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Second Edition

# Team Roles at Work



R. Meredith Belbin

# **Team Roles at Work**

## Also by this author

*Management Teams: Why They Succeed or Fail*

*The Coming Shape of Organisation*

*Changing the Way We Work*

*Beyond the Team*

# Team Roles at Work

**Second edition**

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 **Routledge**  
Taylor & Francis Group  
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 1993 by Butterworth-Heinemann

This edition published 2010 by Routledge

2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

711 Third Avenue, New York, NY, 10017, USA

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

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#### British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

#### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

ISBN: 978-1-85617-800-6 (pbk)

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# Preface

It was a matter of surprise for me and my publishers that my earlier book *Management Teams: Why They Succeed or Fail* should have reached its peak in sales 9 years after being first published. A new way of describing roles and relationships at work had gradually percolated into the wider language of industry and so created its own momentum. The level of interest shown related to two broad groups of people. The first comprised those who work in management education, including industrial trainers. The second group was made up of active practitioners, especially those charged with the urgent need of improving results from small project teams or new business ventures.

That was the background against which I decided to write the first edition of *Team Roles at Work*, published in 1993. I approached the subject by narrating as accurately as I could the events and experiences that led us to apply the theory and, in so doing, to pass on some of the lessons learnt. Now a decade and a half later, I have retained much of the original material but have sought to recast the subject in terms of the pressures of our times, with special reference to the choices currently facing Management.

The direction of the book has been influenced by the many questions asked at lectures and the letters I have received from many different parts of the globe. Pressures began to mount in my mind whenever I reflected that the answers I gave at the time were not as adequate as I would have wished. Wisdom is always assisted in due course by the beneficence of time and hindsight.

But I think the biggest factor accounting for the decision to launch a second edition of *Team Roles at Work* is one of confidence. It is the practitioners themselves who have boosted the subject and raised the profile of Belbin teamwork. A further element of proof is that the approach has become almost second nature to some of the most successful companies in various parts of the world. A new blueprint is emerging that promises to replace hierarchical bureaucracy (arguably the blight of our times) with considered empowerment based on talent and teamwork.

Hierarchical organisation has the merit of operating on a simple model, comprehensible to all, and within which all parties know their place. Alternative forms of organisation rest on larger bodies of information that can be rapidly processed to offer more refined and more generally acceptable recommendations. This is the area in which a veritable revolution has taken place. During the last 10 years, computerization of data has rendered many difficult issues easier to understand and act on. Our perspective changed as more variables could be considered and their interactions assessed. The inclusion of observer material to supplement self-reporting, along with the further discovery that the specific demands of given jobs

had Team Role implications, has added value to the original Team Role concepts. In essence, the range of inputs could be extended, filtered, normalized, and computer processed into Team Role language to produce a wide range of personnel related outputs in a few seconds. Thereafter, the problem became one of how best to manage this new range of information and advice. Here much experience has been gained on which to report.

For the benefit of prospective readers, a few words may be said about the nature of the material covered in the chapters that lie ahead. The first port of call relates to the way in which work has been assigned throughout the ages. From the earliest times, roles were cast from stereotypes about particular groupings of people. Later, a developing recognition of individual aptitudes and skills brought about a revolution in the way in which work was organised. That individuality was preserved through formal job titles. But in due course the disadvantages of sharply differentiating job territories in well-ordered organisations threatened to outweigh the advantages. Responsibilities became fragmented, communication barriers grew, and the bureaucracy that resulted made it difficult to tackle large issues in a holistic fashion. As these faults became increasingly apparent, a new form of awareness set in. It was gradually recognized that the vitality of groups depends on interdependence and cooperation between members. Team Role language grew in response to this demand and its nature, mechanism, and implications are explained.

The middle section of the book deals with the operational strategies now available to executives. Team Role theory and data have a special part to play in self-management, in the management of others, and in the resolution of conflict. Here there are ideas and techniques that can be learnt to advantage.

