

Contemporary Organizational Behavior

From Ideas to Action

KIMBERLY D. ELSBACH

University of California, Davis

ANNA B. KAYES

Stevenson University

D. CHRISTOPHER KAYES

The George Washington University

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Teams In Organizations: 10 Team Roles to Foster Team Effectiveness

Troy V. Mumford

Colorado State University

Michael C. Campion

University of South Carolina

Michael A. Campion

Purdue University

In modern organizations, work teams have proved to be vital for success.

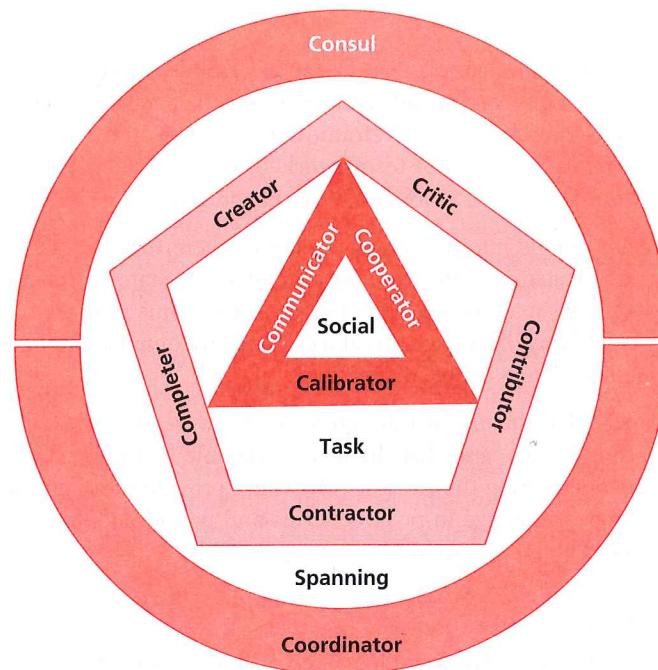
Whether an organization is designing innovative products, improving quality in its manufacturing processes, or creating customer loyalty through great customer service, it needs employees who can effectively collaborate on teams to accomplish work. Functional team roles are clusters of related behaviors that accomplish a particular function within the team¹ and allow the team to integrate the contributions made by individuals to the requirements of the team environment. These functional team roles allow the team to carry out three critical functions in teams, namely the effective execution of the team's work, effective management of the team's relationship with its environment, and preserving the team's ability to work together efficiently through meeting the social needs of members.

High-tech product design teams provide a useful illustration of these functional team roles in action and will be used throughout this article. To be effective, the team must accomplish many things including: define its goals, organize the project, adapt to changes in customer preferences from marketing efforts, integrate the expertise of each team member (and do so without growing to hate each other!). Question: Who does each of these things? Answer: The team members taking various functional team roles. Understanding what these team roles are and when to take them is critical to working effectively in teams.

The goal of this article is to provide managers the 'What' and 'When' of roles in teams. Each role should be defined so managers can enhance their understanding of *what* the team roles are. In addition, the article will define the times and situations *when* these team roles should be taken within a team in order to maximize team effectiveness. Understanding of the situational dependency of individual functional team roles is vital because as a member becomes more skilled at assessing environmental situations and adopting the correct team role, the member increases their value to the team—this ability has been shown to predict the performance of teams.²

Team success is driven, in part, by fulfilling ten distinct team roles that fall into three categories: Task roles, socioemotional roles, and boundary-spanning roles. The categories describe how the team role helps the team. Ten team roles represent the specific behaviors that managers should carry out when the team and its circumstances require it, as illustrated in functional categories in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Ten
Functional Team Roles



Task Roles

The first subset is task roles, or the roles pertaining to the accomplishment of work. As team members take on these roles, it enables the team's work to move forward. When team members do not take on these roles, team productivity will falter. There are five primary task roles that team members need to understand and become proficient.

1. Contractor

What: The Contractor gets the team organized. The member taking this role is responsible for a) coordinating, organizing, and assigning tasks within the team, b) providing the team with structure, c) clarifying team member's abilities, resources, and responsibilities, and d) summarizing accomplishments to date.

When: The team needs the contractor role in any environment involving a high level of ambiguity and complexity. Examples of this may include situations where a) team members have little experience working together, b) team members have little experience with a particular task, or c) the tasks are complex and highly interdependent, requiring coordinated assignment according to individual skill-sets.

Illustrated: Let's use the product design team as an example—a team member taking the Contractor role would highlight for the team the deadline when the product was supposed to go into production and help the team articulate the steps in their design process. The Contractor would also likely ensure that certain individuals are individually held accountable for deliverables needed throughout the project.

2. Creator

What: The Creator provides vision. The member taking this role is responsible for providing the team with innovation and creative vision when approaching tasks. This role often functions to facilitate change or to reframe the team's objective. While the contractor role represents the *management* of the team's work, the Creator role represents the *leadership* of the team through creative vision, innovation, and change.

