

## Team Roles in a Nutshell

**Ever wondered why some teams just seem to work and others hit the rocks?** When things don't work, it is obvious to all and it often has a profound effect on the people involved, as well as the project or objective to be achieved.

In the 1970s, Dr Meredith Belbin and his research team at Henley Management College set about observing teams, with a view to finding out where and how these differences come about. They wanted to control the dynamics of teams to discover if – and how – problems could be pre-empted and avoided.

Over a period of nine years, international management teams were studied. Each participant completed a battery of psychometric tests, so that attributes such as personality and behaviour could be brought into play and their effects on the team could be accurately considered.

As the research progressed, the research revealed that the difference between success and failure for a team was not dependent on factors such as intellect, but more on behaviour. The research team began to identify separate clusters of behaviour, each of which formed distinct team contributions or “Team Roles”. A **Team Role** came to be defined as: **“A tendency to behave, contribute and interrelate with others in a particular way.”** It was found that different individuals displayed different Team Roles to varying degrees.

The first Team Role to be identified was the **“Plant”**. The role was so-called because one such individual was “planted” in each team. They tended to be highly creative and good at solving problems in unconventional ways.

One by one, the other Team Roles began to emerge. The **Monitor Evaluator** was needed to provide a logical eye, make impartial judgements where required and to weigh up the team's options in a dispassionate way. **Co-ordinators** were needed to focus on the team's objectives, draw out team members and delegate work appropriately.

When the team was at risk of becoming isolated and inwardly-focused, **Resource Investigators** provided inside knowledge on the opposition and made sure that the team's idea would carry to the world outside the team. **Implementers** were needed to plan a practical, workable strategy and carry it out as efficiently as possible. **Completer Finishers** were most effectively used at the end of a task, to “polish” and scrutinise the work for errors, subjecting it to the highest standards of quality control. **Teamworkers** helped the team to gel, using their versatility to identify the work required and complete it on behalf of the team. Challenging individuals, known as **Shapers**, provided the necessary drive to ensure that the team kept moving and did not lose focus or momentum.

Whilst some Team Roles were more “high profile” and some team members shouted more loudly than others, each of the behaviours was essential in getting the team successfully from start to finish. The key was balance. For example, Meredith Belbin found that a team with no Plant struggled to come up with the initial spark of an idea with which to push forward.

However, once too many Plants were in the team, bad ideas concealed good ones and non-starters were given too much airtime. Similarly, with no Shaper, the team ambled along without drive and direction, missing deadlines. With too many Shapers, in-fighting began and morale was lowered.

As well as the strength or contribution they provided, each Team Role was also found to have an “**allowable weakness**”: a flipside of the behavioural characteristics, which is allowable in the team because of the strength which goes with it. For example, the unorthodox Plant could be forgetful or scatty; or the Resource Investigator might forget to follow up on a lead. Co-ordinators might get over-enthusiastic on the delegation front and Implementers might be slow to relinquish their plans in favour of positive changes. Completer Finishers, often driven by anxiety to get things right, were found to take their perfectionism to extremes. Teamworkers, concerned with the welfare and morale of the team, found it difficult to make decisions where this morale might be compromised or team politics, involved. Shapers risked becoming aggressive and bad-humoured in their attempts to get things done.

It was only after the initial research had been completed that the ninth Team Role, “**Specialist**” emerged. The simulated management exercises had been deliberately set up to require no previous knowledge. In the real world, however, the value of an individual with in-depth knowledge of a key area came to be recognised as yet another essential team contribution or Team Role. Just like the other Team Roles, the Specialist also had a weakness: a tendency to focus narrowly on their own subject of choice, and to prioritise this over the team’s progress.

The Team Roles that Meredith Belbin identified are used widely in thousands of organisations all over the world today. By identifying our Team Roles, we can ensure that we **use our strengths to advantage and that we manage our weaknesses as best we can**. Sometimes, this means being aware of the pitfalls and making an effort to avoid them.

Most people have a number of “preferred Team Roles” or behaviours they frequently and naturally display. We also have “manageable roles”, roles which might not be the most natural course of behaviour for us, but which we can assume if required and might wish to cultivate. Lastly, we have least preferred roles, those we should not assume, since we’ll be playing against type. In this instance, the effort is likely to be great, and the outcome, poor. If work requires Team Roles other than our own, it is a much better bet to find and work with others who possess roles complementary to our own. Since people tend to display more than one preferred role, a team of four could quite easily represent all nine Belbin Team Roles.