The concluding chapters address the more holistic issues involved in management. The move from solo leadership to team leadership, problems of succession in management, and the future shape of organisation are examined in the light of newly acquired understanding and experience.

The author, in writing this book, is deeply indebted to the many who have contributed in work and ideas from the earliest days of experimentation at Henley, through the development of the information technology that has allowed us to enter so many uncharted waters, to more recent days when pioneers have valiantly introduced Team Role concepts and practices in many countries overseas. I hesitate to mention names for fear of leaving out of account those who merit mention, but there are countless individuals who have ensured that Belbin Team Roles have been taken up in more and more organisations globally. My thanks are extended to them all.

*Meredith Belbin, 2009*



# Chapter 1

## How roles at work emerged

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This book is about the establishment of roles within a team where the assumption of duties and responsibilities depends on a measure of self-discovery combined with a perception of the needs of the team as a whole.

If it is argued that roles are not normally brought about in that way, I would have to agree. Usually, people are given roles; they do not find them. Nor for that matter do they associate work with teams. Yet I would claim that advanced teamwork is one of the most efficient ways we know of accomplishing complex tasks and missions.

The concept of the team is well established in sport but in so far as it relates to work, it is of comparatively recent origin. Teams, where the players play a different part but enjoy broadly equal status, have scarcely any precedents in the broad political history of mankind. The only possible exception arises in hunter-gatherer society, which I will consider below. But otherwise, the assignment of duties and responsibilities has operated through rank and has incorporated traditional rules and conventions. So it is important to heed the nature of these forces if we are to proceed, for, in the complex societies of our times, nothing ever begins on a blank sheet.

If the word 'teams' does not appear in recorded history, it is not surprising. It would hardly be a fitting description of the many key groupings of people that have significantly affected events over the last 3000 years. Yet in an earlier age, when closely knit bands of nomadic hunters and gatherers roamed the earth, social life was very different from what followed later.

Evidence from surviving indigenous peoples suggests a pattern of social behaviour marked by its elemental, spontaneous, and sharing characters. These small dynamic groups were closely related in kin, commonly matrilineal in descent and matrilocal in their places of residence, and developed relationships that owed little to the exercise of personal power. Distinction in the roles in which people engaged were linked with gender and age and had evolved in a way that was perceived natural. The notion of natural roles is far removed from how work is ordered in a world where divisions of labour are studied and enforced from the point of view of productivity.

The nature of working relationships changed with the building of towns and cities, along with the settlement and ownership of large tracts of territory. As the gains in material culture became worth defending, evolution exerted its unrelenting laws. The survival of the fittest meant that ascendancy was conferred on the possessors of superior weapons. And, inevitably, those possessors discovered that what could be used in defence was of equal value in attack; that weapons constituted investments, offering conspicuous rewards in the harvests of war – booty, tribute, growing empires, and a vanquished people who could provide wives, concubines, or slaves or, failing that, might be exterminated at will. (The Mongol and Ottoman empires, the largest the world had ever seen, owed their remarkable rate of expansion from so small a base to the discovery of a winning formula: interbreeding with the available women in the conquered lands and killing all but the most submissive men. So their empires grew as their kinship expanded).

### **As primaeval teams recede, tyrannical order develops**

Weapons and violence alone were not enough to give this new order of society permanence. Something extra was needed. That something was disciplined

organisation and it was conferred by patriarchy based on the authority of the war leader. Its uniform theme was the exertion of, and respect for, power.

Just as power regulated dealings between states, turning some nations into imperial masters and others into the subjugated, power was directed inwardly as much as outwardly. It was the key to organisation within the state – in political or social spheres no less than in the military. Power was wielded by the implied threat of force, or overtly by terror, commonly aided by resort to torture and even, in some societies, by human sacrifice.