When: The Creator role is integral in any situation where the team is experiencing a loss in creative and strategic momentum, also known as a state of creative and strategic stagnation. Examples may include stages when a) the team's purpose is unclear or its current strategy is faltering, b) the team is at a critical developmental point or transition, or c) the work requires a high degree of creativity.

Illustrated: Suppose that the product design team discovered that their competitor had launched their product early, and that the team's schedule had to be shortened by four weeks. A team member taking the Creator role would provide the team motivation and direction by framing the change in positive terms and providing a big-picture plan for how the change could be accommodated.

3. Contributor

What: The Contributor gives expertise. One of the main reasons organizations utilize teams is to provide a mechanism for the efficient integration of different ideas, knowledge areas, skill-sets, and abilities. The Contributor role is defined as the actions taken by the member to ensure that their knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) are known and applied to the team's task. This requires that the individual knows the specific KSAs they have to offer and that they have the ability to determine where they must contribute these attributes to ensure completion of tasks.

When: The role of Contributor is critical specifically in situations where teams are comprised of members with distributed expertise. The Contributor role will become conspicuous in situations where a team is formed of members with different a) areas of expertise, b) levels of authority, and c) backgrounds.

Illustrated: As the product design team works, if one team member has a better understanding of customer preferences, that member would be taking the Contributor role by letting the team know of the expertise and providing the task-related information.

4. Completer

What: The Completer volunteers and follows through. The Completer role contributes to the effectiveness of the team during times when task work has been assigned and work must then be completed by individuals working outside of the team. Examples include: "doing homework" outside of the team, taking responsibility to complete certain tasks for the team, and ensuring that their team commitments are fulfilled.

When: The Completer role is important in most teams, however, the role is particularly prominent in situations where the effectiveness of the team depends on the performance of individuals working alone outside the team setting. These situations are typically when the work has been assigned and is now termed "unitary." This means that the work can no longer be divided among multiple individuals. This role is particularly important as the team approaches its deadline.

Illustrated: While working on the product design, the team discovers that someone needs to prepare a spreadsheet to compare three different configuration alternatives. The individual who volunteers to take on the task and brings it completed to the next meeting has taken the Completer role.

5. Critic

What: The Critic thinks critically. One of the most studied problems in teams is the phenomenon of “groupthink” wherein team members make poor decisions when their cohesiveness leads them to come to decisions through unanimity, or “going with the flow,” rather than considering alternative courses of action. This problem brings into light the functional team role of Critic which subjects team decisions to critical evaluation. Often the member in the critic role points out the flaws in a course of action that tends to lead to a more evaluative approach in decision making.

When: The Critic role is most essential when a situation has occurred where there is concurrence without any type of scrutiny. This type of situation refers to a time when a group unanimously decides to move forward with an idea or decision without having considered potential costs or consequences. This role is particularly important in situations where a) there is a high level of trust within the team, b) the task assigned is to make a decision, c) tasks are technically complex, d) the team is highly cohesive and in a stressful work environment.

Illustrated: Suppose a senior member of the product design team suggests that a certain product configuration should be used and that there isn't a need to consider other alternatives. A team member taking the Critic role might point out that the configuration would only work in certain circumstances and decide that the design may not work for the project.

Socioemotional Roles

The second subset of roles is socioemotional roles. These roles enable the team to manage its intra-team relationships and draws upon the team member's interpersonal skills.

Communicator

What: The Communicator makes the team environment pleasant. The communicator role serves to create a social environment that is conducive to trust and collaboration. The member taking this role may exhibit many behaviors that create a social environment that is open, positive, and communicative. This role involves listening to the opinions of others, paying attention to the feelings of others, and communicating effectively.

When: The Communicator is required in almost all situations, however, it is particularly important in situations that are high in social sensitivity. Several examples include: a) when the task is socially complex, b) when ego or emotionally charged issues are involved, c) when the team is diverse either in values or in backgrounds, d) and when the environment is highly stressful.

Illustrated: The product design team may be under a lot of stress due to the schedule change. An individual who remains positive, and thanks a team member for his or her hard work is taking the Communicator role.

Cooperator

What: The Cooperator supports the team's decisions. The Cooperator role serves to sustain the progress of the team by supporting the team's decisions and adhering to leadership and influence attempts within the team. Taking the cooperator role involves being open to feedback and receiving information from others in the team.

When: The Cooperator role is particularly vital in conditions where there is scrutinized consensus, there are high status differentials, and during negotiation tasks. In addition, after a team member has taken the critic role and the concern has been addressed, the Cooperator role allows the team to move forward with its task.