**So, in a nutshell, the Belbin philosophy is about celebrating – and making the most of – individual differences. The message is that there is room for everyone in the team: all positive contributions are welcome.**

# An introduction to Belbin Team Roles

The research of Dr Meredith Belbin in the 1970'S lead to the development of Belbin Team Roles, nine clusters of behaviour that individuals adopt when participating in a team. During extensive experiments at Henley Management College it became clear that teams comprising a balanced mix of Team Roles outperformed unbalanced teams.

Subsequent research has also demonstrated that teams consistently outperform individuals when dealing with high risk- high complex issues where a wide range of complementary behaviours is required.

Today, the Belbin Team Role model is used by over 40 percent of the top 100 companies in the UK, the United Nations, the World Bank and thousands of organisations throughout the world to enhance individual and team performance.

The original research involved painstaking and labourious observation using Bales analysis to identify a person's natural team roles. Today the process takes a few minutes by using the Belbin Interplace computer system to process the results of the Belbin Self Perception Inventory, Observer Assessments and Job Assessments.

The diagnostic and advisory information provided by the Interplace reports has proved to be invaluable for:

- Enhancing self awareness and personal effectiveness.
- Fostering mutual trust and understanding and building productive workplace relationships.
- Ensuring managers and organisations have a better understanding of the natural talents, motivations and behavioural tendencies of each employee.
- Matching people to the right jobs and jobs to the right people.
- Selecting and building effective teams and diagnosing the causes of underperforming teams.

Below is a brief summary of each of the nine Team Roles:



**PLANT (PL)**

**Characteristics** Plants are innovators and inventors and can be highly creative. They provide the source of original ideas to support innovation. Usually they prefer to operate by themselves at some distance from other members of the team, using their imagination and often working in an unorthodox way. They tend to be introverted and react strongly to criticism and praise. Their ideas may often be radical and may lack practical constraint.

They are independent, and usually regarded as being clever as a result of their original and radical perspective. They don't always manage to communicate in a compelling way and offer their ideas in a practical and relevant framework.

**Function** The main use of a PL is to challenge conventional and established ways of doing things and provide suggested solutions for solving complex problems. PLs are often needed in the initial stages of a project or when a project is failing to progress. PLs have usually made their mark as founders of companies or as originators of new products.

However, too many PLs in one team or group may be counter-productive as they tend to spend their time reinforcing their own ideas and engaging each other in combat.

**RESOURCE INVESTIGATOR (RI)**

**Characteristics** Resource Investigators are usually enthusiastic extroverts. They are natural communicators with people both inside and outside the company. They are natural negotiators and are adept at exploring new opportunities and developing contacts. Although not a great source of original ideas, the RI is effective when it comes to picking up other people's ideas and promoting them. As the name suggests, they are adept at finding out what is available and from whom. They usually receive a warm reception from others because of their warm outgoing nature.

RIs are generally relaxed people with a strong inquisitive sense and a readiness to see the possibilities in anything new. However, unless they remain stimulated by others, their enthusiasm can rapidly fade.

**Function** RIs are good at exploring and reporting back on ideas, developments or resources outside their immediate group. They are the natural people to set up external contacts and to carry out any subsequent negotiations.

They have an ability to think on their feet and to probe others for information.

**CO-ORDINATOR (CO)**

**Characteristics** The distinguishing feature of Co-ordinators is their propensity for helping others to work towards shared goals. Mature, trusting and confident, they delegate readily. In interpersonal relations they are quick to spot individual talents and to use them in pursuit of group objectives. While COs are not necessarily the cleverest or most senior member of a team, they are likely to have a broad outlook and perspective.

The natural goal focus of CO's can sometimes lead to them manipulating others to achieve their personal objectives. In some situations COs are inclined to clash with Shapers due to their contrasting management styles.

**Function** COs are well placed when put in charge of a team of people with diverse skills and personal characteristics. They perform better in dealing with colleagues of near or equal rank than in directing junior subordinates. Their motto might well be "consultation with control" and they usually believe in tackling problems calmly.

**SHAPER (SH)**

**Characteristics** Shapers are highly goal and oriented people with great drive and energy. They push themselves and others and tend to overcome obstacles by sheer determination. They tend to be highly assertive and have very directive management styles. Shapers also tend to be competitive and like to win. They frequently progress upward in organisations because they get results and because many people are impressed by their courageous and decisive leadership style.

