

The Crisis Team Exercise

Rob Groen demonstrates how to help team members appreciate the importance of diversity in a successful team

I have been using Belbin's Team Role Model in Holland for 25 years, applying it in a variety of ways and in many organisations.

Over the years I have developed a number of teambuilding games and exercises, often in close cooperation with the participants themselves. The Crisis Team Exercise is my unrivalled favourite and has proven to be a real eye-opener; its effectiveness is obvious in the discussions it triggers among the participants.

The exercise is simple to run, fun and provides great insight into, and understanding of, the Belbin Team Roles. It doesn't require any special facilities or materials – the participants need flipcharts and markers, and all you need is to do some clever thinking beforehand. It provides a sharp and evocative picture of how team roles actually manifest themselves, not just at the level of observable behaviour but even more at an underlying level, and how team members solve problems, create their own reality and give meaning to life itself. It is no surprise that complementarity is not as easy as it seems.

Timing

There are two guiding principles for the timing of this exercise: firstly, the participants should already possess a certain understanding of team roles, so the exercise can be cunningly introduced as

a way to test their current knowledge. Secondly, it should be run before the participants have had their own team role reports fed back to them. This enables them to complete the exercise in an open-minded and spontaneous way, without being led by the expectations laid down in their reports; conversely, this prevents them from

attempting to disprove their report by acting in an opposite way.

The groups

The ideal size of the subgroups is between three and six people. The composition of these determines what will happen, so it needs to be well thought-out. Divide people

Team roles were first recognised during research at Henley Management College in the 1970s. Meredith Belbin set out to identify what made some teams succeed and others fail. He came to realise that there were eight (now known to be nine) forms of behaviour which are useful to teams, and that the best teams had all of the roles within them.

The nine forms of behaviour were:

- Plant (PL) – Creative, imaginative, unorthodox. Solves difficult problems. Sometimes preoccupied, poor at communication and uninterested in incidentals.
- Resource Investigator (RI) – Extrovert, enthusiastic, communicative. Explores opportunities. Develops contacts. Can be over-optimistic and lose interest quickly.
- Co-ordinator (CO) – Mature, confident, good chairperson. Clarifies goals, promotes decision-making, delegates. May be manipulative and delegate too much.
- Shaper (SH) – Challenging, dynamic, thrives on pressure. Drive and courage to overcome obstacles. At times provokes people and offends.
- Monitor Evaluator (ME) – Sober, strategic, discerning. Sees all options. Judges accurately. Can lack drive and the ability to inspire.
- Teamworker (TW) – Co-operative, mild, perceptive, diplomatic. Listens, builds, averts friction. But indecisive in crunch situations.
- Implementer (IMP) – Disciplined, reliable, conservative, efficient. Turns ideas into practical actions. Somewhat inflexible and can be slow to respond to new possibilities.
- Completer Finisher (CF) – Painstaking, conscientious, anxious. Searches out errors and omissions. Delivers on time. But can be inclined to worry unduly, and has a reluctance to delegate.
- Specialist (SP) – Single-minded, self-starting, dedicated. Provides knowledge and skills in rare supply. But tends to contribute only on narrow front and dwell on technicalities.

The perfect team doesn't have to have nine people. Although some people will be very predominantly in one role, others might be able at several roles, for example a Plant/Shaper or Teamworker/Co-ordinator.

who are orderly and practical-minded, IMPs in particular, from those who are more innovative and chaotic, such as RIs, as this creates the most promising contrast.

The next thing is to look for a group of real thinkers – MEs and/or PLs; a group that is forceful and achievement-oriented – SHs and/or COs; and a group that is quite the opposite of the latter, such as TWs. These groups echo the ‘Teamopoly-teams’ that Belbin and his associates designed during their Henley experiments.

The instructions

The instructions should be as minimal as possible. I usually say: ‘This assignment is meant to familiarise you with the team role types and to help you apply your knowledge to solving an interesting problem.’

The groups are sent away for an hour to create their crisis and devise their solutions to it. See figure 1 (p48) as an example of the instructions that can be displayed on the flipchart. The crisis the team can generate has no limits: it may be big or small, as realistic or fantastic as they please. The only rule is that, as a group, they have to reach agreement on every issue on the basis of a full and strong consensus. No-one may be ignored or ruled out – everyone has a right of veto.

