

Managing Conflict with Belbin

5 sections 9 role profiles 15 min read

Understanding why team members clash often has less to do with personality and more to do with role behaviour. This guide helps managers apply Belbin thinking to diagnose, navigate and prevent workplace conflict.



SECTION ONE

Introduction to Belbin Team Role Theory

Belbin Team Role theory, developed by Dr Meredith Belbin, identifies nine distinct roles that individuals naturally adopt when working in teams. Each role brings specific strengths and characteristic behaviours - and each carries what Belbin calls **allowable weaknesses**, the predictable flip sides of those strengths.

The critical insight for managers is this: most workplace conflict is not personality-based. It stems from role imbalance, allowable weaknesses colliding, or individuals being forced to operate outside their natural role preferences. Naming the role behaviour, not the person, removes the personal charge from conflict and creates a shared, objective language for resolution.

The Three Role Clusters

THINKING ROLES

Plant

Monitor Evaluator

Specialist

ACTION ROLES

Shaper

Implementer

Completer Finisher

SOCIAL ROLES

Co-ordinator

Teamworker

Resource Investigator

SECTION TWO

The Nine Role Profiles

Each profile outlines what that role contributes, its allowable weaknesses, what typically triggers conflict, and how that role characteristically behaves when in conflict. Use these profiles to identify the role dynamics at play before intervening.



Plant

THINKING ROLE

KEY STRENGTHS

- Generates creative, original ideas
- Solves complex problems in lateral ways
- Thrives when given freedom to think
- Challenges conventional assumptions

ALLOWABLE WEAKNESSES

- May ignore practical constraints
- Sensitive to criticism of ideas
- Can neglect detail and follow-through
- May be absorbed in ideas over communication

CONFLICT TRIGGERS

Plants clash when their ideas are dismissed without proper consideration, when forced into repetitive tasks, or when working alongside strong Implementers who prioritise the practical over the possible.

CONFLICT STYLE

Often withdraws or becomes disengaged rather than confronting directly. May disengage from the team when feeling undervalued.



Monitor Evaluator

THINKING ROLE

KEY STRENGTHS

- Objective, impartial judgement
- Identifies flaws in proposals before commitment
- Strategic thinker with strong discernment
- Rarely makes the wrong call

ALLOWABLE WEAKNESSES

- Can appear overly critical or negative
- Low energy and enthusiasm
- Slow to decide - seen as a blocker
- May lack ability to inspire others

CONFLICT TRIGGERS

Monitor Evaluators create friction when their critical analysis is perceived as obstruction. They frustrate idea-generators who read their caution as negativity.

CONFLICT STYLE

Cool and detached in conflict. May not show emotion but will quietly resist or slow-walk decisions they disagree with.



Specialist

THINKING ROLE

KEY STRENGTHS

- Deep technical knowledge in their field
- Self-starting and dedicated
- Provides rare expertise
- Maintains high professional standards

ALLOWABLE WEAKNESSES

- Can only contribute narrowly
- Dwells on technicalities
- Overlooks the bigger picture
- May dismiss others' areas of knowledge

CONFLICT TRIGGERS

Specialists feel dismissed when their expertise is not given appropriate weight, or when asked to contribute broadly across areas outside their specialism.

CONFLICT STYLE

Tends to disengage from discussions where they feel out of their depth or underutilised. Can be stubbornly focused on their own area.



Shaper

ACTION ROLE

KEY STRENGTHS

- Highly driven, thrives under pressure
- Challenges complacency and inertia
- Finds ways around obstacles
- Brings urgency and momentum to the team

ALLOWABLE WEAKNESSES

- Prone to provocation and short temper
- Can hurt feelings unintentionally
- Challenges others in ways that feel aggressive
- May be perceived as bullying

CONFLICT TRIGGERS

Shapers are frequent sources of conflict due to their challenging style. They clash most sharply with Teamworkers and Coordinators. They often do not recognise the impact of their approach.

CONFLICT STYLE

Direct, confrontational and persistent. Does not back away from conflict and may escalate without intending to. Quick to recover but others may not be.



