Belbin Team Roles

Why do some teams of talented people argue, drift or miss deadlines, while other teams with the same talent deliver? Dr Meredith Belbin's answer is that a team needs a balance of useful behaviors, and that no single person supplies all of them. In this video, Shahd, who leads a product team at a software company, uses his nine team roles to understand why her team has many ideas but few finished features. This video is a teaching aid, so facts should be checked on Belbin's own pages.

1. Nine Roles in Three Groups

A team role, in Belbin's sense, is a cluster of behaviors that helps a team perform. Belbin measures behavior, not personality, because behavior changes with the job, the colleagues and the setting. The nine roles fall into three groups. Three roles work with people: the Resource Investigator, who brings in outside ideas, the Teamworker, who helps the team gel, and the Co-ordinator, who sets goals and delegates work. Three roles think: the Plant, who solves problems in unconventional ways, the Monitor Evaluator, who weighs options impartially, and the Specialist, who brings deep knowledge of one area. Three roles get things done: the Shaper, who provides drive, the Implementer, who plans a workable strategy and carries it out, and the Completer Finisher, who polishes the work and checks it for errors.

Example: A small building firm has a site engineer with deep technical knowledge, a foreman who plans the daily work, and an estimator who checks every figure twice. They are a Specialist, an Implementer and a Completer Finisher, whatever their job titles say. That is exactly what a team role means: behavior, not a job title.

At work: Shahd's team has six people building a banking feature: a designer, two developers, an analyst, a tester and a product owner. They work hard, yet the last three launch dates slipped. In the review meeting people blame each other: ideas never stop, and nobody finishes. This is exactly the kind of imbalance that Belbin's model helps explain.

2. Strengths and Allowable Weaknesses

Each role has strengths, and what Belbin calls allowable weaknesses, which are the flip side of the strength. The Plant is creative but may ignore details, and the Monitor Evaluator weighs options calmly but may lack the drive to inspire others. The Shaper keeps the team moving but may offend people's feelings, and the Teamworker helps the team gel but may avoid confrontation. The Implementer is efficient but can be inflexible, and the Completer Finisher catches errors but may worry unduly. Allowable means that the team accepts these weaknesses as the price of the strength, if it knows and covers them.

Example: A software lead who is a strong Shaper pushes the team to meet every deadline. His drive saves a late release, yet a quiet colleague stops mentioning her worries, because the pace leaves no room for them, until the team helps him notice. That is exactly what an allowable weakness is: the flip side of his strength.

At work: Shahd asks everyone to complete the Belbin assessment and puts the results on one wall. The designer and one developer are strong Plants, and the product owner is a Shaper. Nobody prefers the Completer Finisher, Implementer or Co-ordinator role. This explains the pattern: many ideas, a strong push, and nobody whose natural job is to finish and check.

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3. Reading a Team

Belbin looks at preferred roles, which feel natural and are usually two or three, at manageable roles, which a person can take on when needed, and at least preferred roles, which are better covered by others. A preferred role rarely becomes a least preferred one, while manageable roles can be cultivated. We map the team in a grid, with the nine roles across the top and the people down the side. Then we look for three things: gaps, where nobody prefers a role, overlaps, where several people compete for the same role, and loads, where one person carries too many roles. A gap does not mean that the team is poor; it shows where to borrow or add a role.

Example: A start-up with five founders, all strong Shapers, argues endlessly, because everyone wants to lead the company. The map shows the overlap: five people competing for one role. One founder becomes chair of meetings, and the debates end in decisions. That is exactly what reading a team means: finding overlaps, gaps and loads.

At work: Shahd draws the grid and sees an overlap of Plants, a single Shaper, and gaps in Completer Finisher, Implementer and Co-ordinator. The tester has Completer Finisher as a manageable role, and the analyst has Implementer. She writes down who can cover which gap during the next quarter. That is exactly how the grid turns a vague worry into a plan.

4. Using the Map Well

The map is a tool for conversation, not a label. We close a gap in three ways: by asking someone to use a manageable role for a defined period, by changing how the team works, and by adding a person with the missing role. An idea gate, for example, lets the Plants propose ideas for a fixed time, and then the Implementer and the Completer Finisher turn the chosen ideas into plans and checks. Behavior changes with the situation, so we redraw the map when the team or the task changes.

Example: The leadership team of a school notices that its members are all Co-ordinators and Teamworkers, so nobody challenges decisions. Meetings are friendly, but weak plans pass without a single hard question. It invites a deputy who prefers the Monitor Evaluator and Shaper roles. That is exactly what using the map well means: closing a gap by adding the missing role.

At work: Shahd makes three changes. The analyst takes the Implementer duty of turning each chosen idea into a task list, and the tester takes the final checks as a named role with time in the plan. The Plants get an idea gate of thirty minutes every Monday, and an idea that misses the gate waits for the next release. The next two launches are on time. These results are an invented illustration.

Conclusion

Belbin's model shows that a team needs a balance of nine kinds of useful behavior, and that every strength brings an allowable weakness. Mapping preferred, manageable and least preferred roles reveals gaps, overlaps and loads, and the map turns blame into a plan. Roles are behaviors and not boxes, so the map should be refreshed as things change. The examples here are illustrations, so facts should be checked on Belbin's own pages before use.

Sources

- Belbin: Belbin Team Roles (nine roles in three groups, strengths and allowable weaknesses, behavior not personality, preferred and manageable roles) – https://www.belbin.com/about/belbin-team-roles
- Belbin, R. M., Management Teams: Why They Succeed or Fail, Butterworth-Heinemann (1981).
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