

Team theory and group dynamics

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Key learning points

- **Historical perspective.**
- **What group dynamics and team theory are.**
- **How team theory and group dynamics are relevant to training.**
- **Four team models: Tuckman, Belbin, MTR-i and Cognitive Team Roles.**
- **How to manage difficult group dynamics.**

A historical perspective

The study of group dynamics began only after the end of the Second World War. The terms *teams* and *teamwork*, although common in sport, did not become commonly used within organisations until the 1970s.¹

What are group dynamics and team theory?

The dynamics of a group are the constantly changing relationships and influences that occur between the people within that group. Because of changing team composition and changing objectives, the dynamics of a team are rarely stable for very long. A dysfunctional team is one that isn't achieving its objectives. This can be caused by the internal dynamics of existing relationships within the team, or by external factors such as budgetary constraints.

Team theory suggests that the tasks within a team can be subdivided into various roles. The four best known are Belbin's Team Roles,^{2,3} Margerison-McCann's Team Management WheelTM,⁴ Myers's MTR-i⁵ and Cognitive Team Roles.⁶ Each model has a slightly different basis in psychological theory, but all identify between eight and ten roles within a team structure. All four suggest that people will have different degrees of preference for fulfilling each role and may avoid some roles if they can. The need for behavioural and situational flexibility is stressed particularly by the MTR-i and Cognitive Team Roles.^{5,6}

How is team roles theory relevant to training and learning?

As a trainer, it's important for you to know about group dynamics and team theory if:

- you divide delegates into teams
- you are training an existing team
- you find that the group you are working with is dysfunctional in some way
- it's the first time that the people have come together as a group as they follow Tuckman's process model.



Tuckman's 1965 process model of group dynamics⁷

This is the fundamental basis of group dynamics as we know it in the UK. When people come together, even just two of them, they first form some kind of relationship within their group: the **Forming** stage. Exploring the boundaries of the relationship often involves a degree of conflict to establish roles and hierarchies and to identify people's personality characteristics, strengths and possible weaknesses. This is the **Storming** stage. According to Tuckman, once people have established boundaries, they begin to feel comfortable with each other and their behaviours become **Normalised**. Only then can the group really begin to **Perform** and become a team that achieves its objectives. When the dynamics change, the group will revert to the start of the model and will experience Forming and Storming again.

I add a fifth stage to Tuckman's model, that of **Mourning**. When team composition changes, the existing group mourns the loss of their previous group dynamics or group members. There is also a shift in the dynamics of a team, either when it achieves its objectives or when the tasks or roles within the team change. This means that group dynamics are rarely stable for very long, even if the people within a team do not change.

Key benefits for trainers in applying this knowledge

- You will be able to maintain your own personal balance without being destabilised by a dysfunctional team or difficult group.
- You will be able to create a safe environment for your delegates.
- You can ensure that everyone has a more enjoyable experience.
- Through your own reactions, you will become a role model for delegates and colleagues.
- The increase in your skills relating to teamworking and group dynamics is a totally transferable skill that will be beneficial in all other areas of your life and relationships.

Self-diagnostic quiz

After reading this article, score yourself 1 if you know a little about the topic and would like to learn more. Score 2 if you know quite a lot about the topic in both theory and practice, but need to do some more research and brush up a little to train others in the subject. Score 3 if you know all about the topic and could already write appropriate training materials about it. The numbers in brackets relate to items in the References section.

Topic	Score
The history of teams and teamworking (1)	
Tuckman's group dynamics (7)	
Belbin's Team Roles (2, 3)	
Cognitive Team Roles (6)	
Margerison-McCann's Team Management Wheel TM (4)	
Myers's MTR-i (5)	
Socio-Cognitive Dynamics (6)	
Managing difficult groups (6, 7)	

Helpful hints for the case study

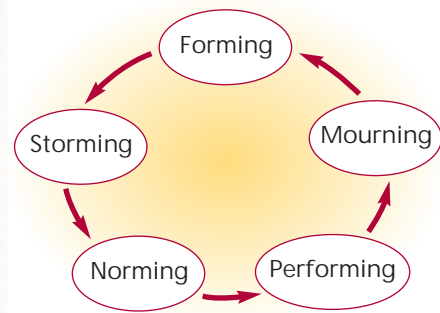
- As two new people have recently joined the team, it's possible that the existing members of the group could be in Mourning for the loss of the previous dynamics, and that the team will have been thrown back into the Forming stage.
- Tuckman's model would suggest that at least some members of the team, notably Peter and John, are Storming, and that they will work through it – although they may need your help to move them on through the process to the next stage.
- Belbin's Team Roles would suggest that, potentially, both John and Peter are Shapers who want to shape and organise what goes on in the team, and that, by understanding the role better, both you and the rest of the group will be better able to cope with their behaviour.
- Cognitive Team Roles would suggest that John's *modus operandi* for thinking is to Challenge. Allow him to question the information, and encourage him to discuss it whilst making clear the boundaries for challenging behaviour.
- The MTR-i would suggest that John is trying to take on a Sculpting role because the situation demands it, and that, when the situation changes, another role would become more dominant.
- The Team Management WheelTM would suggest that John and Peter have a Thruster/Organiser role preference, and – like Belbin's model – that greater understanding will make them easier to work with.