Implementer

ACTION ROLE

KEY STRENGTHS

- Disciplined and reliable
- Turns plans into practical actions
- Loyal and committed to the team
- Efficient and systematic

ALLOWABLE WEAKNESSES

- Inflexible - struggles to adapt to change
- Slow to see new opportunities
- Resistant to unproven ideas
- Prioritises process over innovation

CONFLICT TRIGGERS

Implementers clash with Plants and Resource Investigators whose fluid, exploratory style feels chaotic. They become frustrated when plans change or the team lacks structure.

CONFLICT STYLE

Not overtly confrontational, but expresses frustration through resistance, slowing down, or repeating objections. May become increasingly rigid under pressure.



Completer Finisher

ACTION ROLE

KEY STRENGTHS

- Meticulous attention to detail
- Delivers on time and to high standard
- Conscientious and dedicated
- Identifies errors others miss

ALLOWABLE WEAKNESSES

- Reluctant to delegate
- Anxious and prone to worry
- Can be seen as a perfectionist or nit-picker
- Resistance to “good enough”

CONFLICT TRIGGERS

Completer Finishers clash when standards slip, deadlines are treated casually, or they are asked to hand work over before they are satisfied.

CONFLICT STYLE

Internalises stress and worry. May criticise others’ work in ways that feel undermining. Can create anxiety in the team through ongoing visible concern.



Co-ordinator

SOCIAL ROLE

KEY STRENGTHS

- Mature and confident leadership presence
- Clarifies goals and promotes decision-making
- Draws out the best in each team member
- Skilled at delegation

ALLOWABLE WEAKNESSES

- Can be seen as manipulative
- May take credit for others’ efforts
- Can be lazy if relying too much on others
- May seem detached from the work

CONFLICT TRIGGERS

Co-ordinators clash with Shapers over team direction and authority. They can create resentment if they delegate without doing enough visible work themselves.

CONFLICT STYLE

Prefers to resolve conflict through dialogue and consensus. Can occasionally use influence in ways that feel political or indirect.



Teamworker

SOCIAL ROLE

KEY STRENGTHS

- Co-operative and diplomatic
- Listens and perceptive to others
- Averts friction and builds cohesion
- Versatile and adapts to situations

ALLOWABLE WEAKNESSES

- Indecisive in crucial situations
- Avoids confrontation even when needed
- Can be easily influenced
- May prioritise harmony over necessary challenge

CONFLICT TRIGGERS

Teamworkers are made uncomfortable by direct challenge or aggressive behaviour. They can absorb tension for too long, which can lead to resentment building under the surface.

CONFLICT STYLE

Conflict-averse and seeks to smooth things over. May not voice dissatisfaction until it becomes significant. Prone to withdrawing when the team dynamic feels unsafe.



Resource Investigator

SOCIAL ROLE

KEY STRENGTHS

- Enthusiastic and communicative
- Explores opportunities and makes contacts
- Good at negotiating and networking
- Brings external energy into the team

ALLOWABLE WEAKNESSES

- Can lose enthusiasm quickly
- Over-optimistic about what is achievable
- May not follow through on initial interest
- Can distract with external opportunities

CONFLICT TRIGGERS

Resource Investigators create conflict when their follow-through is poor and others are left to deliver promises they made. They clash with Monitor Evaluators who dampen their enthusiasm.

CONFLICT STYLE

May not take conflict seriously at first, preferring to smooth things over with energy and charm. Can become defensive when follow-through is questioned.

SECTION THREE

A Four-Stage Conflict Framework for Managers

Use this framework to move from noticing conflict to resolving and preventing it. Each stage builds on the last.

1

IDENTIFY: MAP WHO IS DOING WHAT

Before addressing conflict, establish each team member's primary Belbin role profile. Look for role clusters that are absent and roles that are duplicated or competing. Conflict often signals an imbalanced team, not difficult individuals.

