

Assigning Team Roles

By BNET Editorial

published on BNET.com 5/02/2007

Teams are important because they can accomplish much more than any of the members could achieve individually. The team that functions effectively and efficiently brings together a diverse range of characters, skills, and talents, and is able to realize large, complex projects.

Two factors need to be in place in order for a team to have the best chance of succeeding:

- The team leader needs to specify clearly the purpose, objective, or goal of the team, and all team members need to work together to achieve it.
- Team members need to understand and agree on the role of each person.

In all likelihood, once this has been done, the team members will work well together and achieve their goals, and at the same time gain a sense of satisfaction from the experience. However, meeting these criteria does not guarantee success. A high-performing team also requires the right ingredients, and a good team leader will ensure that the chemistry is in place to make connections that work. In order to do this, the team leader must focus on the behaviors of individual team members and the roles they are suited for. The first step is to get a sense of the desirable mix of roles. Next, become familiar with the individual behavioral types of your team members. Finally, find a way of combining these diverse personalities to form an effective team.

What You Need to Know

If we're all team members, why does each person need a separate role?

While the team must work together to achieve its goals, each individual's role describes the way he or she behaves, contributes, and relates to the others. Everyone has certain natural characteristics that they display in other workplace settings, and these are most likely to show up in your role within a team. Although your preferred role is unlikely to be a surprise to either you or your team colleagues, sharing this information with each other helps to manage expectations, build trust, and aid good communication.

How will I know if my team isn't performing well?

Poor-performing teams have trouble reaching their objectives in an efficient and timely manner. There may be an unequal distribution of team roles, or squabbling among team members. Several individuals may all have the same preference for a particular role and compete for it, or some may be carrying more weight than others. This will lead to ineffectual decision-making processes and

unnecessary conflict. In these circumstances, it is essential to understand the team dynamics and communicate them so that you can agree on how the team will adapt to cover all the necessary roles.

What if I, or other members of my team, want to change roles?

Over time, you may find that as your ability to function as part of a team develops and matures, you will want to pursue a new role. This often happens quite naturally, as a result of experience, or as a result of the demands of a particular situation. You may also choose to focus on a role that you would like to try out, and make conscious changes based on a strong motivation to improve your skills or develop new abilities. Whether you are taking on something that comes naturally to you or are tentatively trying out a new role that you would like to explore, try to keep your colleagues informed of your intentions so that they know how to relate to and engage with you.

What to Do

Learn about the various team role models

Modern corporations are often defined by matrix structures, a trend that has emerged in response to the need for leaner, meaner organizations. The idea behind such a structure is that role duplication and unnecessary costs will be minimized or eliminated altogether. One of the by-products of the matrix design is the “transient team,” which forms and dissolves on a project by project basis. As a result, organizations are increasingly turning to team role models in an attempt to ensure the effectiveness of these temporary teams.

One such model is *Belbin (r) Team Roles*; a model that emerged from research into the behavior of managers from all over the world. The managers were observed in a business school setting while they tackled a complicated team challenge. Over time, several different clusters of behavior were identified. Based on their behavior patterns, individuals were then assigned to a team role. These designations fell into three categories: the action-oriented roles, the people-oriented roles and the cerebral roles.

Decide on the roles that best fit you and your colleagues

Have a look at the Belbin Team Roles below and see which one best describes your preferred behaviors. Then think about the behavior patterns of your team colleagues and try to figure out which roles would best suit each of them.

1. **Plant:** Creative, imaginative, unorthodox. Solves difficult problems. Excusable weaknesses: Ignores incidentals. Too preoccupied to communicate effectively.

2. **Resource Investigator:** Extrovert, enthusiastic, communicative. Explores opportunities. Develops contacts. Excusable weaknesses: Over-optimistic. Loses interest once initial enthusiasm has passed.
3. **Co-ordinator:** Mature, confident, a good chairperson. Clarifies goals, promotes decision-making, delegates well. Excusable weaknesses: Can be seen as manipulative. Offloads personal work.
4. **Shaper:** Challenging, dynamic, thrives on pressure. The drive and courage to overcome obstacles. Excusable weaknesses: Prone to provocation. Offends people's feelings.
5. **Monitor Evaluator:** Sober, strategic and discerning. Sees all options. Judges accurately. Excusable weaknesses: Lacks drive and ability to inspire others.
6. **Teamworker:** Co-operative, mild, perceptive and diplomatic. Listens, builds, averts friction. Excusable weaknesses: Indecisive in crunch situations.
7. **Implementer:** Disciplined, reliable, conservative and efficient. Turns ideas into practical actions. Excusable weaknesses: Can be inflexible. Slow to respond to new possibilities.
8. **Completer Finisher:** Painstaking, conscientious, anxious. Searches out errors and omissions. Delivers on time. Excusable weaknesses: Inclined to worry unduly. Reluctant to delegate.
9. **Specialist:** Single-minded, self-starting, dedicated. Provides knowledge and skills in rare supply. Excusable weaknesses: Contributes on only a narrow front. Dwells on technicalities.

