

3.2: Introducing Member Roles

Learning Objectives

1. Describe group member roles and their impact on group dynamics

The performance of a team or group is often influenced, if not determined, by its members' roles.

We can start our analysis of member roles with the work of Benne and Sheats (1948). They focused on studying small discussion groups that engaged in problem-solving activities. From their observations, they proposed three distinct types of roles: task, building and maintenance, and self-centered. Task roles were identified by facilitating and co-coordinating behaviors such as suggesting new ideas or ways of solving problems. Building and maintenance roles involved encouragement, including praise, statements of agreement, or acceptance of others and their contributions nonverbally or verbally. Self-centered roles involved ego-centric behaviors that call attention to the individual, not the group, and distract or disrupt the group dynamic.

Table 3.2.1 Group Roles

Group Task Roles	Coordinator: facilitates order and progress Evaluator-critic: analyzes suggestions for strengths and weaknesses Orienter: focuses on group progress, recaps discussions Recorder: takes notes on the group discussions, important decisions, and commitments to action
Group Building and Maintenance Roles	Supporter: Encourages everyone, making sure they have what they need to get the job done Harmonizer: Helps manage conflict within the group, facilitating common ground, helping define terms, and contributing to consensus Tension-releaser: Uses humor and light-hearted remarks, as well as nonverbal demonstrations (brings a plate of cookies to the group), to reduce tensions and work-related stress Compromiser: Focuses on common ground, common points of agreement, and helps formulate an action plan that brings everyone together towards a common goal, task, or activity Standard Setter: Sets the standard for conduct and helps influence the behavior of group members
Self-Centered Roles	Aggressor: Belittles other group members Block: Frequently raises objections Deserter: Abandons group or is very unreliable Dominator: Demand control and attention Recognition-seeker: Frequently seeks praise Confessor: Uses the group to discuss personal problems Joker or Clown: Frequent use of distracting humor, often attention-seeking behavior.

Bales (1950) built on their research and analyzed interaction from two categorical perspectives: task-orientation and socio-emotional. Belbin's (1981) work on successful teams focused on the number of team members in a group and their respective roles. Imagine a baseball team, with each distinct team member with a clearly defined role and territory. Someone guards first base, and someone covers left field. Each person has both a role and a personality. The role, according to Belbin, was imposed. The team manager would assign a team member, or player in our example, to a position. Some people place first base better than others. Personality traits, talents, and relative skills are relatively stable over time (Pervin, 1989), and it was a challenge to match the best player to the most appropriate role. Get the combinations right across the whole team and you have a serious contender for the World Series. Get the combinations wrong and the manager will be looking for a job in short order.

Again the emphasis in this area of inquiry was the effectiveness of teams. It is all about the win, or the progress, or the degree of completion. This line of investigation does not explore what it means to be a healthy family, or a productive community, though each type of group is related to this discussion.

Belbin (1981, 1983) used a Self Perception Inventory that consists of seven sections to assess which group member would be best for his nine group roles:

Table 3.2.2 Belbin's Role Characteristics

	Title	Description
1	Plant (PL)	Creative, imaginative, unorthodox. Solves difficult tasks and problems.
2	Resource Investigator (RI)	Extrovert, enthusiastic, communicative. Develops contacts, networks, and explores opportunities.
3	Co-Coordinator	Mature, confident, effective chairperson. Promotes decision-making, delegates, and clarifies goals.
4	Shaper (SH)	Challenging, dynamic, thrives on pressure. The drive and courage to overcome obstacles.
5	Monitor Evaluator (ME)	Sober, strategic, and discerning. Makes accurate judgments. Perceives several options.
6	Team Worker (TW)	Cooperative, perceptive, mild, and diplomatic. Avoids tension, listens, a consensus builder
7	Implementer (IMP)	Reliable, disciplined, and efficient. Turns abstract ideas into practical actions
8	Completer-Finisher (CF)	Anxious, detail-oriented, and conscientious. Searches out errors and omissions. Delivers on time.
9	Specialist (SP)	Dedicated, self-motivated, and single-minded. Provides specific knowledge or skills

If someone in your group always makes everyone laugh, that can be a distinct asset when the news is less than positive. At times when you have to get work done, however, the class clown may become a distraction. Notions of positive and negative will often depend on the context when discussing groups. Table 4.3 and Table 4.4 list both positive and negative roles people sometimes play in a group setting. (Beene, K., & Sheats, P. (1948). Functional roles of group members. *Journal of Social Issues*, 37, 41–49.;McLean, S. (2005). *The basics of interpersonal communication*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon).

Table 3.2.3 Positive Roles. Beene, K., & Sheats, P. (1948). Functional roles of group members. *Journal of Social Issues*, 37, 41–49.;McLean, S. (2005). *The basics of interpersonal communication*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Initiator—Coordinator	Suggests new ideas or new ways of looking at the problem
Elaborator	Builds on ideas and provides examples
Coordinator	Brings ideas, information, and suggestions together
Evaluator-Critic	Evaluates ideas and provides constructive criticism
Recorder	Records ideas, examples, suggestions, and critiques

Table 3.2.4 Negative Roles. Beene, K., & Sheats, P. (1948). Functional roles of group members. Journal of Social Issues, 37, 41–49.,McLean, S. (2005). The basics of interpersonal communication. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Dominator	Dominates discussion, not allowing others to take their turn
Recognition Seeker	Relates discussion to their accomplishments, seeks attention
Special-Interest Pleader	Relates discussion to special interest or personal agenda
Blocker	Blocks attempts at consensus consistently
Joker or Clown	Seeks attention through humor and distracts group members

Now that we've examined a classical view of positive and negative group member roles, let's examine another perspective. While some personality traits and behaviors may negatively influence groups, some are positive or negative depending on the context.

Just as the class clown can have a positive effect in lifting spirits or a negative effect in distracting members, so a dominator may be exactly what is needed for quick action. An emergency physician doesn't have time to ask all the group members in the emergency unit how they feel about a course of action; instead, a self-directed approach based on training and experience may be necessary. In contrast, the pastor of a church may have ample opportunity to ask members of the congregation their opinions about a change in the format of Sunday services; in this situation, the role of coordinator or elaborator is more appropriate than that of dominator.

The group is together because they have a purpose or goal, and normally they are capable of more than any one individual member could be on their own, so it would be inefficient to hinder that progress. But a blocker, who cuts off collaboration, does just that. If a group member interrupts another and presents a viewpoint or information that suggests a different course of action, the point may be well taken and serve the collaborative process. If that same group member repeatedly engages in blocking behavior, then the behavior becomes a problem. A skilled communicator will learn to recognize the difference, even when positive and negative aren't completely clear.

Key Takeaway

Group members perform distinct roles that impact and influence the group in many ways.

Exercise 3.2.1

1. Think of a group of which you are currently a member. Create a list of the members of your group and see if you can match them to group roles as discussed in this section. Use describing words to discuss each member. Share and compare with classmates.
2. Think of a group of which you are no longer a member. Create a list of the members of the group and see if you can match them to group roles as discussed in this section. Use describing words to discuss each member. Share and compare with classmates.

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