Power, by its nature, starts at the top and is exercised downwards through a succession of subordinate relationships. Its mode of operation ensured that the key issues of politics hinged on the whims and personality of the ruler. And, as the ruler aged, all attention turned to succession. Where would-be heirs could point to no acknowledged rules to bolster their claims, succession became literally a subject of life and death. Monarchs were fortunate if they died peacefully in their beds. Sons murdered fathers in their haste to seize the throne. Rulers surrounded themselves with ever-watchful bodyguards and the duties of administration were passed to eunuchs, whose ambitions to install their own line were limited by the destruction of their capacity to reproduce. But even so, plots for assassination could still be hatched from afar. Poisoning became the favoured long-range weapon; food tasting a common security occupation.

Those who ruled their empires by the sword may have been preoccupied with their own well being and personal ambitions but tyranny had one positive outcome. It showed what a disciplined organisation, even in its harshest forms, can accomplish.

The level of economic and cultural success that each empire reached now depended on a new governing factor – the division of labour. The higher the level of achievement, the more intricate this division became. The assigning of duties and tasks necessary to maintain the system demanded complex handling; for every successful system that uses labour, whether imperial or industrial, has to settle the recurring question – according to what principles should work be distributed?

Several types of solution were available. Whatever formula was chosen had an enormous bearing on the vitality of the system and on the survival value of the society that adopted it.

### **Some traditional ways of assigning people to work roles**

It is not in the nature of autocratic rulers to consult servants and underlings or to weigh up their preferences when distributing duties and responsibilities. A few favourites may have enjoyed the pick of appointments. But the great mass of people had no say in the matter. Their work was determined according to their station.

The notions of rulers about what work particular people should and should not have been doing may have been based on prejudice and often on falsehoods. But whatever their merits or otherwise, such beliefs ensured that the required work got done. By classifying people, work schedules were more easily arranged. So to understand the productive forces of society and its dynamic mechanisms, one should first look at how work was and is assigned to those undertaking it.

When scheduled work began – of the type needed to develop major well-planned undertakings – only a limited range of possibilities existed. The most straightforward rules for allotting differentiated duties involved a classification of all people by age, gender, and race. That classification has such universality of application that it is no surprise it is alive and well today. In many contemporary societies it remains, as it has done for countless ages, the principal determinant of the rank and occupational positions in which people find themselves.

### THE MOST SENIOR PERSON GETS THE JOB

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One of the most favoured differentiators of status is seniority. Individuals line up for jobs, responsibility, and promotion in a sequential order where the first to arrive in service and employment has the highest claim. All the jobs are similarly ranked on the ladder of a hierarchy. As the years pass by, the candidates move up a rung and occupy positions with the higher status.

The premium placed on seniority was much in evidence as the nineteenth century moved into the twentieth century. A typical example was set by the railways. A newcomer would be given a station or track job before being allowed on to a locomotive. The entry job would then be as fireman. That title denoted a stoker busily shovelling coals into the boiler. Many years would pass before he was allowed to act as a locomotive driver. That was the route forward. There was no other.

An everyday example can be witnessed in a restaurant. There, an under waiter is ranked below a waiter, who in turn is less important than a wine waiter, above whom stands the head waiter. Each job involves different tasks, performance of which scarcely prepares the jobholder for the position above. But one unwritten code applies – no under waiter would ever be appointed who was older than a head waiter.

A seeming justification of the seniority principle is that age and experience convey confidence and wisdom (as once must have been true before the age of literacy). The principle is therefore traditional, with the conservative nature of its code ensuring the unwavering support of the establishment. As has been the case in China for centuries, status is attached to looking old. The practical advantage of the age and seniority principle is that anyone can check that no one has been promoted out of turn. At the same time, those who have any reason to be disappointed can console themselves with the thought that their turn will eventually come.

Here it is remarkable how a long-standing principle has lately been turned on its head. In sunrise industries, age and experience have given way to an emphasis on youth, vigour, and recency of education. For those who fail to match these requirements, the prospects are poor. As the passage of years renders them 'past it', the disappointed are consigned to the legendary scrapheap. So age still serves, even in its perverse form, as a visual marker for assigning work.

