

Description of the different roles in a team

Visionary

There should be one or more people in the team able to see beyond the team's own requirements. They must have the overall vision of the team mission, as well as a perspective of where that mission fits into the wider organization objectives. Inevitably, as the name implies, the visionary may not always have his feet firmly 'on the ground'. Part of this function is to 'soar above the clouds' and 'reach for the stars'. There are others whose function is to bring such visionaries back to earth and it is the balance between the two, which is the practical and creative force within the team.

Typical characteristics of visionaries include the following.

- They use a 'pull style' of influence, i.e. *pulling* people along by their consent rather than *pushing* them by coercion.
- They are positively optimistic (which is itself a reflection of a pull style of influence.)
- They express openness in an assertive manner, thereby recognizing the rights and needs of all parties.
- They are disinterested in detail in this role; preferring the bigger picture (blue skies – no clouds on the horizon!), rather than the components.
- They express impatience, which is also reflected in a need to get on with the big picture rather than tinker about with what they regard as pointless detail.
- They are often frustrated leaders. If there is a team leader then a 'natural' leader will need to find an alternative role and that alternative role will often become that of the team's visionary.
- They don't get a lot of work done, but then they don't need to because others do all the work while they interpret that vision for them.
- They will often have artistic tendencies.

Pragmatist

The pragmatist acts as foil to the visionary and his or her supporters. At one level the pragmatist identifies the clouds in the visionary's clear blue skies, for example when the visionary has suggested a particular solution to a problem it is usually the pragmatist who reminds the team of budget constraints, or other such practicalities.

At another level pragmatists have a slightly different function. Pragmatists show the team how to make the impossible possible. While, in our above example, it may be their role to remind the visionary of budget constraints, it is also their role to suggest an alternative, building on the visionary's ideas within budget constraints or encouraging other contributions gradually to build up towards a practical suggestion.

Typical characteristics of pragmatists will include the following.

- They are realistic.
- They favour a push style of influence that is acceptable in the short term, but since it does not enlighten members of the team, it is unlikely to succeed in the long term.
- Pragmatists are team players, putting the team before the individual.
- They are disillusioned visionaries and can be summed up in the expression 'I've heard it all before'.
- They tend towards cynicism and scepticism.
- They will often come from a scientific or mathematical background.

Explorer

There will not be many times when the team has requirements that it does not automatically fulfill from within. It is the explorer's role to seek information, material, support and so on from outside the team environment. The explorers will build bridges between the team and other teams, or the wider business environment. More than anyone they will form relationships that go beyond the personal relationships of the team itself. They are explorers only from the point of view of the team looking towards its own requirements; they are also ambassadors of the team when the team needs to project beyond itself.

Typical characteristics of the explorers include the following.

- Sociable, gregarious and forms friendships easily. These are of course necessary in forming the relationship in the world beyond the team.
- Sense of adventure and curiosity. Explorers are not content with the world within the team but need to look into the world beyond.
- Competitive.
- Self-starters and self-achievers. Explorers need little motivation from others and are more capable of driving themselves than anyone else is of driving them.
- They are self-made and probably not from an academic background.
- They are good communicators and this provides information flow at the technical level and provides friendships and connections at the social level.

Challenger

They will always be someone who challenges the accepted position. They may be as little as agreed definitions; the challenger may occasionally request that the team review its own definitions of objectives, progress and so on. It may be as big as challenging even the team mission itself, asking team members to remind themselves of what the mission of the team is, whether it is still relevant after a period of time and so on.

The challenger will also challenge suggestions or proposals made by team members, a further foil to the interaction between visionary and pragmatist. At the worst level the challenger could include such negative individual roles as blocker and nitpicker, but generally speaking the role of challenger is a positive one, as all team roles are furthered and that the team mission is being fulfilled rather than delayed or distracted.

Typical characteristics of challengers include the following.

- They tend to be defeated visionaries; disillusioned leaders who have seen their own ideals fail.
- They are prone to cynicism though remaining optimistic (unlike the pragmatist who tends towards skepticism.)
- They will be generalists rather than specialists, but are able to challenge other team members at every level.
- They are extremely curious.
- They will tend to be mavericks or have a rebellious nature.
- They will tend to have business or other failures in their background, but will have learned lessons from these.

Referee

The referee is that person who takes as near an independent view of team progress, decisions and so on as is possible. Clearly as a team member his or her view can never be completely independent and of course there is some blurring at the edges in some teams between referee and challenger, at least in practical approach, i.e. the independent view will usually lead to challenging questions being asked in order that the team evaluate itself from time to time.

However, we believe the roles can be separated for certain team situations on one very important criterion. Challengers are always team members in the sense of being 'company employees', i.e. coming from within the company and being a product of the company culture. Referees on the other hand, can be outsiders.

Typical characteristics of referees will tend to include the following.

- Flexible in style and approach (they have to be able to role-play).
- Neutral, not taking sides and usually able to see both sides of any argument.
- Optimistic and enthusiastic.
- Decisive.
- Daring and courageous.
- Demonstrating a commitment to people and to the task in hand.
- Will tend to have a sense of humour.
- Have a reputation for authenticity ('street creed').