References

- 1 F. Beddoes-Jones, 'The Psychology of Teams', *Training Journal*, April 2004.
- 2 R. M. Belbin, *Management Teams: Why They Succeed or Fail*, Butterworth Heinemann, 2003.
- 3 R. M. Belbin, *Team Roles at Work*, Butterworth Heinemann, 1993.
- 4 See: www.tmsdi.co.uk
- 5 S. Myers, 'MTR-i: A New Arena for Team Roles', *Training Journal*, January 2002.
- 6 F. Beddoes-Jones, 'Belbin's Team Roles and Cognitive Team Roles: A Study of two "perspectives"?'', 2002. See: www.ukhrd.co.uk
- 7 B. W. Tuckman, 'Developmental Sequence in Small Groups', *Psychological Bulletin*, 63, 1965, 384–399.

Author

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A group may progress through the stages very quickly, or may become stuck at a particular stage. Groups that play power games, jockeying for position, are stuck at the relationship-building, **Forming** stage. Groups that argue and fight are stuck at the **Storming** stage. Sad or depressed groups that have no energy are stuck at the **Mourning** stage.

Tip

Very active groups, within which people seem to rush around without actually getting very much done, are stuck at the **Performing** stage. Even though they are not actually achieving their objectives, they are maintaining their equilibrium and the *status quo* by not moving on to the next stage, **Mourning**, which would be inevitable once they have achieved their objectives.

Group dynamics and the movement between Tuckman's stages are largely unconscious in all but the most self-aware individuals and teams; and the process of group dynamics seems to be inevitable, even if group members are consciously aware of them.

How do group dynamics and team theory work in combination?

The *social* dynamics of a team encompass friendships, relationships and loyalties, and the ways in which team members get on with each other as people, regardless of the team roles they fulfil. The *cognitive* dynamics of a team are generated

from the thinking preferences of its members and the cognitive roles they fulfil within the team. Therefore, the *socio-cognitive* dynamics of a team are the ways in which people's thinking-style preferences influence their social interactions and behaviours with others. Cognitive Team Roles specifically identifies and explores the socio-cognitive dynamics of teams and, in this way, links team theory and group dynamics.

Four team roles models

Belbin's Team Roles

The first and best-known of all the models has nine roles based on people's likely behaviours within a team: Shaper, Teamworker, Resource Investigator, Monitor Evaluator, Plant, Completer-Finisher, Implementer, Co-ordinator and Specialist.

Cognitive Team Roles

This model has ten roles, based on the thinking which needs to occur within any team for that team to be successful in achieving its objectives. The roles are subdivided into a Sensory, a People and a Task focus: Intuitive Thinker, Challenger, Altruist, Collaborator, Strategist, Creative Thinker, Logical Thinker, Detailed Thinker, Driver and Troubleshooter.

The Team Management Wheel™

The roles within this model are based on people's preferred behaviour within a team. The roles are defined as Explorers, Organisers, Controllers and Advisors, subdivided into:

- Creator/Innovator
- Explorer/ Promoter
- Assessor/ Developer
- Thruster/Organiser
- Concluder /Producer
- Controller/Inspector and
- Upholder/Maintainer.

Myers's MTR-i

This is designed using the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) types to generate eight roles: Coach,

