



# What Makes a Team Tick?

By Bob Larcher

**I**n my previous article I talked about the need for an understanding of the group development process in order to help groups develop and move from one development phase to the next. The objective of this article is to explore the concept of team-roles and their importance in maintaining the group as a cohesive unit.

Today, there are a number of team-role frameworks available for trainers and consultants to use. The application of these frameworks is generally in the area of team building in terms of improving the awareness of team dynamics and understanding the impact that different personality styles can have on team performance.

After a brief clarification of what is meant by team, teamwork and team-role, I will:

- Compare four popular team-role frameworks, those of Belbin, MTR-i, Insights and Mumma.
- Identify the behavioural descriptors for the Belbin team-roles.
- Make links, where possible, between the different frameworks.

I will use as the basis for the comparison the Meredith Belbin framework as he is considered to be one of the fathers in terms of trying to understand “what makes a team tick”.

Before comparing the different team-role frameworks; what is meant by a team, teamwork and a team-role?

A team “is a group of people who work together in specialised roles to make optimum use of the talents and experience of each person in reaching the group’s objective”. The Aston Organisation Development group has identified five types of team:

- Management team
  - Members of management teams have responsibility for ensuring that a department or function within an organisation is effective. They oversee, coordinate and direct groups of employees and are required to ensure that these employees perform effectively to achieve organisational objectives.
- Project team
  - Teams in this type are groups of people (often functionally diverse) who come together to undertake a specific task. They often work within a specified time limit and usually with a specific scope of action.
- Service team
  - Members of teams in this type have repeated interactions with customers whose demands or needs vary, requiring team members to work together. These teams may be field-based or organisation based.
- Production team
  - Teams in this team type are composed of production personnel who make, assemble, construct or otherwise produce outputs that an organisation sells.
- Action & performing team
  - Teams in this team type are groups of experts who come together for a short period (usually highly time-constrained) to perform interdependently on a specific task.

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Teamwork consists of the tasks that the members of a group perform in order to meet their objectives and fulfil member needs.

A role is a collection of behaviours that serves a particular purpose. Benne & Sheats identified task roles, maintenance roles and counter group roles, Bales & Strodtbeck showed how different phases in the problem solving process required different behaviours from group members and Belbin showed the relationship between team-roles and effective task performance.

A team-role as defined by Meredith Belbin is: "A tendency to behave, contribute and interrelate with others in a particular way."

Belbin also identified four principles of team design:

1. Members of a team can contribute in two ways to the achievement of team objectives:
  - They can perform well in a functional role based on their technical knowledge e.g. financier, engineer, salesperson, etc.
  - They also have a potential team-role to perform based on their personality e.g. creative, pragmatic, analytical, etc.
2. Teams need an optimum balance of both functional roles and team-roles.
3. The team's effectiveness will depend on the extent to which team members recognise and adjust to the relative strengths and weaknesses within the team.
4. A team can only use its technical resources to best advantage when it has the right balance of team-roles.

Team-roles can be seen as the parts of the engine that make the team work effectively. A team needs a variety of parts, some technical, some leadership and some maintenance functions. A team could be made up of "best in field" technical experts, but fail to perform due to too little (or too much) creativity, perfectionism or analysis. There is often a tension between the different perspectives of different roles and learning to communicate well is the 'oil' that makes the team work. Team-role models can be useful in seeing that differences between team members are necessary to make the team rounded, whole and effective.

Most of the team-roles frameworks identify eight different team-roles, Belbin being the exception in having nine – although in his original work, he also had eight. Below are the team-roles as defined by the four frameworks. Although similar "names" are used in the different frameworks, there is often a different definition of the associated team-role; an MTI-i "Innovator" for example is not defined (or described) in the same way as a Mumma "Innovator".

Although there may be some loose correlations between the team-roles defined within each framework, it is difficult to make direct comparisons as the theoretical basis of each framework is different. A study undertaken by Henley Management College showed, for example, that there is no clear relationship between Belbin and the MTR-i.

The Belbin framework was derived from observational studies of team roles apparent in, essentially, British management teams; the Mumma framework draws on the work of other researchers such as Benne & Sheats (very appropriate for those working with youth groups, as opposed to management teams), Bales and even Belbin and both Insights and MTR-i are based on Jungian personality theory.

Below is a brief description of each team-role as defined by the Belbin framework:

**PLANT**

The Plant is the team's source of original ideas, suggestions and proposals: the ideas person. The Plant tends to be the most imaginative member of the team, and the most likely to start searching for a completely new approach to a problem if the team starts getting bogged down, or to bring a new insight to a line of action already agreed.

