

Belbin and Successful Project Teams

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Creating successful project teams is a daunting task for any project leader, especially when they are pressed to deliver results within aggressive time scales and tight budgetary constraints. Overcoming challenges such as getting the right blend of youth and experience, skills and competencies, academic qualification and professional certifications does not necessarily lead to the establishment of successful project teams.

Building successful project teams is about slotting the right individuals into designated team roles and fostering team spirit. This may sound easy at first, but in time it can become a cumbersome task, especially when project leaders have to choose from a number of highly competent people that can do multiple roles. Selecting individuals on conventional criteria based on experience, skills, qualifications and psychometric tests simply does not work. Alternative mechanisms have to be explored to get the right person for the right role within the team.

One such method of determining the suitability of individuals for team roles is the Belbin Team Inventory Method (BTIM). BTIM is a personality test and evaluates whether the personality of an individual is suitable for a particular role within the team. Based on this, individuals are assigned appropriate Belbin roles to perform. There are eight Belbin roles in a team. These are Plant, Resource Investigator, Coordinator, Shaper, Monitor Evaluator, Team Worker, Implementer, Complete Finisher, and Specialist.

See Table 1.0 for a brief description.

Whilst it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the profiles of the Belbin roles in detail, it is suffice to mention that leadership roles are Shaper and Coordinator, delivery focused roles are Resource Investigator, Implementer and Complete Finisher, and the cerebral roles are Monitor Evaluator, Plant and Specialist.

Belbin Role	Brief Description
Plant	The source of original ideas and proposals. Looking for different approaches, Concern with major issues. Independent outlook.
Resource Investigator	Communicates to and from outside world. Sells ideas to others. Knows lots of people.
Coordinator	Detached, observes team processes. Absorbs all alternatives and takes the team's decisions. Encourages, soothes conflict.
Shaper	Pushy leader shapes team's efforts into a cohesive whole.
Monitor Evaluator	Dispassionate analyst. Reaches logical conclusions by analysis. Checks feasibility and practicality.
Team Worker	Promotes group harmony. Dampens arguments. Know others' problems. Counterbalance to friction between Shapers and Plants.
Implementer	Translates ideas into concrete tasks and implements them. Clarifies objectives, defines tasks and roles
Complete Finisher	Relentlessly makes the team achieve on time. Raises standards, injects urgency. Compulsive about deadlines.
Specialist	Provision of rare skills. Can be called upon to make decisions based on in-depth experience. Advance their own subject.

Table 1.0 Description of Belbin roles

How does BTIM work? Individuals within a specified group fill in a Belbin Team Inventory questionnaire. The results are then used to establish Belbin profiles for each individual in the team. The two dominant scores correspond to the two Belbin roles that individuals can perform within the current group. A profile is also developed for the group as a whole, which can be used to compare the profile of other groups within the same department or similar projects. See Figure 1.0.

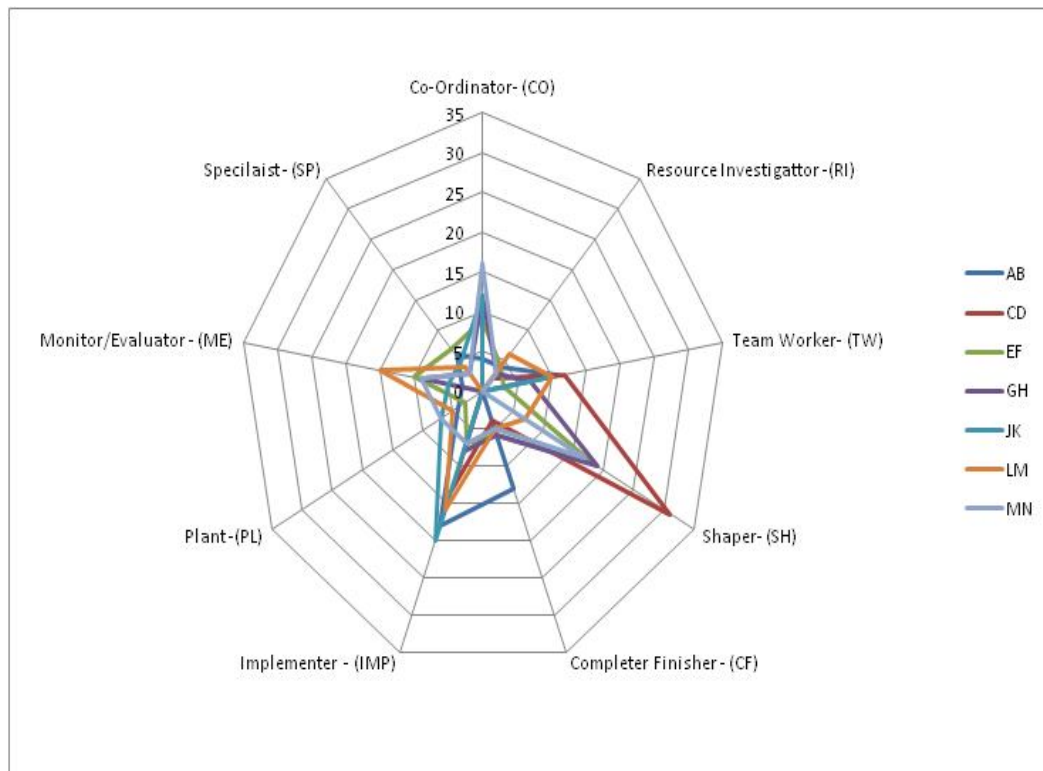


Figure 2.0 Belbin profile for a project team

A major advantage of BTIM is that it does not pigeon-hole individuals into particular personality types. Individuals may exhibit different behaviours in different groups and roles are assigned on the basis of behaviour. This means that the individual can be assigned multiple Belbin roles in various project teams. Additionally, the individual could be assigned a secondary Belbin role within the same team based on the second highest score. For instance, an individual whose daily job is to analyze business requirements takes the Belbin test, and the top two scores from the test correspond to Monitor Evaluator and Shaper respectively. This means that given the right opportunity the individual could also lead a team of business analysts.

BTIM can also highlight unhealthy imbalances in project teams. For instance, in a PMO function that exclusively reports on the progress of projects and possesses a significant proportion of Shapers points to a couple of disparities. First, some team members are more suited to leading projects instead of reporting. Second, the PMO team would be better equipped to undertake its role if it was staffed with more Coordinators, Team Workers and Implementers.

Such information can prove invaluable to project leaders, as it can help them plug resource gaps on mission critical projects during period of peak work load. Project leaders can use competent resources that score well via BTIM to perform multiple roles within projects—at very little cost to the project.

At team level BTIM can encourage team members to take on more challenging roles or try something different. For example, someone who has been leading project teams may like to take a step back and try to get a deeper look at problem solving. If the individual's secondary scores on BTIM for Plant or Monitor Evaluator were high then it would be relatively easy for the person to convince his superiors about this move. The same dynamics can be used to assess the performance of project teams working on similar projects.

In summary, BTIM is a useful tool as it assists individual team members to enhance self awareness and allows them to manage their strengths and weaknesses. For project leaders, BTIM enables them to manage their project teams effectively through placement of the right individuals in the roles they perform best thereby improving the overall effectiveness of the team and driving higher performance.

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