## THE IMPACT OF GENDER

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There is another simple principle, of ancient origins, which from time immemorial has governed the allocation of tasks and responsibilities. That principle is gender. Men and women in most societies and firms characteristically do different jobs. The distinction in domains is so basic that in most languages – with the notable exception of English – nouns are either feminine or masculine. (That in some languages the compromise of neuter has introduced a grey zone does no more than mask the fundamental division).

The fact that there is no uniformity in what constitutes the orbits of masculinity and femininity matters less than the fact that the division exists at all. For by existing, it simplifies decision-making in terms of the roles people play. A dynamic market entrepreneur in West Africa is likely to be female, in India and China male. It is not aptitude but how the gender factor is treated in culture that largely determines the differences in job opportunities.

Those biophysical twins, age and gender, are at their most powerful in their bearing on work roles when they operate in combination. There we encounter a powerful consolidating factor: initiation ceremonies or rites of passage. These are kept rigorously separate for men and women as they move up the age scale. In tribal society, these often gain an added emphasis through secret ceremonies. Emphasis is added through physical mutilation, e.g. male adolescent circumcision and its female equivalent, clitoridectomy, and by wearing distinguishing clothing or other forms of decoration. These transition points may strike an observer as primitive and often brutal. But they have a function. They serve as frontiers, introducing, as they are passed through, new and socially accepted forms of work and privilege.

Age and gender have offered a means of separating roles, so bringing together complementary work activities throughout the history of mankind. But in due course, as the population filled the land, and intertribal and imperial conflicts became more intense, skirmishes gave way to conquests. There were the victors and there were the vanquished. And now a new principle became available for assigning roles at work, for, those features of appearance that had hitherto marked out enemies now offered a special opportunity for constructive exploitation. The new formula for assigning work took in racial segregation and stratification. And so it came about that peoples of different stocks took on different working roles.

### RACIAL ROLES AND HIERARCHIES

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Virtually all the early cities about which we have historical evidence were built up on ghettos. Cities were assemblies of peoples chosen for their specialist tribal skills. Inevitably, they looked physically different from one another. The ethnic factor played a major part in channelling them into distinctive occupations. Trades were passed from father to son and shared to some extent within their own community, but were nearly always hidden from outsiders.

Manpower policies thus have an ancient lineage, accounting for much of the belief that different peoples have different talents for particular classes of work. So strong was this belief that whenever one empire overran another in the ancient world, it was customary for the new ruler to transplant that source of wealth creation, the ghetto of skilled tradesmen, from the old city to the new capital.

So it was when Cairo fell to the Ottoman Empire. Then, Selim the Grim uprooted the peoples of the most useful ghettos and resited them in Byzantium. As a consequence, Cairo never regained its former pre-eminence in the ancient world.

Because people in ghettos looked different, one could recognize or even assume their occupation. In due course, as empires expanded, these ethnic variations signified not merely the rich trade tapestries of cities but also different positions in the hierarchy of the empire.

This gradation was extended by bringing in and finding a place for slaves. Because conquered peoples belonged to different tribes and races, who were overcome in different circumstances, their positions within the system varied. The best positions would go to those who enjoyed superior status. For example, a Greek slave would typically end up as a tutor in a Roman patrician family. The losers became the hewers of wood and the drawers of water, or, in Roman times, the harshly treated labourers who toiled on the latifundia.

Slaves who distinguished themselves through their work performance became emancipated and so moved one step up the social and work ladder. Yet race, and its junior cousin, tribe, still remained primary factors in marking out positions within the complexity of the empire.

To this day, in liberally minded cities, different ethnic groups are still attached to certain trades, industries, and professions. A balance between these ethnic groups can therefore enrich the life of the city. Moreover, much is to be gained for the groups themselves. There are social and cultural advantages both in passing on special skills within family groups and in restricting knowledge.

