



To Team or not to Team

By The Belbin Team | 30 September 2021

You might not expect us to say this but...

Teamwork isn't always the answer.

There, we said it.

Do you work with people who are sceptical about teamwork? Perhaps they've had negative past experiences. Conflicts that were badly handled. Team members who left them to do all the work and then took the credit.

Those experiences can be difficult to shake, especially if there is little evidence that things will be different this time.

It can leave people feeling that they'd be better off working alone.

In that situation, rather than trying to jolly someone along, it's important to acknowledge that teamwork isn't always the right answer. That it can sometimes overcomplicate things, slow progress or obfuscate responsibility. That it can be messy and difficult.

Jon R. Katzenbach, author of 'The Wisdom of Team's, identified three key questions to ask in order to identify whether a team was needed to tackle a particular task, or whether a group of individuals, reporting to a leader, might be more suitable:

- **Can the team identify a tangible result** that the team – using all its skills – can achieve, which couldn't be achieved by group members working alone?
- **Does the leadership role need to shift?** Real teams are able to boost their leadership capacity by changing leadership depending on the task at hand. Individuals working to a 'boss' is a more static arrangement.
- **Which is more important to achieve the objective – individual or mutual accountability?** Individual endeavour means that success in the task falls on one person's shoulders. In a real team, on the other hand, everyone holds everyone else accountable.
- We'd add one more: **Which behaviours are needed** to achieve the objective?

According to Belbin theory, different Team Roles (clusters of useful behaviours) are required in different tasks. Each person has maybe two or three Team Roles which they can play comfortably, and a few manageable roles -- latent skills which can be cultivated. Exploring a team's Team Role requirements for a particular piece of work can help establish whether it can be accomplished solo. If a wide range of behaviours are required, a team or pair is needed.

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Making teamwork work

If a team is required, those who are hesitant about teamwork will need some extra coaching to assuage their concerns. Understanding the ethos of the Belbin methodology can help.

Belbin is all about identifying behavioural strengths. Unlike many personality tests which rely on self-reporting, Belbin uses evidence from within the team (Observer Assessments) to build a realistic view of how the team operates.

Then it's up to you to ensure that the team understands and acts on the findings.

Recognising Team Roles present in the team isn't licence to pass the buck. On the contrary, it ensures that work can be delegated according to strengths, so that everyone is accountable for their contribution to the team's objectives. If work is to be delegated between team members to improve team performance, this should be fairly managed by looking at what else the delegator can do instead.

With each team member working to their strengths, teams are, on the whole, six times more engaged ⁽¹⁾.

In project teams, Belbin theory can be used to decide who should attend which meetings, so that progress isn't hindered -- by having a detail-focused person present at the ideas phase, for example.

And with the language of Belbin in their arsenal, the team will be able to depersonalise conflict and communicate constructively when things go wrong, by framing problems and solutions in the language of Team Roles.

If your team sceptic can see how evidence from Belbin can improve their experience of teamwork, they might be more inclined to give it a try.

Next steps

Are you working with a team sceptic, or a team that simply doesn't gel? Are you confident in assessing whether work requires individual or team efforts? Whatever challenge you're facing, we'd love to hear from you and explore how Belbin might help.

⁽¹⁾ <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/236561/employees-strengths-outperform-don.aspx>

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