



9 Toxic workplace cultures - and how to address them with Belbin

By The Belbin Team | Victoria Brown, 29 October 2020

Workplace culture can be tricky – to create, to cultivate, to change.

Get it right when you're starting out and you'll boost engagement and results, recruiting others who buy into the positive atmosphere and offer something new. Get it wrong, and you'll struggle to attract and retain good people, stifling growth and productivity.

And this problem is more common than you'd think. The temptation to recruit like-minded people or model an ideal manager or employee on one successful individual can have catastrophic effects on diversity, propagating certain behaviours at the expense of others. Organizations can quickly reach a point where valid and important contributions are alienated and pushed out, because 'it's just not the way we do things round here'. Sometimes one team – or even one individual – can find itself culturally at odds with the rest of the organization, fostering disengagement or internal competition and increasing employee turnover.

So, how do you diagnose a toxic workplace culture – and what can you do about it?

In Belbin Team Role terms, diversity of behavioural contributions is essential for a healthy workplace culture. Here we look at what happens when one Team Role behaviour pervades a team or group, and how this might be remedied. If you're not familiar with the nine Belbin Team Roles, please see our [Team Role descriptions](#).

Although, in reality, there are likely to be several Team Role forces exerting influence in an organization, for the sake of simplicity, we've distilled it to a culture per Team Role. And, of course, the process of achieving a suitable Team Role balance may be more complex and nuanced, but in each case we've highlighted those roles we think could redress the balance most effectively in the short term.

Plant culture

"There are lots of ideas flying around, but communication isn't as good as it could be. Sometimes one team doesn't know what another is working on. It's really difficult to put plans in place and get things off the ground around here."

In a predominantly Plant culture, it's important to have Monitor Evaluators to help analyse the viability of new ideas, and Implementers to devise and execute practical plans.

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Resource Investigator culture

"Everyone's busy and often out and about. There's a real buzz and we're certainly not lacking in enthusiasm. We've got good relationships with our customers, but despite best intentions, sometimes we miss things and end up letting people down."

In a culture of Resource Investigators, Implementers and Completer Finishers can help provide structure and follow up on leads. Co-ordinators might also be needed to ensure that everyone's efforts are brought to fruition.

Co-ordinator culture

"We have lots of discussions and communication is good, but there aren't enough people willing to crack on and do the work. Sometimes things can get too political, rather than focusing on the job at hand."

Implementers and Teamworkers are good for getting the job done in a Co-ordinator-heavy culture. Shapers can cut through political machinations and ensure that the team is focused on its goals, whilst Specialists can provide specific expertise that their more generalist Co-ordinator colleagues might be lacking.

Shaper culture

"We've got bucketloads of energy and drive, but everyone has an opinion on which way we should go, and it's often a case of who can shout the loudest. Tensions run high and meetings always end up in arguments."

Whilst it might seem like a good idea to add diplomatic Teamworkers to the mix, in small numbers they're likely to be shouted down in a noisy Shaper culture. Co-ordinators might be better placed to channel the energy into positive outcomes, and Monitor Evaluators, to apply the brakes when needed.

Monitor Evaluator culture

"We're good at analysing and devising strategies, but sometimes we find ourselves debating things beyond the point of usefulness. We tend to get the important decisions right, but progress happens really slowly."

Shapers are best placed to break the Monitor Evaluator tendency towards 'paralysis by analysis' by pushing for action, but simply throwing a Shaper headlong into a Monitor Evaluator culture is likely to make both parties dig their heels in. Co-ordinators and Implementers can be usefully deployed to provide organisation for people and task respectively.

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Teamworker culture

"Everyone gets on and there's a really caring atmosphere, but sometimes things coast along without enough getting done. Problems simmer under the surface but no one wants to rock the boat."

When Teamworker behaviours are prevalent, Shapers can provide direction and impetus, but they might prove too forceful for their environment. Co-ordinators can mediate this effect, whilst Implementers' focus on productivity and company loyalty might help put paid to an overly social culture.

Implementer culture

"Everything runs like a well-oiled machine. We have processes in place to help us work efficiently, but we forget to lift our heads up. We get stuck in a rut, but any suggestions for change are generally met with resistance."

Plants and Shapers are well-placed to promote change through creativity and innovation, so long as new ideas are given a chance by the Implementers in situ. Resource Investigators can offer leads on what others might be doing differently.

Completer Finisher culture

"We're known for quality control – we take pride in getting the details right and don't tend to let mistakes slip through the net. But there's a lot of anxiety around. People tend to work late, but they're still struggling to meet deadlines and cracking under the pressure."

Shapers and Co-ordinators in combination might be best suited to rebalance an anxiety-ridden Completer Finisher culture. Shapers can ensure that deadlines are not neglected in the pursuit of perfection, whilst Co-ordinators can delegate and distribute workload most effectively.

Specialist culture

"We're renowned for being experts at the cutting edge of our field, but perhaps we don't know what we don't know. We're too inward-looking and we miss out on opportunities because other considerations pass us by."

A Specialist culture needs Co-ordinators to keep an eye on the bigger picture and Resource Investigators to avoid insular tendencies, by providing a link to the world beyond the group's special focus.

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Redressing the Team Role balance

It isn't easy to change organisational culture, but recognising the predominant behaviours – and how they might have arisen – is a good start. From there, you can assess what's needed to restore Team Role balance and ensure that crucial contributions aren't being missed.

The first step is to complete [Belbin Individual Reports](#) with your team, helping each individual to understand where they contribute.

Next, [Belbin Team Reports](#) collate the data, offering leads as to broader Team Role trends, assessing how different individuals contribute to the team, and identifying where they might be operating in isolation.

Do you recognise any of the above patterns in the organisations you've worked for, or with? How did you work towards restoring behavioural diversity?

We can help – contact us.

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