**RESOURCE INVESTIGATOR**

The Resource Investigator is probably the most immediately likeable member of the team. Relaxed, sociable and gregarious, and easy to interest and enthuse. Resource Investigator's responses tend to be positive and enthusiastic, though they can dismiss things as quickly as they take them up.. The Resource Investigator's ability to stimulate ideas and encourage innovation can lead people to mistake them for an ideas person, but the Resource Investigator does not have the radical originality that distinguishes the Plant. They are, however, quick to see the relevance of new ideas.

Belbin	MTR-i	Insights	Mumma
Shaper	Conductor	Director	Leader
Coordinator	Campaigner	Motivator	Manager
Plant	Innovator	Inspirer	Creator
Resource Investigator	Explorer	Helper	Innovator
Monitor Evaluator	Supporter	Supporter	Evaluator
Implementer	Curator	Coordinator	Organiser
Completer Finisher	Coach	Observer	Finisher
Teamworker	Scientist	Reformer	Moderator
Specialist			



### CHAIRMAN

Chairman is one of those slightly misleading titles - they are best suited to lead the team even though that may not be their 'formal' role. The Chairman is the one who presides over the team and co-ordinates its efforts to meet external goals and targets. They are the social leader; calm; self-confident; controlled.

### SHAPER

The principal function of the Shaper is to give a shape to the application of the team's efforts, always looking for a pattern in discussions, and trying to unite ideas, objectives and practical considerations into a single feasible project, which the Shaper seeks to push forward urgently to decision and action.

### TEAM WORKER

The Team Worker is the most sensitive of the team; the most aware of individuals' needs and worries, and the one who perceives most clearly the emotional undercurrents within the group.

### IMPLEMENTER

The Implementer is the practical organiser; the one who turns decisions and strategies into defined and manageable tasks that people can actually get on with. If anyone does not know what on earth has been decided and what they are supposed to be doing they will go to the Implementer first to find out.

### MONITOR EVALUATOR

The Monitor-Evaluator's contribution lies in measured and dispassionate analysis rather than creative ideas.

### COMPLETER FINISHER

The Completer Finisher worries about what might go wrong and is never at ease until they have personally checked every detail and made sure that everything has been done and nothing has been overlooked.

### SPECIALISTS

Specialists are passionate about learning in their own particular field. As a result, they will have the greatest depth of knowledge, and enjoy imparting it to others. They are constantly improving their wisdom. If there is anything they do not know the answer to, they will happily go and find it. Specialists bring a high level of concentration, ability, and skill in their discipline to the team, but can only contribute on that narrow front and will tend to be uninterested in anything which lies outside its narrow confines.

You may well recognise yourself in some of the above descriptions and not at all in others; we all have team-roles that we spontaneously naturally prefer and others that we spontaneously naturally reject. It is important in a team that all roles are covered in the right balance i.e. not an over dominance of one and a complete absence of another; which can be a problem if we are drawn to work with people who think like us. It is important that individuals are not "pushed" permanently into fulfilling a team need with one of their less preferred team-roles, the

result could be less job satisfaction and little fun working in the team. People with natural preferences for different roles provide different perspectives: some look outwards, others inwards; some look forward, some back and some see the big-picture while others see the detail. All add strength to the team.

As I stated earlier making direct comparisons between the different team-roles is difficult, however by studying the definitions given within each framework it is possible to find similarities. The MTR-i Sculptor "action orientated", "spurring others into action", "achieve clear goals" is clearly similar both to the Belbin Shaper and the Insights Director "purposeful, task oriented approach", "forceful, decisive and dominant". The Mumma Creator "generates original ideas", "produces several alternatives" resembles both the Belbin Plant and the MTR-i Innovator "dream up new ideas", "produce radical solutions". The Belbin Completer Finisher clearly compares with both the Mumma Finisher "follows through on plans", "attends to detail" and the Insights Observer "painstaking and conscientious", "attention and accuracy".

## Conclusions

There is no one framework that fits all situations and each framework has its strengths, its weaknesses and its limits. The easiest to use is probably the Mumma framework as the associated inventory, or questionnaire, that enables each person to identify their preferred and rejected team-roles can be obtained relatively easily, the others require accreditation and special training. However, the others have gone through very rigorous validation processes and provide more (maybe too much) information.

Whichever framework you decide to use, I suggest that you at least familiarise yourself with the others - it is not unusual for teams to participate in a number of team development events and each consultant has his/her preferred framework. ■

### References

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[www.teamtechnology.co.uk/teamroletheory](http://www.teamtechnology.co.uk/teamroletheory) For information on the MTR-i framework  
[www.managementlearningresources.co.uk](http://www.managementlearningresources.co.uk) The Mumma framework can be accessed from here (product code 209)

### Author's Notes

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