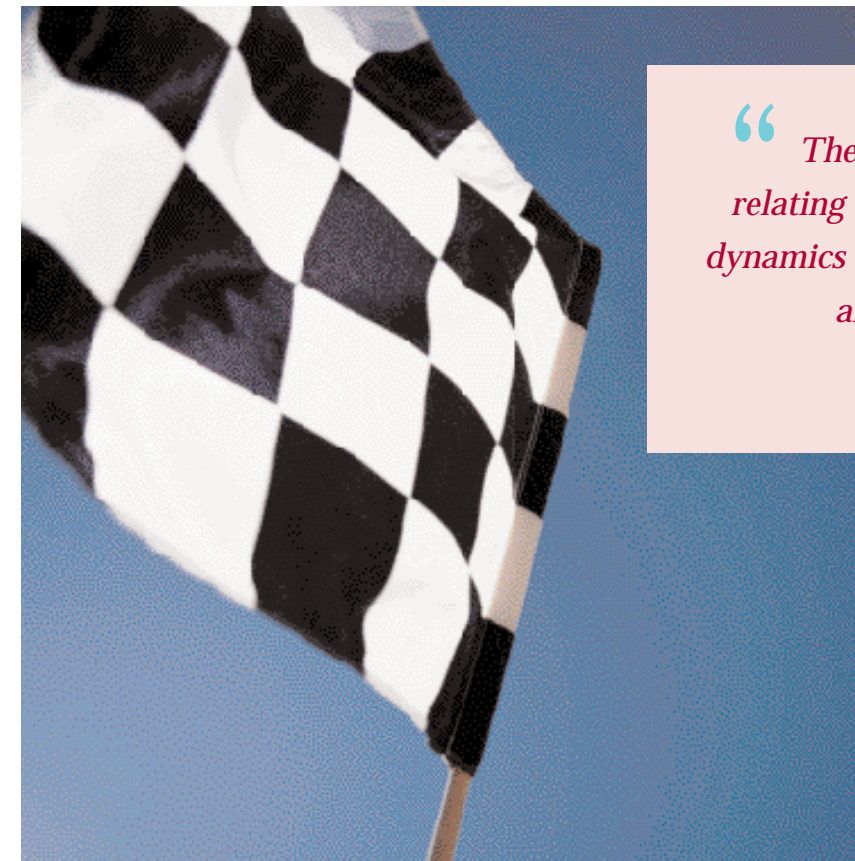
Campaigner, Explorer, Innovator, Sculptor, Curator, Conductor and Scientist. The roles are situational, rather than representing personality preferences, so people may change roles as the situation changes.

Are some team roles more important than others?

No; within each model all the roles are important, if the team is to achieve its objectives. However, some team roles do seem to be more valued than others within the culture of certain organisations, and are therefore more popular. All four team models include the following three roles, albeit with different names, suggesting that these might be particularly important: **creative**, **detail focused** and **challenging**. And all four models assume that, because people are inherently flexible, they will be able to move between the roles, or take on dual or multiple roles if necessary.

Which model should I use?

The reasons for using any team roles model are to generate beneficial understanding, encourage dialogue between team members, and create new ways of working. So, in one sense, any model will do. They all have their own particular language and labels, which both you and your delegates will need to learn, if you are to use them effectively. Belbin is



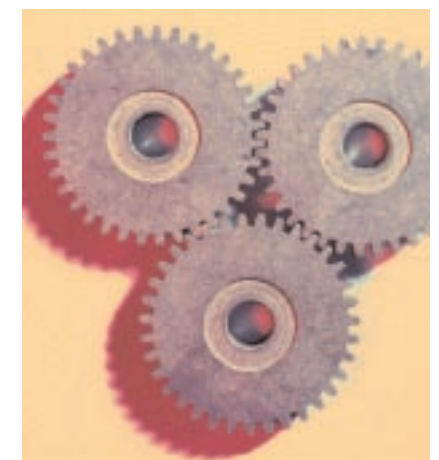
“ The increase in your skills relating to teamworking and group dynamics ... will be beneficial in all ... areas of your life and relationships ”

a good starting point for supervisors or new managers. The Team Management Wheel™ is useful for putting together and managing project teams. The MTR-i is useful if you are already MBTI trained, and Cognitive Team Roles is particularly relevant if the quality of thinking of team members is important to the team's success.

How to manage difficult group dynamics

- 1 Take a deep breath and don't panic! (This is often easier said than done.) The issues are not your fault, so don't take them personally. All the delegates have done is to give you valuable information because they want your help to resolve their problems. Master trainers stay calm and relaxed, no matter what is going on around them, because they maintain a professional detachment.
- 2 Take a moment to think about which theory or model is most relevant to the situation. What is really going on? For example:
 - Are they Storming? If so, Tuckman's model will be relevant.
 - Are people in the wrong role for their own preferences? If so, one of the team roles models could be relevant.

- Are they playing games with each other, or are some other internal politics or power struggles going on? If so, you can use Tuckman's model to explain how they are unlikely to achieve their objectives successfully, and that they need to change their behaviour if they want to move forward.
- 3 Take some time to think what kind of intervention would be most beneficial, so that the group can learn something from what's going on. Do you need to stop them and regroup, or reorganise the task/delegates in a way that means no one loses face?
 - 4 Remember that every situation is an opportunity to learn something. What can be learned and how can you share it?



Case study

Read the following case study and see what insights you might have into the emergent group dynamics. What would each of the four team roles models suggest about the situation and the people involved in it?

The Blue team has been together for quite some time, although two new people have recently joined it. Jenny says very little and tends to try to avoid John, who is one of the new team members. John is perceived as being quite difficult to work with, since he comes across as quite bossy and opinionated, even though he does have expert knowledge. Not a lot is getting done and Peter is frequently at loggerheads with John, which upsets some other team members, particularly Jenny.

You will find some helpful hints on the back page.