

Team weaver

Meredith Belbin's explanation of how teams work has stood the test of time and spread across the globe.

Michael Costello interviews the thinker who showed us the roles we take

You would be hard pressed to think of anyone more influential to our understanding of workplace teams than Meredith Belbin. Now in his eighties, but still active as a consultant and as visiting professor at Henley Management College, it was Belbin who first expounded the idea that teams with a balance of different types of people were the most effective.

Belbin made his discovery in the 1970s by detailed observation over many years of different groups taking part in management exercises. "What was first deemed likely was that high-intellect teams would succeed where lower-intellect teams would not," he says. "But the outcome of the research was that teams predicted to be excellent based on intellect failed to fulfil their potential. It was team balance that enabled a team to succeed."

Belbin identified nine distinct clusters of behaviour that individuals exhibited and called them "team roles" (see panel, facing page). Each team role defines a tendency to behave, contribute and interrelate with others in a particular way and can be used, says Belbin, "as a common meaningful language to bridge the gap between ourselves and our colleagues".

Ever since the publication in 1981 of Belbin's book *Management Teams: Why they Succeed or Fail*, executives have been putting a "Team Worker" in a team that is not gelling, a "Plant" in a department that lacks innovation or a "Completer Finisher" at the end of a tender bid to ensure a strong submission.

Teams don't necessarily need all roles to function well, says Belbin. "We worked with

one organisation that had a large team that did not have one Plant, which is very rare. But in this case, the team dynamic was ideal for the organisation's requirements – where they were working it was not essential to be putting forward new ideas," he recalls. "Having the right people at the right time for the task is also important – a Completer Finisher is not always good at the beginning of the project."

The notion of team roles has obvious implications for recruitment as well – although Belbin believes that even today, organisations are too apt to recruit based on qualifications. "It is important to get the right balance between the person's preferences and their qualifications," he says. "It is so important to ask: 'What have you done in life?' 'What do you enjoy?' 'How have you lived?' When you recruit the wrong person with the right qualification you are going to have a challenge in changing the individual's preferences."


Belbin speaks as someone with a very strong personal tendency. "I'm a Super-Plant, which means Plant is my top, second and third role. There are other tendencies there too, but nothing very significant," he adds. "I don't think people do change that much," he says, throwing the cat among the learning and development pigeons. "If you are a Shaper you have a preference for this. It is ridiculous to suggest you can adapt and play the part of each role to the same high standard. We have genetic and other influences that distinguish us and make us who we are."

Through the consultancy that he formed with his son in 1988, Belbin has worked with teams

from around the world – and he is particularly proud that his work has transcended cultural boundaries. In Russia, for example, Belbin feared his method might not resonate because of the "do what you are told" mentality. Exploring team roles, however, had a profound effect. "The organisation began to see teamwork and diversity as a competitive advantage and took the confidentiality of such an approach very seriously. They realised that a team of Shapers providing orders to others wasn't working. Young talent with open views and opinions were all of sudden provided opportunities to contribute through a series of networks formed and developed to facilitate teamwork and break down the existing hierarchy."

Belbin suggests that unless organisations value diversity, they can repeat mistakes because of an individual's natural strengths interacting with the organisation's culture. He cites the financial crisis as being down to a phenomenon he calls "corporate forgetting" that earlier led to corruption at Enron and the demise of Barings Bank at the hands of rogue trader Nick Leeson. "If your company culture does not allow challenge, if people who suggest alternatives are castigated for not being 'team players', you produce an environment of fear, stagnation and antipathy," he says.

Despite these warnings, Belbin does believe humanity is capable of learning and growing. Through his friendship with naturalist and broadcaster David Attenborough, he has become fascinated in recent years by the behaviour of insects, and what they can teach us about teamwork and co-operation. "Social insects know far more about organisations than humans do," he says. Strengths based on their genetics, he observes, include the division of labour, complex communication systems, ability to adapt and having no criminals or waste. "Look at the bees," he says. "A classic Resource Investigator has to look for good spots for the honey and do a dance to communicate its location. The hive decodes the dance – distance, direction and amount – and they follow."

It is a testament to Belbin's modesty and Super-Plant tendency that he spots opportunities to learn in such unlikely places – and sees his own legacy only in terms of his relationships with others: "My wish is to be forgotten after my demise so that people might say: 'Who was he?' My legacy instead will survive through cultural transmission via my work associates and, in personal terms, by reference to the work and actions of my five grandchildren, who may have benefited, in part genetically but perhaps more directly, by the manner of their upbringing." 



▶ **LINKS & NOTES**

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- Belbin Associates
www.belbin.com/rte.asp
- Henley Management College
www.henley.reading.ac.uk
- **YouTube** Clip of David Attenborough documentary, including footage of a bee directing the hive to a new food source (from 4:50 mins)
bit.ly/dabeehive
- **PM feature** on Belbin 'Variations on a team' /**team22**
- **PM feature** on Belbin 'Theories of evolution' /**evolution42**

Belbin team roles

Plant: A creative, imaginative, unorthodox team member who solves difficult problems. They sometimes situate themselves far from the other team members.

Resource Investigator: The networker for the group. Being highly driven to make connections with people, the Resource Investigator may appear to be flighty and inconstant, but their ability to call on their connections is useful to the team.

Co-ordinator: Seeks fairness and equity among team members. Those who want to make decisions quickly, or unilaterally, may feel frustrated by their insistence on consulting with all members, but this can often improve the quality of decisions made by the team.

Shaper: A dynamic team member who loves a challenge and thrives on pressure. This member possesses the drive and courage required to overcome obstacles.

Monitor Evaluator: A strategic and discerning member, who tries to see all options and judge accurately. This member contributes a measured and dispassionate analysis and, through objectivity, stops the team committing itself to a misguided task.

Team Worker: Someone who seeks to ensure that interpersonal relationships in the team are maintained. This concern with people factors can frustrate those who are keen to move quickly, but their skills ensure long-term cohesion within the team.

Implementer: The practical thinker who can create systems and processes that will produce what the team wants. They may frustrate other team members by their perceived lack of enthusiasm for inspiring visions and radical thinking, but their ability to turn radical ideas into workable solutions is important.

Completer Finisher: The detail person within the team. Others may be frustrated by their analytical and meticulous approach, but the work of the Completer Finisher ensures the quality and timeliness of the output of the team.

Specialist (1988): Belbin later added a ninth role, the "Specialist", who brings expert knowledge to the team.