- ✓ Are all three role clusters represented in the team?
- ✓ Is any single role dominating the team dynamic?
- ✓ Are individuals working in their natural role preferences or covering gaps?
- ✓ Has the team's role balance changed recently due to personnel changes?

2

DIAGNOSE: UNDERSTAND THE ROLE DYNAMIC AT PLAY

Look at which roles are in tension. Is a Plant's ideas being dismissed by an Implementer's need for practicality? Is a Shaper steamrolling a Teamworker? Name the role behaviour, not the person - this removes the personal charge and creates a shared, objective language.

- ✓ Which role behaviours are in direct tension with each other?
- ✓ Is the conflict about task (what to do), process (how to do it), or relationship (how people feel)?
- ✓ Are allowable weaknesses from one role colliding with the strengths of another?
- ✓ Is anyone operating significantly outside their preferred role?

3

INTERVENE: ADJUST STRUCTURE AND EXPECTATIONS

Restructure how work is distributed so individuals can operate within their natural roles. Introduce team agreements about how different roles contribute at each stage. A Plant needs space to generate; an Implementer needs clear deliverables - build both in.

- ✓ **Role overload:** where one person carries multiple non-preferred roles, redistribute tasks
- ✓ **Duplicate roles:** where two people share the same dominant role, assign distinct areas with clear boundaries
- ✓ **Stage mismatch:** match role contribution to project phase - Plants and Resource Investigators at the start; Implementers and Completer Finishers at the close
- ✓ **Missing roles:** name the gap explicitly and ask who is willing to flex into that space temporarily

4

DEVELOP: BUILD ROLE AWARENESS ACROSS THE TEAM

Share individual Belbin profiles with consent. Run a team session exploring each person's top roles and allowable weaknesses. When team members can name their own patterns - and recognise them in others - tolerance and mutual respect increase significantly.

- ✓ Ensure all team members have completed the **Belbin Self-Perception Inventory** - and preferably observer feedback
- ✓ Include Observer Assessments from peers where possible for a fuller, more accurate profile
- ✓ Facilitate a team session using role language - not to label people, but to build shared understanding
- ✓ Establish team agreements about how different roles are valued at different project stages

SECTION FOUR

Common Role Clashes and How to Resolve Them

The five most common role pairings that create conflict, and the manager's response for each.

Roles in tension	What causes the clash	Manager resolution approach
Plant vs Implementer	The Plant generates bold ideas; the Implementer dismisses them as impractical. The Plant feels stifled; the Implementer feels disrupted.	Separate ideation from evaluation phases. Give the Plant space first, then the Implementer to assess feasibility. Avoid role overlap at the same stage.
Shaper vs Teamworker	The Shaper pushes hard and challenges; the Teamworker finds this aggressive and harmful. The Shaper reads the Teamworker as passive.	Acknowledge both contributions. Coach the Shaper on delivery tone; help the Teamworker voice disagreement constructively. Establish team norms around challenge.
Monitor Evaluator vs Resource Investigator	The Monitor Evaluator's critical analysis deflates the Resource Investigator's energy. The RI reads the ME as a blocker; the ME reads the RI as dangerously optimistic.	Give each role a defined contribution point. RI leads on external exploration and possibility generation; ME leads on evaluation before commitment. Keep them sequential, not simultaneous.
Completer Finisher vs Plant	The Completer Finisher needs to close; the Plant keeps generating. The CF finds the Plant's open-endedness intolerable; the Plant finds the CF's closure premature.	Define clear handover points. The Plant contributes early in the project cycle; the Completer takes over for delivery. Avoid role overlap at the same stage.
Specialist vs Co-ordinator	The Specialist wants narrow focus and expert recognition; the Co-ordinator wants all voices to contribute equally, which the Specialist finds superficial.	Give the Specialist a defined expert brief. Involve them at points where depth matters, not across all team discussions. Respect the boundaries of expertise.

SECTION FIVE

Manager Toolkit

Team Health Checklist

Use this checklist to assess whether your team's role balance is likely to be contributing to conflict.

