

Exploring Team Role Theory in Education

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Over the last decade there has been increasing interest in the concept of teams and team working in the field of education. This interest reflects a growing body of research that suggests collaboration amongst teachers has positive outcomes not only on teacher professional development and motivation but the attainment of pupils. However, whereas leading literature points to the benefits of team working, there is, in fact, a lack of information on how to build teams in school contexts.

As a Principal of a small international Primary school in Hong Kong, I came to learn about Belbin Team Role theory during a Masters in Education unit on Managing People. Having read about the successes of applying the theory in businesses with managers, I was intrigued to find out whether the model could be used in schools and with a team of teachers to the same positive effect.

In a staff meeting in May 2014, I invited 9 teachers and 2 members of the senior management team to join me in completing the individual Self Perception Inventories (SPI) and peer Observer Assessments (OA). Despite some hesitation in providing feedback to our peers (something that teachers are not so accustomed to doing!), we all found the profiling process engaging and eagerly awaited the emailed results.

Our individual and group reports were returned immediately and showed that our team had many notable strengths. With a higher than average proportion of natural Team Workers and Resource Investigators, we are a collective of 'people' orientated individuals with a highly specialist approach and a natural ability to get along. However, our group report also pinpointed an absence of 5 out of 9 team role types (including Shaper and Plant) and suggested we may find it hard to make difficult decisions or take risks.

In the following staff meeting, we came together again to discuss the results. Although we felt that the model had some limitations in our setting, it was clear that our work with Belbin had value in that it had opened up a dialogue across the team. Indeed, the reports not only allowed us to identify and appreciate our attributes and talents, they enabled us to contemplate the dynamics of our team and focus on how to become a stronger working unit. Certainly within the senior management team, we have since learnt to draw on our broader secondary role types where necessary and also the expertise within the wider unit.

Although not a blueprint for success, the Belbin process provided a team of teachers with the unique opportunity to self-reflect, laugh, listen and learn more about one another. In a small school, Belbin Team Role theory has planted the seed of change and enabled the concept of collaboration to take root and grow. I certainly recommend it to other school leaders and professionals wishing to do the same.