Yet the corollary is that those who start in disadvantaged positions face an uphill climb in rising to higher things, whatever their talents. Progress is hardly possible for those outside the favoured circle until the old stereotypes are broken down.

## The rise of the free city

These age-old conventional systems for assigning people to work had their part to play in expanding the productive base of society. But their greatest limitation to continued development was that they neglected individual differences. There was no place for those glittering and unexpected talents that often rear their heads in the most unexpected places. Personal behaviour was circumscribed by those stereotypes that attach to membership of an identified group. Individuality could find no place in such societies – a condition still to be witnessed in large parts of the world today. The acceptance of individual differences in the population at large did not enter the social and political scene until the power structures of empires and associated tyrannies began to crumble.

The opportunity for change first arose when small city-states laid down their roots beyond the reach of powerful empires. So it was that Miletus, famed for such great thinkers as Heraclitus and Hippocrates, achieved its trading and cultural pre-eminence on the rocky coasts of Asia Minor; similarly Knossos on the apparently undefended island of Crete, Rhodes, and Samos in the Aegean; Athens in the age of Pericles; or Corinth on the isthmus of the Peloponnese and its later colony, Syracuse, on Sicily. So it was that Venice established itself on sand dunes in the North Adriatic out of reach of invading Goths and Vandals; or Aigues Mortes, that remarkable and well-preserved walled city, set in a salt marsh on the Camargue and beyond the easy grasp of the Bourbons; or the cities of Armenia and Georgia in the mountain fastnesses of the Caucasus, protected from the ravages of the Mongol and Ottoman empires; or the independent Swiss cantons, founded by Huguenot artisans, protected in their remote mountain strongholds from the oppressive forces of the French monarchy; or the Baltic cities of the Hanseatic League spreading skills and enlightenment well beyond the Baltic itself; or the city states of Florence, Siena, Bologna, Assisi, and others on the Italian peninsula, flourishing during the Renaissance before mega empires could once again resume their onward march.

These cities that had so much in common, over an extensive time span, owed their prosperity to their skills in craftsmanship, small-scale industry, and trading. They were small enough to make their own rules and to defy the conventions governing permitted work behaviour in larger scale societies. They became beacons of opportunity. That was the state of affairs that prevailed with Athens in its heyday; for it welcomed skilled artisans, encouraged them to settle, allowed them to take out citizenship, and, in consequence, became a magnet for the most talented in the Greek-speaking world. Such was the manpower policy that underlay its prosperity and cultural achievement.

The fluidity in movement that a trading community permits and encourages, along with a recognition of the gains which the production of saleable goods offers,

changed the way in which work was regarded. A new valuation was placed on human skills and human perfectibility, an emphasis often seen in the characteristic art forms of these cultures.

### **Skilled labour in a free market**

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Under such conditions the scene was now set for the appearance of a new operating principle in the assignment of work. Instead of relying on the mechanistic classification of people for work according to gender, age, and race, another consideration came to the fore. That consideration was individual skill.

In a free city, the road to success lay in acquiring a trade or entering a profession. Any teacher of a trade or profession was in demand. The ambitious sought an apprenticeship. Such was the demand that it was common practice for apprentices to pay, rather than to be paid by, the masters they served.

A journeyman (i.e. qualified craftsman) needed to establish his credentials to the world at large. The age-old badges of work identity – age, gender, or race – could no longer offer the requisite cues. So how was it to be done?

The answer had to be a written document authenticated by the master under whom the apprentice had served. That in turn quickened the quest for a general education; for documents are of little use unless they can be read.

The path that had been opened up by city-states over a long period was widened by the industrial revolution until it became general practice.

A person's work role in life was no longer set by age, gender, or race but was conditioned by education and training, factors in limited supply and therefore cherished all the more on that account. A job title became a means of self-description. People would identify themselves in terms of what they had learnt and what they were qualified to do. So they were carpenters, turners, and smiths – words which became common surnames – or they collected at the highest status level some professional title to announce both their occupation and their identity. Self-projection of this nature was possible and even desirable. People were free to move in a free labour market and to take up any job offered, so it was in their interests that others should know who they were in an occupational sense. Workers joined trade unions just as craftsmen had joined guilds.

