

White Paper

Making Better Matches: Determining Team Roles and Team Dynamics



A Belbin® Team Role Primer



Introduction to Teams and Team Roles

In the post-industrial age, the importance of “teamwork” has increased exponentially. It seems that every group of co-workers these days is assumed to be a *team*, and its members to be *team players*. As a result, the demands placed on people working within the context of a team have evolved beyond technical competencies (the ability to consistently and reliably perform the assigned tasks with confidence and accuracy). To understand this evolution, it helps to understand the differences between a group and a team.

In a group, all the members perform essentially the same tasks: the typing pool (now obsolete) is a prime example of a group. The interactions between members of the group is superficial, mainly social, and non-critical to individual or group success.

Dr. R. Meredith Belbin defines a team role as: “A tendency to behave, contribute and inter-relate with others in a particular way”. This definition also identifies the crucial difference between groups and teams: for a team to be successful, its members are required to *inter-relate*. In a well-balanced team, each member contributes in a specific way to the end-goals, and styles, skills and expertise generally complement one another. As any manager will attest, the challenges lie in *how* his/her direct reports inter-relate and contribute, or more accurately: fail to do so effectively.

Teams vs. Groups

If you accept that teams are different from groups, it is important to understand *how* these differences play out. The following table identifies key differences:

	Teams	Groups
Size	Limited	Medium or Large
Selection	Crucial	Immaterial
Leadership	Shared or Rotating	Solo
Perception	Mutual or Shared understanding	Focus on Leader
Style	Role Spread; Coordination	Convergence; Conformism
Spirit	Dynamic interaction: “We”	Togetherness and Persecution of opponents: “Us and Them”



Selecting for Teams vs. for Groups

Given the different nature of working in a team versus working in a group, it follows that placing people in a team requires a new, and different, approach. The traditional criteria to determine “eligibility” no longer suffice. Instead, the “suitability” of a candidate must be gauged - a more difficult concept, and one that carries with it the risks of arbitrariness and subjectivity.

Eligibility	vs.	Suitability
<i>Entry criteria</i>		<i>Performance criteria</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Qualifications• Relevant experience• References• Acceptability at interview		<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Aptitude• Versatility• Assessment(s)• Role fit with those adjacent to the job

However, if one defines “suitability” in terms of performance criteria, and if one has a method of reliably predicting performance, subjectivity and its inherent risks are greatly reduced.

The traditional method of psychometrical assessment - while offering valuable information about an individual’s preferred behaviour - lacks direct indication of the preferred ways of interacting and interrelating with others. While general inter-relational preferences can be inferred from for instance the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI™), these assessments offer very limited insight into the complex team dynamics that impact team success. What makes team dynamics so complex is that teamwork requires team members to subtly and regularly adjust and adapt their roles to changing situations. These adjustments are (often simultaneously) triggered by the needs of the team, by the phase of the project, or by the roles of other team members.

In simpler terms: it stands to reason that an individual’s responses to a challenge change, depending on the responses of the other people (the team) responding to the same challenge. In a situation where three individuals prefer to take a leadership role, two of the three will generally - perhaps after some jockeying for position - submit to the third’s stronger leadership. In this way, team dynamics follows general rules of the physical world: the system will always strive for equilibrium and balance. The two more submissive individuals are of course not now relegated to uselessness; far from it! They will take on a role as required by the challenge, taking into account the needs of the team, and as determined by their “other” team role preferences. Dr. Belbin calls this behaviour a “team role sacrifice”.

Team Roles and the Top 5 Human Resource Challenges

In a 2004 survey of its members, HR.com identified the top 5 HR concerns and challenges facing corporations in the US and Canada. These are:

1. Performance Management
2. Leadership Development
3. Career and Succession Planning
4. Change Management
5. Talent Retention



Each of these areas stands to benefit from a better understanding of teams, team roles, and team dynamics. The staffing decisions required to tackle these challenges and to adequately respond to the rapidly changing market conditions are perhaps the single most important contributor to a company's competitiveness. If - as is commonly understood in the knowledge economy - its people are a company's greatest asset, assuring that this asset is deployed optimally and for maximum effect is critical to business survival.

Improving individual and organizational performance, identifying and developing a leadership culture within the organization, providing tools and information for individuals to self-manage their careers, and identifying talented staff and fast-tracking them into positions of greater responsibility, are the ways in which smart companies stay ahead of the competition.

Managing change - and in particular managing how people respond and adapt to change - costs far less, and has greater long term benefits than the introduction of new technology or the re-design of business processes in and of itself can generate.

Finally, retaining key staff and promoting internal job mobility is the answer to the challenge of finding and hiring quality staff in an increasingly tight market.

e-Interplace - Team Role Assessment

Dr. Belbin's Team Role Theory and the suite of assessment tools derived from it: e-Interplace, identifies all of an individual's team roles - including the roles for which an individual is clearly unsuited. As a framework for understanding team dynamics, and for understanding how individuals interrelate to one another, it offers clear and direct guidance for addressing a multitude of staffing and teambuilding needs, including but not limited to:

- Determining critical "soft" success factors for job and project assignments
- Recruitment and selection of new team members and team leaders
- Assembling project teams and allocating key functions
- Re-aligning teams and individual roles before, during or after organizational changes
- Identifying strong team role preferences as a predictor for potential advancement

Hamer Associates uses e-Interplace®, the suite of assessment tools developed by the Belbin organization, to provide managers and HR professionals with the information to predict performance outcomes of individuals within teams, *and* of the entire team itself. Individual profiles incorporate 360-degree observer feedback to supplement the self-perception assessment, enhancing reliability and accuracy. In addition, *up to 15 individual profiles* can be linked, to provide an in-depth mapping of preferred team roles, missing team roles, potential team role conflicts - in short: of the complex team dynamics so critical to team success.

Learn more

e-Interplace® is now available in North America - call us today for an orientation and discussion of your particular challenges. Let us help you manage your company's most crucial resource: its people.

Hamer Associates
Career and Performance Management
402 West Pender Street, Suite 507
Vancouver, BC V6B 1T6
(+1) 604-317-2234

info@hamer-associates.ca