The action-orientated roles are numbers 4, 7 and 8. The people-oriented roles are numbers 3, 6 and 2. The cerebral roles are numbers 1, 5 and 9.

It is important that you understand your preferred team role, as well as that of your team colleagues. This will help you develop the ability to adapt to the demands arising from the particular challenges you are facing. However, the context in which the team exists, the external pressures on it, and your own personal motivations will all change over time. It is behavior that determines the various roles and not knowledge or skills. Thus, your preferred team role may well fluctuate over time, depending on changes in circumstances.

You can also identify your team role online by filling in a self-perception questionnaire on e-interplace (r) on the Belbin Team Roles web site.

Start building your team using team members' strengths and skills

You will have a better chance of building a balanced and high-performing team if you understand more about the personality traits and work preferences of your colleagues. By using the table below, which is based on the Margerison-McCann Team Management Wheel, you can develop an individual's work preference profile and then allocate a team role right from the beginning.

- **Reporter-Adviser:** Supporter, helper, tolerant, a collector of information, knowledgeable, flexible, dislikes being rushed.
- **Creator-Innovator:** Imaginative, future-oriented, enjoys complexity, creative, likes research work.
- **Explorer-Promoter:** Persuader, “seller,” easily bored, influential, outgoing, likes varied, exciting, stimulating work.
- **Assessor-Developer:** Analytical and objective, developer of ideas, experimenter, enjoys prototype or project work.
- **Thruster-Organizer:** Organizes and implements, quick to decide, results-oriented, sets up systems, analytical.
- **Concluder-Producer:** Practical, production-oriented, likes schedules and plans, takes pride in reproducing goods and services, values effectiveness and efficiency.
- **Controller-Inspector:** Strong on control, detail-oriented, low need for people contact, an inspector of standards and procedures.
- **Upholder-Maintainer:** Conservative, loyal, supportive, personal values important, strong sense of right and wrong, work motivation based on purpose.

These work preferences will provide insight into an individual’s interpersonal and team-building skills, their organizing and decision-making abilities, and their leadership strengths. Having compiled all of this information, you will be in a good position to put together a well-balanced team.

Learn how to create good team chemistry

It is important to remember that there is more to holding a team together than individual preferences for particular roles. There are many forces that can distract from team building, and it is necessary to create connections between members that engender commitment, respect, and responsibility.

Factors that contribute to high-performing teams are:

- good communication
- the courage to confront and resolve conflict
- the ability to give positive feedback
- the ability to empathize with other team members
- a willingness among team members to temporarily put aside their personal goals in order to be at the service of the team

Remember that good team chemistry doesn’t just happen. You can help by engaging the team in exercises that build trust and encourage meaningful communication and feedback. This could be done before starting work on the collective task—perhaps by holding a team retreat that includes challenges and fun. It’s good to have a formal discussion about members’ concerns and then come

to an agreement on several approaches to help the team move more easily through the challenges of making decisions, managing conflict, and completing tasks.

What to Avoid

You fail to notice when team members become unhappy in their roles

Once you have assigned someone a particular role, it's important to remember that they probably won't be happy to continue in that role indefinitely. Although individuals may have preferred behaviors, as they progress in their careers it is helpful for them to take a different role from time to time. This way they can learn new skills and begin to understand the different role dynamics first hand.

You need to be aware of the values and motivations of each individual in order to ensure that they "buy in" to the team's overall purpose. Leaving someone in a role that they have become dissatisfied with can lead to low morale and loss of dynamism. The worst possible scenario puts dissatisfied team members in a position to sabotage the collective work of the group. Give all members of the team the chance to voice their concerns, and instill a culture of feedback so that nothing festers and becomes destructive.

Be open about the way you identify the roles and how you assign them to team members, and bear in mind that it doesn't have to be imposed by the team leader; it can be done cooperatively.

You lose sight of the connections between your role and the roles of others

A high-performing team needs to start with a common goal and clearly-defined roles, but this is only the beginning. While members' motivations need to fit with the common goal, each person also needs to be able to communicate well with all the others, thus bridging the role boundaries. One of the keys to ensuring that the team runs smoothly is the ability to take responsibility for your own role AND the connection between your role and those of the others. Trust, respect, and responsibility must be present. This doesn't happen through planning; it happens through chemistry.

Where to Learn More

Books:

Belbin, Meredith R., *Management Teams: Why They Succeed or Fail*. Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2003.

Katzenbach, Jon, *The Wisdom of Teams*. Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill, 2005

Web Sites:

Belbin Team Roles: www.belbin.com

Working out your team role: www.teamtechnology.co.uk/workingoutyourteamrole.htm

Team Management Systems online: www.tms.com.au

2