SHs are not noted for their interpersonal sensitivities and can be argumentative and even aggressive.

**Function** SHs are generally perceived as ideal managers because they generate action and thrive under pressure. They come into their own when quick and decisive action is called for to overcome threats and difficulties or when progress towards goals and objectives is unacceptably slow.

**MONITOR EVALUATOR (ME)**

**Characteristics** Monitor Evaluators are serious-minded, prudent individuals with a built-in immunity for being over-enthusiastic. They are likely to be slow in making decisions preferring to carefully think things over. Usually they have a high critical thinking ability. They have a good capacity for shrewd judgements that take all factors into account. A good ME is unlikely to make intuitive and reckless mistakes. They deal in facts and logic rather than emotion when considering options.

They are often regarded as over-critical and can be seen to be slow and boring.

**Function** MEs are best suited to analysing problems and evaluating ideas and suggestions. They are very good at weighing up the pro's and con's of options. In a managerial position their ability to make high quality decisions consistently is likely to make them highly regarded.

**IMPLEMENTER (IMP)**

**Characteristics** Implementers are characterised by their practical approach and possess higher than normal levels of self-control and discipline. They are prepared to work hard to ensure things are done as prescribed in a systematic way. They are typically loyal to the organisation and prescribed and established ways of doing things. They are likely to be regarded as someone who will not seek personal agendas and self-interest.

On the downside IMPs may be inflexible in accepting new ways of doing things, particularly if they are radical or impracticable.

**Function** IMPs are valuable in an organisation because of their reliability and capacity for application. They succeed because they are efficient and because they have a sense of what is feasible and relevant. While many people might stray favouring the tasks they like to do and neglect things they find not to be to their liking an IMP is more likely to do what needs to be done in a systematic and relentless way.

**TEAMWORKER (TW)**

**Characteristics.** Teamworkers possess a mild and sociable disposition and are generally supportive and concerned about others. They have a great capacity for flexibility and adapting to different situations and people. TWs are perceptive, diplomatic and caring and tend to be good listeners. Because of these qualities it is hardly surprising that they are popular with their colleagues.

Their concern about creating harmony and avoiding conflict can make them indecisive when faced with having to make difficult solo decisions.

**Function** The TW may be legitimately compared to the lubricating oil in a car engine. We don't always appreciate how important it is until it isn't there. Because of their ability to be able to resolve interpersonal problems TW's come into their own when situations are tense and people feel uncared for and not appreciated. They can rise to senior positions because they have few enemies and the fact that they are ready to listen to the views and suggestions of others.

**COMPLETER-FINISHER (CF)**

**Characteristics** Completer Finishers have a great capacity for the attention to detail. They constantly strive for perfection and correct errors. CFs are quite introvert and require less external stimulus than most people. The CF can be trusted to do work to the highest standard and to complete it on time.

The combination of striving for perfection and meeting deadlines often creates anxiety though and CFs are likely to be reluctant to trust others to do work to their own high standards.

**Function** The Completer Finisher is invaluable where tasks demand close concentration and a high degree of accuracy. The standards they set make them well suited to situations where precision and high standards are essential. CFs will also demand the same high standards from people around them and therefore create their own micro culture where the only standard acceptable is perfection.

**SPECIALIST (SP)**

**Characteristics** The Specialist Team Role and the functional title of Specialist is often a cause for confusion. While it is true that both uses of the term may relate to people who are a source of technical knowledge and expertise the Specialist in Team Role terms has some very specific attributes. Their main distinguishing feature is their love of learning. They see learning and the accumulation of knowledge as the main reason for their existence and their single minded and resolute pursuit of this end is their main motivation. The SP is likely to be recognised by colleagues as an expert to turn to for help and guidance.

The SP will usually try to avoid being involved in unstructured meetings and discussions or those of a social nature. They may also be somewhat unyielding when challenged about the validity of their knowledge or field of expertise.

**Function** While SPs may not be regarded as natural team players teams will be wise to engage the SP as a means of providing in depth research. As managers, they command respect because of their in-depth knowledge and they can be used to mentor others to raise their technical expertise.

**CONCLUSION**

From the above descriptions it can be seen that each Team Role has its own distinctive cluster of behavioural characteristics - with potential strengths and allowable weaknesses.

