

THE IMPORTANCE OF TEAMS

by **John Ball**
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We are often told that teams are the way forward, especially in business. But of course the problem is that if the team is not working, perhaps because the members cannot get on, or the skills are out of balance or indeed the team has not come together, then serious, often negative, problems can arise. And that's bad for business. Teams are everywhere. They have to develop, mature and often eventually terminate.

According to the writer Tuckman, it is possible to identify five distinct stages of development through which teams should pass. The first stage is the so-called forming stage, when the members meet and decide on the purpose of the team and how it will operate.

At this stage the team is no more than a collection of individuals, finding out about one another and discussing the task - which may be unclear. Although wasteful and time consuming, this stage is essential to ensure that the team members become comfortable with each other.

The second stage is referred to as storming. The phrase is a deliberate reference to conflict, ideas, ideals and behaviour that are challenged and sometimes rejected. There is competition and argument about who should fill the roles in the team. Although characterised by conflict, this is constructive with trust developing and if the individuals are successful with this stage then a stronger team will result.

The third stage is norming, when the routines under which the team will operate become established. The team is now settling down, investigating ideas, testing the reactions of the team's members and consequently norms are established. In addition, patterns of behaviour are established, trust will develop and the methods by which decisions will be taken will be decided on. By the time the performing stage is reached, the team is complete and is able to perform effectively.

Problems with team roles, conflict and issues of adjustment have been resolved. In practice, many teams reach the dorming stage, which is the final stage. The team becomes complacent, loses interest in the task and self-preservation becomes the dominant issue.

All teams, it is suggested, go through these five stages. However, if for some reason the team loses or gains members, or the external environment imposes fundamental changes on it, the team very often may revert to earlier stages of development.

Team development is however only one dimension in understanding the importance of the ways in which teams work. Dr Meredith Belbin has studied team membership (as opposed to team development). He has suggested that all teams are a matter of

balance and that the team members fulfil two roles. The primary role is the skill or function for which the individual was appointed to the team in the first place. This is usually the individual's professional role.

The secondary role is the team role based on the individual's preferred behaviour pattern. All the team roles are needed for a team to be successful, the team role being in addition to the members bringing their own disciplines and skills. It is also possible that members have more than one team role skill, although one will usually dominate. The team role may change, depending on the task and the number of team members to avoid the problem of team imbalance. Belbin describes eight team roles:

- the coordinator provides the leadership, presides and coordinates the activities - he or she is a balanced and disciplined person, good at working with others
- the company worker is the administrator and organiser who turns the team's ideas into jobs and tasks - this person is efficient, trustworthy and unexcitable
- the shaper is highly-strung and a dominant, extrovert personality - task-driven to the point of passion, he or she is a force for action
- the plant is the introvert, invariably intellectually bright, and imaginative who acts as a source of ideas
- the resource investigator is the popular, social member of the team - an extrovert, this person is relaxed and a useful source of new contacts but not ideas
- the monitor-evaluator is not creative but is analytically gifted - often tactless and aloof, the role is to examine ideas and spot errors and flaws
- the team worker is the silent member - concerned with the maintenance of the team, he or she is supportive, understanding and popular with the team but only noticed when absent
- the completer-finisher enjoys the details, pushes the team to meet targets and sees urgency and follow-through as important.

Later research has identified a further team role - the specialist. This person joins the team only when expert or specific advice is required on matters outside the competence of the team. This additional role has come about because of the greater use of teams for project work.

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