Peacemaker

The team will have friction between its individual members from time to time and the peacemaker is the one who will seek to see fair play is done, to try and redress perceived injustices, to harmonize between conflicting views and so on. Previous group role analyses have produced such expressions as 'harmonizer' (i.e. Benne and Sheats), but we have always felt that this implied certain negativeness, i.e. a repairing function, rectifying damage being done to the team's energies. We have chosen the name 'peacemaker' to imply the positive side that we see in the role, i.e. that part of the job is to predict areas of conflict and head them off before they arise. Perhaps this role is also that of trouble-shooter; this is probably the time to remind ourselves that during the pioneer days in American the most famous Smith & Weston gun was also know as the peacemaker!

Typical characteristics of peacemakers will include the following.

- They will be good communicators.
- They will be 'people oriented' but not 'task oriented'.
- They tend to have an assertive character.
- They are able to be objective about most matters.
- They have a logical mind.
- They will not allow themselves to demonstrate commitment.
- There will be strength of character based on an inner belief of self.

Worker

There is little to be said about the worker except what is implied by the name, i.e. this is the person who does all the work! The worker is the worker bee, the soldier ant or the Mr/Ms Fix It, Etc.

Typical characteristics of the worker will include the following.

- 'Task oriented' rather than 'people oriented'.
- Needing recognition, usually through the achievement of tasks in hand.
- Bedrock, salt of the earth, not creative in their work environment, a typically honest character.
- Will tend to confuse efficiency with effectiveness (concentrating on doing things right rather than doing the right things).
- Will be obsessed with rules and regulations (if Leonardo da Vinci was a visionary then this individual will tend to paint by numbers!)
- Can be oppressively negative.
- Will usually tend to be creative outside the work environment, but rarely inside.
- Not competitive
- Needs to work in groups and teams in order to feel a sense of achievement.

Coach

Morale is not always going to be high in a team, even in the best led groups, and there will be times when the team loses its direction or loses its own focus of its mission. It is the coach who is there to boost morale, to shout ‘Attaboy!’ Also to remind people of why we are here and what the game plan is, hence the analogy to a sporting coach. This is one of the driving force functions within a team, shouting ‘Come on lads!’ or ‘Well done!’

Typical characteristics of coaches will include the following.

- Tactician and the interpreter of the corporate or team vision.
- Retired visionary (i.e. once was a successful champion – in the golf world Arnold Palmer, once and world champion and now a grand old man of golf, would fulfil this title role).
- Has ‘street cred’.
- Will tend to have a mature personality and will often be an older person.
- Has a depth of experience, probably several jobs and will tend to be well traveled.
- Coach is not a role that develops but tends to be an adopted one: they need the flexibility to adopt what can be an unenviable position.
- They are often not concerned with personal popularity. In the army, sergeant majors tend to adopt the role of coaches and will often argue that they can measure their strength in direct relation to the amount of people who dislike them.
- Coaches’ visions are quite simply that the team must win at all costs. Once winners, now they believe they must be winners again in the new role.
- Will tend to be teachers.

Librarian

There is an important requirement for someone to be recording, for posterity, the activities of the team. This can include its deliberations, decisions, actions, evaluations and so on. The librarian is the person to whom team members can go for historical information about what the team has been doing, but as the name implies it is also the role with the responsibility for being the one who stores the information available to the team which could be information collected by all member of the team, particularly the explorer. Librarians house the information bank from which the others draw, they are the team's 'Mr. Spock'.

Typical characteristics of librarians tend to include the following.

- They are normally reticent, not interested in small talk.
- Their sense of detail is probably almost out of control; they will be structuralists, everything having to be organized and nothing left to chance.
- Hardworking and diligent.
- Intolerant and excitable.
- They have crusader instincts developed only through practical research and not through vision.
- They will be good interpreters of facts.

Confessor

Team dynamics invariably means that there is a need for someone to whom members can tell their troubles, a shoulder to cry on, a priest to whom to confess. This is probably the least recognized role and yet practical teambuilding has shown that is a much-valued role. The important requirement of the confessor is of course that stories confided in him or her remain confidential.

If such a role is successfully established within the team then a great many difficulties can be headed off, but if the person adopting the role should turn out to be a gossip then the function is badly negated and the team becomes very disharmonious. There is a tendency for this role to fail to arise in teams because it is a role that might naturally fall to the team leader and yet the team leader may well not be the person in whom others wish to confide. If the team leader can encourage the team into finding that role within another member of the group then it removes a greater drain on the team's energies.

Typical characteristics of confessors will include the following.

- Gregarious and honest
- Shallow personalities; unable to get too involved and therefore not committed wither to tasks or to people.
- They have a low sense of disclosure attracting high disclosure to them from members of the team in the reasonable certain knowledge that they will not pass on confidential information.
- They are normally people of professional status.
- They will tend to be in 'transit'; part of the strength of their position is that they are mobile characters that are not around for the long term and are not able to use or manipulate the information they glean.