



Belbin and Tuckman: Supporting your team at every stage.

By The Belbin Team | Victoria Brown, 27 Jul 2021

Tuckman theory

In 1965, Dr Bruce Tuckman was doing ground-breaking work on group dynamics in Ohio. A couple of years later, Dr Meredith Belbin began his seminal research into team behaviours at Henley.

Tuckman studied teams from formation to completion of a task and identified crucial stages in a team's life cycle. Belbin's observations of teams uncovered nine Team Roles, which describe ways of contributing and interrelating in a team.

So how do the two fit together? What is happening in Belbin terms as the team changes, and what can be done to give teams the best chance of success at each stage?

Tuckman and Belbin - Forming

In Belbin terms, the team needs to get to know one another's strengths and weaknesses, but they haven't worked together long enough to provide Team Role feedback on each other. Completing a [Team Wheel](#) can provide a powerful visual illustration of the spread of roles within the team. A good Co-ordinator can bring the team together and identify how each person can contribute.

There is a risk that team members won't want to address difficult topics for fear of causing conflict. Teamworkers in particular might be uncomfortable about arguments, but this part of the process is crucial to the team's success. Completer Finishers and Specialists might be tempted to bring broader

Forming

During this stage, team members behave independently. They're just getting to know one another, so there may be politeness and goodwill, but mutual trust hasn't yet been established. Discussion is likely to focus on defining the scope of the task in hand, and how to approach it. The team relies on a leader for guidance and direction.

In Belbin terms, the team needs Plants to come up with new ideas, and Monitor Evaluators to analyse them dispassionately. [Working Relationship Reports](#) can highlight potential areas of conflict between individuals, giving discussion starters to work towards resolution. Teamworkers can help build relationships internally too. On the opposite side of the [Team Wheel](#), Shapers can be valuable at this stage, as they're forthright, will prevent the Co-ordinator from getting too involved in team politics, and will help move discussion on from ideas to outcomes.

Tuckman and Belbin - Storming

Storming

The team begins to suggest ideas and compete with one another. People begin to form opinions about the characters of others in the team, so relationships can be made or broken at this stage. Disagreements and personality clashes must be resolved, or it can lower motivation. On the other hand, if the team is too focused on consensus, they may agree on a flawed plan simply in order to keep the team together.

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There is a risk that too many Plants could be competing for ideas, or could feel demotivated by the Monitor Evaluator who points out the glitch in their idea. Shapers are useful, but should be deployed with caution at this stage: if their competitive streak turns aggressive or confrontational, this needs to be addressed, to ensure good relationships going forward.

Tuckman and Belbin - Norming

In Belbin terms, the team needs a clear understanding of who should do what. Knowing Team Role strengths and weaknesses within the team will enable the team leader – and other team members – to quickly identify who might be suited to which kinds of work, and when each contribution is needed. Co-ordinators are proficient at facilitating group decisions, whereas Implementers are well-placed to make plans for efficient processes, given that they have a reliable – and unchanging – structure to work with. Resource Investigators are needed to go outside the team and gain insights into the competition.

Norming

There is greater agreement and consensus in decision-making. Roles and responsibilities are made clear and the team moves towards more harmonious working practices. Discussion centres around the development of working processes. The team is more aware of competition and a greater spirit of co-operation emerges.

There is a risk that Plants might cause disruption by trying to interest the team in a new idea when work is already underway. At this stage, they might prefer to move on to another team where they can be involved in the earlier stages once more.

Performing

In this era of high performance, the team understands its purpose and goals, and is motivated and knowledgeable. Team members are autonomous and are able to handle decision-making without the leader present, according to agreed criteria. Disagreements can be positively resolved within the team.

Tuckman and Belbin - Performing

In Belbin terms, the team needs to continue to use the language and understanding that Belbin gives to ensure that they continue along the route of becoming a High Performing Team. Constant communication is key. Referring back to Belbin Individual Reports as the project changes to ensure that the right people are being involved at the right time.

Tuckman and Belbin – Adjourning

Longstanding teams may expand, recruiting more members and building on their successes, or may disband after the successful completion of their project. But that's best-case scenario. Plenty of teams get stuck and end up repeating the first two stages over and over again, especially if they do not frequently meet in person.

The language of Belbin Team Roles can speed up the process of moving teams from one stage to the next, by giving team members insight into one another and the contributions needed to help the teamwork.

Adjourning

Now that the team has worked together for a while, perhaps now is the time to introduce Observer Assessments – do individuals present a clear Team Role image, or does the team notice different strengths than those they see themselves? This stage is when new goals and plans are made, ensuring that the past contributions of both individual and team are fully identified and recognised.

This common frame of reference enables individuals to engage, express preference, explain how they work best and resolve conflict with each other. This is invaluable if a team has never worked together before, or if there is a 'new' and 'old' guard scenario – Belbin is always a great leveller and aids with cohesion.

Next steps

Start learning and using the language of Belbin Team Roles to help your teams along the Tuckman stages! Leapfrog to performing.

Become Belbin Accredited or contact us and have a chat - we would love to help you. Call us on 021 842893 or email info@leadershipsolutions.co.nz