What can you expect?

When the groups return to the plenary room and prepare themselves to tell their stories, it is as if a stage-curtain rises and a life theatre begins. It is a *Commedia dell’Arte* of applied psychology, in which our dear stereotypes interact in endless variations and improvisations. Here is what you might expect to happen (any resemblance to people you know is entirely deliberate and not exaggerated).

The crises that **Implementers** produce demonstrate their realistic views and practical mindsets. They all come down to technical failures: a power station has broken down, a train has been derailed, a dyke is



Soldiers bolster defences in York following widespread flooding in North Yorkshire in 2000

breached. It is a *fait accompli*, often situated within their own professional field. The dauntless crisis team immediately gets into action – repairing the damage, restoring order and regaining control over the situation as soon as possible. Preferably, they act according to a trusted method, following a tested scenario. In such circumstances they prefer a decisive leader, such as an SH, who knows what he wants, with an ME and an RI to assist him in an efficient and instrumental way, and relying heavily on a lot of IMPs and SPs to turn everything into action. There is hardly ever room for a PL (too vague and time-consuming in their view) or a TW (why be sociable here?). Their presentations are serious and business-like, well schematised on a flipchart, and they seem convinced that their approach will work out.

Resource Investigators never seem able to resist the temptation to add a big shot of fun to their crisis. Their disasters are chaotic and uncontrollable, many things coinciding at the same time (a kidnap, mysterious infections, a tsunami and rebels proclaiming Holland a republic). The crisis

is running and increasing at this very moment and completely open-ended – anything can happen. Many options are available, many solutions possible. Everyone is doing something in a carnival atmosphere and loosely coordinated way. A lot of attention is paid to keeping the public informed (or, even more fun, manipulated). They rely on the qualities of the SH, RI and PL and instantly rule out the CF as being a worrier and a dampener, depressing the optimism of the crisis team by focusing on details no one wants to hear about. Their presentation is often worth remembering for its playful and entertaining performance.

Plants like to go beyond reality whenever they can. Their crises are unorthodox and take you by surprise: meteorites that split the earth, charming hills that suddenly turn into mysterious volcanoes, or viruses that wipe out all living people except those with the team role profile matching their own. Their crisis teams are just as unpredictable as their crises, but contain people who are good at cracking problems and coming up with unusual solutions. When they like

the assignment and their minds are on fire, their presentations are as brilliant as their outcomes, with a lot of last-minute changes, with the participants constantly interrupting and correcting one another.

A major feature of the crises that **Monitor Evaluators** present is that they haven't happened yet. Sure, nasty things are on the horizon, but the real thing still has to take place. So the crisis is announced but still escapable. Abstract as it is, there is always some time and some room to prepare and overlook the consequences before responding. Their crisis teams act sensibly, considering all the relevant information and choosing the best solution. This means that the thinking phase usually happens well in advance of the action phase. Their presentations are weighed and considered, based on sound arguments that seem irrefutable, although they are sometimes steeped in relativity, irony and even pedantry, describing the lengthy debates they had over questions such as what the best definition of a crisis would be.

The crises of **Shapers** are overpowering. Normally they're huge and inescapable, creating a violent and acute threat, causing many casualties. Fires and explosions occur with amazing regularity – they like something that really hurts. But their response is just as vehement and aggressive: immediate, forceful and highly focused action directed at the core of the problem. No mercy is shown.

Without any exception, they rely on a leader who is decisive, knows what he wants and has all the authority to act accordingly – an SH – of course s/he will be surrounded by a team of dedicated assistants, such as IMPs and RIs. The CO, PL, TW and often the CF are quickly set aside, since they only seem to slow down the SH's pace for no obvious reason. The ME, for whom SHs usually have an uncomfortable respect, is permitted to join in and analyse the situation, provided that he may be

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ignored by the SH if s/he chooses.

Their presentation is in line with their solution and is impressive in one of two ways: when they succeed in joining their forces, they are full of energy to convince their audience that their crisis obviously is the worst of all, just as their solution is the best. But if they can't get their minds together, their presentation is a striking example of the liveliness of their internal differences and disagreements.