### **A dilemma in work identity**

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The growth in personal liberty that small city-states first offered, and which the industrial revolution enlarged, produced a new type of division of labour. It was one that gave scope to individual skills and talents by combining education and training.



Craft workers became the product of the system. This meant that the contribution that each worker offered was no longer restricted by the straitjacket of social stereotyping. New talents could be discovered and developed in hitherto unexpected quarters.

The combination of training and education favoured change on a scale that would have been impossible in the older societies where individuals were locked into stereotyped roles. The greater scope for personal initiatives allowed innovations to flourish. Workers found the best way to use their trade skills to advantage. Productivity shot up and a standard of living was reached that was incomparable with anything seen before.

The arrival of universal education increased the basic employability of people and so prepared them for whatever changes might take place in the demands of work.




But in due course, universal education produced a number of unwanted side-effects as the gap opened between the practical and the theoretical, resulting in a formal separation between vocational and non-vocational subjects. The later age of entry into work, which is the price paid for extended education, meant that suitability for any given job had to be presumed. And it was often presumed incorrectly. Young people would follow a course of learning without much insight into the reality of the demands of the work for which they were being prepared, whereas, before, the suitability of an apprentice had been proved before any qualified person was appointed.

Much of the attraction of the apprentice tradesman lay in the scarcity of that skill. As more entrants to college pursuing non-vocational subjects became eligible for jobs in the labour market, employers would find that educational results were not enough. In theory, any one of a large number of candidates might prove suitable for a given job.

A final difficulty arose from the changing nature of work. Up to a century ago, all jobs were well defined and well understood. They had job titles that conveyed, both to the jobholder and the wider world, exactly what was expected. No communication problem arose until the formal boundaries of jobs began to break down and jobs lost their distinctiveness. With the rapid advances in technology and strategic thinking, employers placed a growing emphasis on versatility and teamwork. This shift in priorities was to affect operator and management levels alike (Figure 1.1).

## **A strange outcome**

The sum total of all these changes has brought about a peculiar situation. Increasingly well-educated and trained job seekers are applying for positions, the exact nature of which they find difficult to comprehend, while employers are considering the credentials of large numbers of possible candidates whose suitability they find hard to assess.

Era	Criteria for assigning work	Method
Pre-industrial 	By category: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Age</li> <li>• Sex</li> <li>• Tribe</li> <li>• Class</li> </ul>	Visual inspection
Industrial 	By qualifications: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trade skills</li> <li>• Experience</li> <li>• Education</li> </ul>	Certificates Selection panel
Post-industrial 	By person shape: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Team role</li> <li>• Personal orientation</li> </ul>	Computer matching Counselling interview

**Figure 1.1** Human resource strategies throughout the ages.

Skills in communication lie at the heart of many key jobs. Yet, ironically, the over-specialisation of subject-study in higher education is threatening to narrow the capacity to communicate with the wider world. Education, in supplying literacy and numeracy, is no longer offering a rare skill in demand as once hoped. By original intention, people have used educational qualifications as a stepping stone to better jobs. The stumbling block is that the nature of these jobs is changing in a way that is unanticipated. At the same time the old certainties about future prospects linked with age, gender, race, and traditional apprenticeships have now been removed. People gather bewildered in increasing numbers wondering which road to take. There are fewer signposts on which reliance can be placed.

A new language will be needed to facilitate versatility and teamwork if the aspirations of the post-industrial age are to be fulfilled.

## Summary

- The criteria for assigning work has continued to change throughout the ages.
- Education has taken the place of apprenticeship, which in so doing has caused problems in identifying suitability for jobs.
- An over-concentration on specialised education has entailed a loss of wider communication skills.