☐ All nine roles are represented in the team - either through individuals or secondary role preferences

☐ No role cluster (thinking, action, social) is entirely absent from the team

☐ Each team member can describe their primary Belbin role and its typical allowable weaknesses

☐ Team has discussed role contributions at each project stage - not just their job titles

☐ Conflict is regularly reframed as role tension, not personal fault, in team language

☐ Manager has reviewed role balance before forming sub-teams or project groups

☐ Individuals operating in non-preferred roles have been identified and supported

☐ Team profiles have been updated to reflect any recent changes in team membership

Coaching Questions by Role

These questions are designed for one-to-one coaching conversations. Use the appropriate

set once you have identified the role dynamic at play.

THINKING ROLES



Plant

- What would it look like if this idea were allowed to develop further?
- When you feel your thinking is dismissed, how does that affect your contribution to the team?
- How could you present your ideas in a way that helps others see their practical potential?
- What do you need from the team to do your best creative thinking?



Monitor Evaluator

- How do you make sure your analysis is heard as helpful rather than limiting?
- When you have concerns about a direction, what is your usual approach to raising them?
- How do you balance being thorough with keeping momentum going?
- What does the team need to understand about how you process information?



Specialist

- How do you help the team understand the value of your particular expertise?
- When do you feel most and least effective in team discussions?
- How do you navigate situations where decisions fall outside your specialism?
- What would help you feel more connected to the wider team goals?

ACTION ROLES



Shaper

- When you challenge others, what are you trying to achieve?
- How do you know when your approach has landed well - or not?
- What signals do you pick up that tell you a team member is finding your style hard to work with?
- How could you maintain your drive while creating more space for others to contribute?



Implementer

- When the plan changes, what is your first instinct?
- How do you balance your preference for structure with the team's need to be responsive?
- What helps you feel confident enough in an idea to get behind it fully?
- How could you signal to colleagues when you need clearer direction - rather than withdrawing?



Completer Finisher

- How do you decide when something is good enough to release?
- When you feel anxious about quality, how does that affect your working relationships?
- How do you communicate your standards in a way that helps rather than pressurises?
- What would it take for you to feel confident delegating part of a task?

SOCIAL ROLES



Co-ordinator

- How do you make sure others feel they share the credit for the team's success?
- When there is a conflict between your approach and someone else's, how do you navigate that?
- How do you stay connected to the detailed work while focusing on the bigger picture?
- What do you do when delegation is not working as expected?



Teamworker

- How do you recognise when you are absorbing tension that needs to be named?
- What makes it difficult for you to raise a concern directly with a colleague?
- How do you balance supporting team harmony with ensuring honest conversations happen?
- When conflict is brewing in the team, what is your natural role?



Resource Investigator

- When you commit to something, how do you make sure you can actually deliver it?
- What helps you sustain focus on a piece of work once the novelty has worn off?
- How do you manage the gap between what you promise and what you deliver?
- When a colleague raises a concern about your reliability, how do you receive that?

Manager Conversation Starters

These phrases can be used verbatim or adapted for your context. They are designed to open role-based conflict conversations in a neutral, constructive way.

OPENING A ROLE-BASED CONFLICT CONVERSATION

"I've noticed some friction when decisions are being made. I want to explore whether our different working styles might be at the root of it."

WHEN SOMEONE IS OPERATING OUTSIDE THEIR ROLE

"You've been delivering a lot of work that isn't naturally in your Belbin profile. I want to look at how we might redistribute some of that so you can work to your strengths more consistently."

WHEN ALLOWABLE WEAKNESSES ARE CAUSING FRICTION

"Your role strengths are genuinely valued here - and like all roles, they come with a flip side. Let's think about how to manage that so it doesn't create problems with the wider team."

FACILITATING A TEAM SESSION ON BELBIN

"We're going to spend some time today looking at our Belbin profiles as a team - not to label each other, but to better understand what each of us naturally brings and where we can cover for one another."



AFTER A CONFLICT HAS BEEN RESOLVED

"I want to check in on how things have been since we spoke. Have you noticed any change in how the team dynamic is working?"