

Excerpt from: Great Teams Are About Personalities, Not Just Skills

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A useful way to think about teams with the right mix of skills and personalities is to consider the two roles every person plays in a working group: a *functional* role, based on their formal position and technical skill, and a *psychological* role, based on the kind of person they are. Too often, organizations focus merely on the functional role and hope that good team performance somehow follows. This is why even the most expensive professional sports teams often fail to perform according to the individual talents of each player: There is no psychological synergy. A more effective approach focuses as much on people's personalities as on their skills.

In our own work we found that psychological team roles are largely a product of people's personalities. For example, consider team members who are:

- **Results-oriented.** Team members who naturally organize work and take charge tend to be socially self-confident, competitive, and energetic.
- **Relationship-focused.** Team members who naturally focus on relationships, are attuned to others' feelings, and are good at building cohesion tend to be warm, diplomatic, and approachable.
- **Process and rule followers.** Team members who pay attention to details, processes, and rules tend to be reliable, organized, and conscientious.
- **Innovative and disruptive thinkers.** Team members who naturally focus on innovation, anticipate problems, and recognize when the team needs to change tend to be imaginative, curious, and open to new experiences.
- **Pragmatic.** Team members who are practical, hard-headed challengers of ideas and theories tend to be prudent, emotionally stable, and level-headed.

Observing the balance of roles in a team offers an extraordinary insight into its dynamics. It also indicates the likelihood of success or failure for an assigned task. For instance, we worked with a **finance team charged with rolling out a novel business reporting product for transforming the culture of a staid government agency**. But the percentage of players in each role showed the team was doomed from its inception:

- 17% of team members were considered results-oriented
- 100% of team members were considered pragmatic
- 0% of team members were considered innovative
- 50% of team members were considered process-oriented
- 0% of team members were considered good relationship builders

Since no one played the relationship-building role, the team lacked internal cohesion and failed to establish any connection with the frontline leaders who were required to take on the team's new accounting process. Similarly, with only a few playing a results-oriented role (and a leader who wasn't one of them), the team struggled to drive itself forward.

Conversely, when too many people play the relationship-building role, it can produce a nice, almost saccharine environment, with too little challenge or contention, as in the **leadership team of this social work organization**:

- 0% of team members were considered results-oriented
- 0% of team members were considered pragmatic
- 29% of team members were considered innovative
- 29% of team members were considered process-oriented
- 86% of team members were considered good relationship builders

In this example, the team spent too much time ensuring harmony and cohesion and too little achieving results. When you focus too much on getting along (with your teammates), you probably will not have much time or energy left for getting ahead (of other teams or organizations).

It is informative to use these kinds of profiles to assess how an incoming team member will impact team performance and dynamics. As the renowned teams researcher Suzanne Bell, who is working on the Mars project for NASA, put it: "...We assume that astronauts are intelligent, that they're experts in their technical areas, and that they have at least some teamwork skills. What's tricky is how well individuals combine."

Thus, evaluating the whole person can offer pivotal insights into how people are likely to work together, and can help flag areas of conflict and affinity. Anything of value happens as the result of team effort, where people set aside their selfish interests to achieve something collectively that they could not achieve by themselves. The most successful teams get this mix of personalities right.