

Belbin and the Lencioni model

In his bestselling book, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, Patrick Lencioni described the pitfalls that can spell a team's downfall.

Here, we take a look at these five dysfunctions and examine how a Belbin approach can mitigate a team's problems and pave the way for success.

1. Absence of trust

Lencioni claimed that teams who were unable to be 'vulnerable' with one another encountered problems. These teams were unwilling to admit mistakes, acknowledge weaknesses or ask for help.

In order to be open with one another in this way, individuals need psychological safety: to know that they can share the negatives of their experiences without fear of recriminations. In 2016, [Google's Project Aristotle](#) – their research into effective teams – named 'psychological safety' as the single most important ingredient for team success.

But opening up can be the most difficult part. Identifying and communicating our Belbin Team Roles – the behaviours we tend to adopt in a team – encourages individuals to share preferences and discuss past mistakes and shortcomings within a protective and positive framework.

Unlike many theories, for Belbin, 'weakness' is not a dirty word. We talk about 'allowable weaknesses' of a particular Team Role as simply flip sides of a Team Role strength. In other words, they're a trade-off for playing a particular role to good effect – shortcomings which, when known, can be mitigated by others in the team.

The clarity of contributions which Belbin offers can help individuals to understand why certain individuals might respond to failure in a certain way.

Lencioni gives the example of someone admitting, “Your idea was better than mine”. For a **Plant**, who makes a significant investment of time and energy into a new idea, this can be a difficult statement to make. It can take a lot for a proud **Shaper** to apologise. An anxious **Completer Finisher** who has let a mistake slip through the net is likely to be punishing themselves rather than sharing the failure with the team. In each case, understanding the underlying behaviour can help the team to process it, modify their approach to the individual, build bridges and move on.

2. Fear of conflict

Where trust is lacking, key issues cannot be debated effectively, because individuals stand to lose too much from the fallout.

Lencioni claims that conflict is simply an attempt to find the best possible solution in the shortest possible time, and that successful teams thrive on engaging in discussions about important topics.

Research shows that harmony doesn’t necessarily help teams move forward. [Professor J. Richard Hackman](#), late Edgar Pierce Professor of Social and Organizational Psychology at Harvard University, discovered that disagreements were good for a team, so long as they were handled well and focused on the team’s objectives.

In Belbin terms, it can help to understand how different people perceive conflict. For the driven, forceful **Shaper**, confrontation is a part of life – and not an uncomfortable one. For the **Shaper’s** Team Role opposite, the sensitive, diplomatic **Teamworker**, however, conflict is to be avoided at all costs, because it creates an unpleasant team atmosphere and risks damaging relationships between team members.

Belbin also helps us to appreciate each person’s starting-point in a discussion. There’s the **Monitor Evaluator**, who seeks to arrive at the right decision through impartial, academic debate. The **Implementer** digging their heels in to avoid changes which threaten their way of working. The **Specialist** who feels that their expertise is being undermined. Understanding the motivations behind words spoken in the heat of the moment can help to depersonalise conflict, allow individuals to engage constructively with one another and keep discussions on track.

“Not finance. Not strategy. Not technology. It is teamwork that remains the ultimate competitive advantage, both because it is so powerful and so rare.” – Patrick Lencioni, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, 2002

3. Lack of commitment

Without conflict, team members do not arrive at decisions, so plans are ambiguous or out of line with the team's objectives. This lack of direction can harm engagement, since individuals don't know where they fit in the grand scheme of things.

Commitment doesn't necessarily come from complete consensus, Lencioni tells us. But the team should have 'buy-in' from everyone, even those who initially disagreed with the proposal.

Someone with strong **Co-ordinator** propensities can ensure that everyone's voice is heard and facilitate the decision-making process, so that individuals can work with the outcome, whatever it may be. With sufficient trust, the team's resident **Plant** can acknowledge disappointment that another idea was not taken forward and the **Completer Finisher** can register concern that the schedule will not allow for sufficient checking.

With an understanding of the Team Role behaviours which prompt their comments, their concerns are likely to be understood and addressed, rather than dismissed as 'sour grapes' or sheer negativity.

4. Avoidance of accountability

In a successful team, individuals are able to confront each other with concerns, whether in terms of behaviour or performance.

As with conflict, it can be difficult to broach these kinds of conversations, but in a team where individuals are fully aware of their strengths and weaknesses – and used to 'auditing' useful team behaviours on a regular basis – these conversations can be approached consistently and handled in the right way.

For example, a **Resource Investigator** might be challenged for failing to follow up clients and letting people down. Belbin provides the language to address the problem – this failure to follow up is a flipside of the **Resource Investigator's** enthusiasm for new projects – but also hints at strategies to enable individuals to manage strengths more effectively. In this example, the follow-up could be handed over to another team member (perhaps with **Implementer** and **Completer Finisher** strengths) at an agreed point, to ensure that clients' needs are met.

With both team members working to their strengths, each is likely to be more engaged and clients will reap the rewards too. When team members hold one another accountable in a constructive fashion, they build trust and mutual respect, and assume more responsibility for the team's endeavours.

5. Inattention to results

When people are not held accountable, there is a tendency for individuals to put their needs and priorities ahead of the team's collective goals. When the team loses sight of the need to achieve, the business suffers as a result.

No one Team Role is better than another, and everyone has something to offer. Belbin helps individuals to understand what they – and their colleagues – can contribute, and how each contribution helps the organisation as a whole.

With each person playing to their strengths, individual aspirations and goals are pulled into line with the group's objectives, so that everyone benefits when the team succeeds.

A work in progress

Lencioni points out that it is difficult to 'master' these five dysfunctions, because a team's situation is always changing. With new members, a change in leadership, or new goals, the team may have to begin again with establishing trust.

Perhaps your team is performing well, but striving for more? Perhaps it finds itself at breaking-point, ridden with conflict and turmoil? Maybe it is suffering from a little apathy and just needs a boost?

Whatever your situation, the language of Belbin Team Roles meets teams where they are, and provide the tools needed to help it grow.

Next steps

Find out how you can use Belbin with your teams... Get in touch to discuss whether you would like to gain the skills and Reports to do this yourself, or whether you would prefer us to come in and work with you! Contact us on 01223 264975 or email team@belbin.com.



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