**There are no good or bad Team roles** but it is important for each person to know their own Team Roles and those of their colleagues with whom they interact.

It is only by making use of complementary and collective strengths that individuals and teams can achieve their full potential - in short, ***Nobody's perfect, but a team can be.***

# Frequently Asked Questions

## What are Belbin Team Roles?

A Team Role as defined by Dr Meredith Belbin is “A tendency to behave, contribute and interrelate with others in a particular way.”

The value of Belbin Team Role theory lies in enabling an individual or team to benefit from self-knowledge and adjust according to the demands being made by the external situation.

## How did the concept originate?

The concept was derived from a study of successful and unsuccessful teams competing in Business Games at Henley Management College, England. Managers taking part in the exercise were given a battery of psychometric tests and put into teams of varying composition. As time progressed different clusters of behaviour were identified as underlying the success of the teams. These successful clusters of behaviour were then given names. Hence the emergence of nine Team Roles:

Action-oriented Roles:	Shaper	Implementer	Completer Finisher
People-oriented Roles:	Co-ordinator	Teamworker	Resource Investigator
Thinking-oriented Roles:	Plant	Monitor Evaluator	Specialist

## What can be gained by identifying people’s Team Roles?

It is difficult to work effectively with people without some reasonable expectations of how they are going to perform. Self and Observer Assessments show how an individual feels and how an individual behaves in a group.

## Why use Observer Assessments?

Observer Assessments provide independent evidence about an individual’s Team Roles. A Self-Perception test is only as good as an individual’s sense of personal realism. Some people answer in terms of how they would like to contribute rather than how they really behave.

## Can I change Team Roles?

Team Roles develop and mature. These may change with experience and conscious attention. Different Team Roles may come to the fore in response to the needs of particular situations.

## Shall I let people know my preferred Team Roles?

The sharing of Team Roles increases understanding and enables mutual expectations to be met. Disappointments will then be less frequent.

**What is an 'Allowable Weakness'?**

Sometimes strength in one role has to be bought at the cost of what might be seen as a weakness in another context. For example, a person whose preferred Team Role is Monitor Evaluator is likely to be objective, impartial and good at carefully weighing up all possibilities to make the right decision. Yet someone with these strengths may well come across as being unenthusiastic or even boring. Any failure to inspire is apt to obscure the true strengths of a Monitor Evaluator. That weakness can be reckoned the price that necessarily has to be paid for the strength and in this sense it is termed Allowable.

**What is a 'Team Role Sacrifice'?**

In some circumstances an individual will need to forego using his/her leading or preferred Team Role and adopt another in its place. This shift may be rendered necessary due to the lack of a good example of a desired role within the team or because another person is already contributing on common preferred ground. Such a shift from preferred behaviour is known as "making a Team Role sacrifice".

**When I know my strongest Team Roles, what shall I do about it?**

A person's overall strongest roles are the ones most appreciated by other people. Develop and play these roles with enthusiasm, because this is where you are likely to make a mark. At the same time take note of your lowest roles and find a strategy to avoid exposure by trying to play them. So try to work with people who are strong in the roles in which you are weak.

**What about the reliability and validity of BELBIN® Interplace?**

Reliability and validity are concepts commonly used in evaluating Psychometric Tests. Reliability is a measure of the internal consistency of a test, while validity relates to whether a test measures what it purports to measure.

Internal consistency is highest where test items are repeated, but this narrows their focus. Rather than repeating questions, or dealing with items that are virtually identical, BELBIN® Interplace seeks to find clusters of useful forms of related behaviour. For example, the Shaper cluster refers to an individual who is challenging, competitive, hard driving, tough and outspoken. However, that does not mean that everyone who is competitive happens to be outspoken.

Most Psychometric Tests rely on self-reporting. But here the behaviour assumed may not correspond with what others observe. The strength of BELBIN® Interplace lies in its emphasis on validity, for its counselling outputs are designed to take account of a consensus on observed behaviour. This can be made evident by looking at how far the Observers agree with each other. Formal correlations are, however, difficult to calculate as Observers are not required to make any fixed number of responses. Genuine responses are more easily obtained, and are more valuable, when forced choices are avoided. Differences in perception between the self and others provide valuable leads for action.

The demands of jobs also have to be taken into account when assessing validity since the many varied forms of behaviour can be seen as effective or ineffective according to the context. Here the fit between the profile of the individual and the profile of the job plays a key consideration.