



Playing better in your team to become a better team player

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It is part of received wisdom that groups of executives or managers should learn to operate as effective teams. Getting everyone to think the same way is a tempting strategy, but our new research reveals that real team work comes when opposites are integrated to work with each other.

The importance of reconciling these opposites is the cornerstone of our work. We have found there is too much one-dimensional thinking across too many HR frameworks and claimed solutions. Too many personality tests mark out people as either 'judging' or 'perceiving'. But why if you are a 'judging' person can you not act as a 'perceiving' person? And if you are 'individualistic' can you not also be 'collectivistic' and therefore work with others as a good team player?

Behaviour analysis metrics for teams tend to pigeon-hole people as being able to offer their contribution through mainly what is their primary natural team role orientation. Traditional logic then purports that by combining several of such individuals ~ selected so that all required team roles are present ~ becomes the winning formula for the assembled group to be able to work as a team.

But is team building that simple? If members of a team play different roles and have different orientations, then the team is full of potential conflict and misunderstanding. Globally we have found the Anglo Saxon world of the US and UK tends to be more individualistic while Asians take to a more communal teamwork approach. So as long as the Americans remain in America managing all-American teams, while for example, the Chinese stay in China doing the same, then conflict and misunderstanding is at least on the local level. But in today's multi-cultural world, an American leader could be running a team of Thai, Chinese, French and English members. And furthermore, what if the senior management group already in place come with an imbalance of team roles?

When we begin to incorporate non-Western types of logic, such as Ying-yang or Taoism, we soon realize that we have all been restrictive in basing any profiling on bi-modal dimensions. We recognized these limitations in (earlier versions of) our own cross-cultural frameworks. For example, we were trying to place respondents along a scale with 'individualism' at one end and 'communitarianism' at the other. But in a multi-cultural environment, a highly individualized leader will agonize over the fact that many subordinates prefer to work with their team. Conversely, the group oriented leader will fail because of an apparent lack of not recognizing the efforts of individuals. Thus we have a dilemma between the seemingly opposing orientations of Individualism or Communitarianism.

We have investigated how well our respondents reconcile these seemingly opposing views by extending our own instruments to explore how well everyone works together in their team to help the

organisation, but where teams encourage, stimulate, reward and celebrate individual contributions.

As an example of what can be achieved, the US semiconductor industry achieved global market dominance by fusing teams of creative individuals. The success from one of our clients came from not simply rewarding individuals for their creative ideas or teams for successful projects, but the integration of these opposites. The key was to reward creative individuals to give their findings to their team, and at the same time to reward teams for how they developed the creativity of their individuals.

Conventionally it has been difficult to relate these patterns to what creates effective collaboration in teams, especially across cultures ~ let alone between any individuals with different value systems. We thought that if we tried to extend existing team analysis tools to find a more subtle way of describing the range of behaviours employed by people in different situations, it would help in more effective collaboration in a team.

We have taken the well known model developed by Meredith Belbin¹ as one example simply because it is recognised as the most widely used team inventory in the world. And no wonder ~ it is well researched, it has been thoroughly validated and has made a significant contribution to management development for over a decade. Of course we know that the Belbin Team role model is not intended for use simplistically as a model for team selection, recruitment or team building, but as an aid to analysis, reflection and constructive debate. We should also remember that facilitators who have been trained and licensed to use such original models are well able to apply them creatively and effectively but that sadly such models are sometimes used by other trainers in less sophisticated ways ~often inappropriately.

We have no wish to criticise the Belbin model, or any other such inventory ~ just to discuss the usefulness of extending it in light of our own experiences.

The Belbin model was not intended as a device for comparing country-specific team-role cultures, which can produce problems in a cross-cultural context. Even when the team role distributions of two cultures are quite similar, the cultures themselves are not necessarily similar. So it is not surprising that effective team behaviour may not look the same in different cultures, let alone in multi-cultural teams.

