



Building the perfect team

A PA plays a pivotal role within the management team. By understanding the different personalities within a team, you can help your team be more successful and provide the highest level of support to senior managers **BY DR NICOLA DAVIES**

Are you a 'Plant' or do you tend to be more of a 'Shaper'?

These are just two personality types you might come across in the workplace. The former is the colleague who rarely seems to contribute, while the latter can sometimes come across as argumentative. The chances are that you have been witness to both of these personalities during your time as a PA, and so you will be fully aware of the negative impact that such individuals can have on team morale.

On the other hand, we don't always recognise the strengths people bring to a team. This is something that Management Consultant, Dr Meredith Belbin, set about exploring in the 1970s. After 10 years of observing various teams, Dr Belbin discovered that the success or failure of a team is strongly influenced by the behaviour of individual team members. He identified nine team roles (see box), which are represented by specific behavioural strengths that facilitate team success.

So, what do the experts' think of Dr Belbin's notion of team roles? Peter Venn, Principal Consultant for the business consultancy organisation DevelopLife, uses Dr Belbin's team roles as an introduction to "knowing the team, its strengths and weaknesses, and where you can add value/get support." Equally, Heather Dallas, Managing Director at Dallas Development Ltd., believes that Belbin's team roles offer "a robust and practical tool that individuals and teams can easily relate to." So, they have the experts' approvals so how you can use this information to enhance your team?

Role play

These nine distinct team roles demonstrate how those traits we might dislike in others can have a clearly productive place within the team dynamic. For example, the colleague who questions every idea you put forward might initially make you feel deflated or self-conscious. However, by challenging other team members, the 'Shaper' encourages improvement, ensures the team keeps striving forward, and keeps momentum going. Similarly, the colleague who tends to stay narrowly focused on a particular topic or way of working might appear inflexible, but there is no doubt that having a 'Specialist' within the team brings valuable skills and knowledge to the table.

Finding balance

All of the team roles identified by Dr Belbin have strengths and weaknesses that can contribute to the success or failure of a team. Furthermore, all of the traits encompassed within these roles are believed to be essential in getting the team to the finishing line. If your team has no 'Plant,' the quiet member who speaks rarely but brings valuable ideas when they do speak, the team is likely to lack that 'spark' that drives them forward. Too many 'Plants,' however, could lead to an overwhelming number of ideas. If your team has no 'Shaper' to challenge you or indeed to challenge your manager, the team is likely to drift along, lack motivation, and miss deadlines. Too many 'Shapers,' on the other hand, can lead to reduced team morale.

The key to a successful team is balance. As pointed out by Michael Costello, Acua's Chartered Business Psychologist, "Ever since the publication in 1981 of Belbin's work, 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." Indeed, Martin Stanton, Managing Director of

BELBIN TEAM ROLES	
Team Role	Behaviour
Shaper	Highly motivated and likes to challenge the team towards improvement and achievement.
Implementer	Takes a well-organised, systematic approach when acting upon ideas.
Completer Finisher	Ensures efficient completion of tasks through attention to detail and good concentration skills.
Co-ordinator	Acts as Chair, pulling the group together towards shared goals.
Team Worker	Supportive towards team members, encouraging co-operation and avoiding conflict.
Resource Investigator	Resourceful explorer and negotiator of opportunities outside of the team.
Plant	An innovative and creative presenter of new ideas.
Monitor-Evaluator	Takes decision making very seriously, opting for the critical approach to analysing choices.
Specialist	Provides specialised knowledge and skills and prioritises the maintenance of professional standards within the team.

Touchstones Surveys Ltd., shares that: "We have used Belbin to recruit a PA for the Managing Director of one of our clients. Essentially, I persuaded the Managing Director that he had some weaknesses in his makeup, which were largely around starting but not completing jobs, time management, and delegation. Our recruitment process, therefore, had to ensure that the preferred team roles for the successful applicant were Completer Finisher, Implementer, and Coordinator."

Work with weaknesses

So, maybe it is a matter of accepting the weaknesses of team members in order to harness their strengths and work towards achieving a balance of personalities. By focusing on the strengths of individual team members, Dr Belbin introduced the concept of 'allowable weakness.' Allowable weaknesses are those weaknesses within a team member that we accept because their strengths sit alongside those weaknesses. So, just as you might forgive your loved one for leaving the cap off the toothpaste, similar allowances need to be made when working as part of a team.

Rather than try to change weaknesses, make an effort to balance them. Drawing on previous experience, Peter has observed that when the relationship between an executive and their PA doesn't work out it is most often because "the PA turns out to be a carbon copy of the executive. So that suggests that, whereas polar opposites might also struggle, there is a need to balance out some of the executive's own blind spots." In the world of the PA, it could be argued that opposites can attract.

The perfect team?

So, can Belbin's team roles be used to create the perfect team? Martin believes so, sharing that since his own use of the Belbin framework, "the company is now far more healthy and growing faster." With this in mind, it seems apt to finish with the words of Dr Belbin, which truly capture the essence of Belbin's team roles: "no individual can be perfect, but a team can be." ■

// Peter has observed that when the relationship between an executive and their PA doesn't work out it is most often because 'the PA turns out to be a carbon copy of the executive' //