The crises that **Co-ordinators** bring in initially never seemed to have unique features. Maybe that's because they prefer to integrate the solutions that others produce rather than come up with solutions of their own. Progress, not content, is what drives them. Their disasters often describe emergency situations in which 'management' or government has disappeared – like a car on the run, without a

Haitians gather on rooftops in the aftermath of Tropical Storm Jeanne in 2004

driver. The main aim of their crisis teams is to restore control, create some form of interim management, make new rules and get the country or the company going again. Normally they provide jobs for every team role type, according to a well-organised sequence of events. Their presentation is calm, self-assured and optimistic.

The crises that **Completer Finishers** devise are quite similar to those of the IMPs. They are just as realistic, but often smaller in scale and more complicated. Wary and threat-sensitive as CFs are, they spend a lot of energy dealing with the delicacies and complexities that emerge in the crisis. When a rare lion has escaped during an annual fair, the problem is not just to save the public, but also to spare the lion, have the fair continue undisturbed and avoid financial claims. Not only



the crisis itself but also the aftermath is to be taken care of, such as the financial damage and the loss of reputation that springs from it. The CFs' crises take a long time to recover from. Their approach is careful and considerate and speaks of thoughtful risk management.

Interestingly enough, they call on forceful personalities such as the SH and IMP and the analytical mind of the ME, but they prefer to exclude their own role, CF, in the crisis team. They believe that they panic easily and are more useful in the aftercare and follow-up than in the handling of the crisis itself.

The disasters that Teamworkers produce can adopt all forms, depending on the participants' secondary roles, but their attention is hardly ever directed towards solving the difficulty itself. Instead they deal with the relational problems that stem from it: taking care of the victims, comforting the relatives, being near in moments of hope and despair, or by entering into difficult negotiations with kidnappers and hijackers. In order to do so, they set up sizeable teams, invoking anybody's help and using lots of TWs to carry out the tasks. SHs and PLs are often avoided, as being too self-centred and self-willed. TWs fear these roles can't attune to the team and will disrupt the harmony.

In line with their natural strengths, they like to do the presentation together, as a real team, dividing the subtasks fairly between them. Or they grant one of their junior members the opportunity of having the floor, and applaud and compliment them heartily when they do so.

In summary

Although the different solutions and presentations speak for themselves and hardly need any explanation, it can be important to take some time to talk through them with the participants.

During the presentations, calling for spontaneous reactions from the other groups can provide valuable



Soldiers search for survivors during an earthquake drill in western Turkey in June

comments and some (non) verbal disapproval of the solutions on offer. These are wonderful examples of 'team role arrogance': the tendency to believe that only their own self-evident attitude and approach will be effective in the end.

And, of course, they want to know what the facilitator thinks of their resolutions. Giving feedback requires some experience and sensitivity in order to stay positive and clear, and make sure participants don't feel trapped, embarrassed or put into boxes. Stress that each

team role reflects and expresses a distinct problem-solving strategy, a built-in coping mechanism to deal with uncertainty and hard times, often with a lifetime history. Each role is a different way not just of solving problems, but also of defining them, that is reinforced and magnified when working in a group of related personalities. 'Team role resonance' is what we call the compelling dynamics of the group that exaggerates and intensifies the strengths and weaknesses of the dominant role, and which makes the group a far stronger caricature of a certain team role type than any one of the participants individually would be.

Identifying these different problem-solving styles, becoming aware that they exist and all have their *raison d'être*, helps people see the value of others. Being able to relate them to differences in types of person can breed an understanding of the complementary nature of the roles. The main objective is to create respect for these differences and maybe, even if it's just for a brief moment, to enjoy these differences, instead of having them drive you to despair. ■

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The Crisis Team

1 Make up a crisis

2 Compose a crisis team

- not on the basis of functional roles
- on the basis of the 'pure' team roles

- a) What team role IN, why?
- b) What team roles OUT, why?
- c) What numbers?
- d) What tasks?

3 Optional: names of well-known people that match the descriptions

- full consensus, everyone has a veto
- prepare a presentation

Figure 1