Britain and the United States offer good examples. The team role distributions of both populations are similar but the behaviour British 'resource investigators' enact to undertake this team role is quite different from the behaviour U.S. 'resource investigators' perform to provide their contribution to their team. The differences in behaviour do not

¹ See for example: Management Teams: Why They Succeed or Fail, R. Meredith Belbin, Butterworth Heinemann, 2003,



necessarily indicate differences in team roles, but differences in ways the preferences can be expressed and enacted within those cultures. There are cultural differences in behaviour, but not in team role.

Our concern is that, too often, consultants who often abuse such models assume that simply having all team roles present will make an effective team. They ignore the whole issue of how people with different team roles should work together to combine their contributions. So our quest is to ask how can we extend orthodox models and thereby make them jewels that go far beyond any cultural preference?

In the same way that we have extended our own instruments, we have also sought to challenge respondents about what dilemmas they face in working in their team. Thus with Pepsico, Stream and other organizations we asked members of their senior team what tensions they face with working with other members of their team that had 'opposite' team roles to themselves. Note that the focus was on the dilemmas they faced when working with other team members by virtue of the team roles, and not aspects of personality or inter-personal relationships. For many participants, simply posing these questions instantly generated new insights to how they were working with others and they were all well able to be creative about how they could reconcile their own team role with opposite team roles. Consider a team member who is a *Shaper*. What dilemma did he identify in working with the *Finisher* role in a team ~ and how could he work better in the future by reconciling this dilemma?

Respondent	Working with a contrasting team role	Other team member
Shaper <i>Challenging, dynamic, thrives on pressure. The drive and courage to overcome obstacles. But prone to provocation. Offends people's feelings.</i>	Working with a contrasting team role	Finisher <i>Painstaking, conscientious, anxious. Searches out errors and omissions. Delivers on time. but Inclined to worry unduly. Reluctant to delegate.</i>
This is what he said about himself: "difficult for me to take on and develop ideas I have not had an original input to"		And about his colleague: "May not appear interested in alternative viewpoints as focus is on detail and delivery"
This is what he proposed as a Reconciliation		
Request the finisher to structure meeting time to evaluate my new ideas and then to identify and discuss his/her concerns and how they could be overcome if my idea might be implemented		

Similarly, consider a team member who is naturally a *Monitor-Evaluator*. What dilemmas did she say she faces when working with a *Plant* ~ and how could she integrate her role with her opposites?

Respondent	Working with a contrasting team role	Other team member
Monitor-evaluator <i>Sober, strategic and discerning. Sees all options. Judges accurately. But lacks drive and ability to inspire others.</i>	Working with a contrasting team role	Plant <i>Creative, imaginative, unorthodox, solves difficult problems. But, ignores incidentals. Too pre-occupied to communicate effectively.</i>
"I want to influence others to take action"		"Idea generation conflicts with need to meet deadlines and work with team"
This is what she proposed as a Reconciliation		
Create action plans with key deliverables with clear roles and responsibilities but which include specific tasks for the review of new ideas, their evaluation and assessment of their implication		

We have repeated this extended team role model with other client companies using an interactive web based system that captures strategies that enable participants to work better with others such that we are now able to build a team-role dilemma database to explore all combinations. Our growing database of these tensions are manifestations at the team level of the more generic dilemmas faced by organisation today. We also know from our work where we measure the impact of these reconciliations that this improves business performance at the bottom line through better team working exposed by this analysis.

Given the importance of reconciling opposites, we are surprised that no instrument that measures this has been devised - not in published form, at any rate. As explained, we recognised the limitations of our own cross-cultural instruments that positioned people on bi-polar scales of mutually exclusive extremes of 7 dimensions and therefore extended these to evaluate how individuals reconcile cultural differences. As well as the extended team role model summarised above, we have also produced an extended version of Meyers Briggs MBTI that we call the Integrated Type Indicator and also the Integrated Scorecard that extends Kaplan/Norton's Balanced Scorecard.

Our concern about applying any linear model across international boundaries might be explained by our own over-developed reconciliation profiles. But we insist that with the combination of seemingly opposed orientations, a team can flourish in diversity. Yes, all team roles need to be present and played out, but it is the reconciliation between them that makes the team surpass. And no-one has ever measured anything like that in us.

The ideas summarised in this article are discussed at length throughout the authors' new book: 'Business Across Cultures'. See www.businessacrosscultures.com