Illustrated: After the product design team has critically evaluated a potential configuration for the potential flaws and tradeoffs, the team member who provided the critique is taking the Cooperator role when he or she agrees to support the team's configuration decision.

Calibrator

What: The Calibrator establishes and promotes healthy team norms. The Calibrator role pays close attention to the social processes within the team. When taking this role, a team member will often make the team aware of how they are communicating with each other and norms for how they treat each other. The Calibrator role plays a critical role in resolving conflict within the team so that social issues don't inhibit task progress.

When: When there is conflict in the team or social interactions in the team are dysfunctional, the Calibrator role becomes essential. These situations are characterized as non-functional group processes, including: a) a newly formed team where the individuals are not yet acquainted and used to working together, b) a situation where there is emotional or task-based conflict, c) a situation where there is distrust within the team, and d) when the team context is socially demanding.

Illustrated: If conflict arises within the product design team over the configuration decision, a team member taking the Calibrator role will remind the team of their agreement to always let each team member express their views before making a decision and to depersonalize the decisions.

Boundary Spanning Roles

Teams exist in organizational settings where effectiveness depends upon interfacing with people outside of the team. Team members carrying out these interactions outside the team are displaying the boundary spanning roles.

Consul

What: The Consul promotes the team externally. The consul role involves interactions with people outside the team setting that are in a position of power. The consul seeks to present the team, its goals, and its interests in a favorable light in order to procure resources for the team and gain sponsors for its actions.

When: When the team faces situations involving high dependence on external resources, the consul role becomes vital. Two examples of situations where a team has external

dependence include: a) when a team doesn't possess the personnel, money, equipment, or information it needs to perform its task, and b) when the team is new and supervisors need status updates.

Illustrated: After the product design team learns of the change in its deadlines, it may need an additional member to speed up the prototype testing. The team member that approaches management about receiving the additional member is taking the Consul role.

6. Coordinator

What: The Coordinator facilitates inter-team interactions by taking part in interactions outside of the team to coordinate efforts with other teams or parties. This can involve scheduling, information exchange, or feedback solicitation.

When: The coordinator role is vital when times involve external activity interdependence. This occurs, for example, when the activities of the team are interdependent with the activities of other teams, supplies, or customers.

Illustrated: As the product design team accelerates their designs, they will need prototypes created earlier than projected. A team member taking the Coordinator role might interact with the production line to organize the specification delivery and prototype manufacturing schedule.

Team Roles in Action

When managers work both with and within teams, they can enhance both the team's effectiveness and their personal performance by understanding what functional team roles are needed by the team and by knowing when to step up and take each role. Below are five tips that can help managers and leaders put these team roles into action:

Expand Your Role Repertoire: What team roles do you tend to take? Are there some roles you avoid? These functional roles are all needed at various times within teams and you will become a stronger team member as you are able to expand your team role repertoire until you are able to fulfill whichever role the team needs you to take.

Enable your Team's Role Development: Are there members of your team that always assume the same role? The highest performing teams tend to comprise team members who perform multiple roles. Consider providing encouragement and opportunities for team members to take new roles within the team.

Analyze your Team Situation: What is the nature of your team's situation? Do the "when" contingencies discussed here suggest that certain team roles are important? Make sure those roles are being adequately taken within your team.

Be Flexible: Do you ever have conflict in your team over roles? Remember that teams are dynamic and as the task, team members, and situation change, your behavior will need to adjust as well. Be flexible in adjusting the part you play in the team to maximize team effectiveness.

To further explore your competence in assigning team roles, test yourself with the quiz in Table 1.

Table 1 Did You Know?

General mental ability has long been a well-known benchmark for its ability to predict employees' performance on the job. However, team role theory has recently been utilized in situational judgment tests to measure how well job applicants are able to work in teams, and research suggests that team role tests can predict performance of an applicant beyond a cognitive ability test alone!

Test Your Knowledge

1. Recently, you have noticed that the ideas and strategies being implemented by your team have led to less than stellar results. Your current strategy does not seem to be working and your team's development has reached a point where it has become stagnant. Which role is needed in this situation?
2. Imagine your team relies heavily on outside sources to remain efficient, which is, the group is characterized as having high external resource dependence. Someone is needed to act outside the team to collect resources and provide information to help the group accomplish its tasks. Which role is needed in this situation?
3. Imagine that all of the tasks have been allocated to each individual in your team and it is now time for everyone to complete the work on an individual-oriented basis. Which role is needed in this situation?
4. Imagine your team has adequately considered every strategy and its possible consequences before coming to a final decision. Which role is needed in this situation?
5. Each member of your team has their specific area of expertise. That is, the team is characterized as having distributed expertise. These areas do not overlap and are all needed to accomplish the team's goals. Which role is needed in this situation?
6. Imagine your team has just received a new project and there is much ambiguity regarding which direction to take and how each member of your group should contribute. The task is highly complex, and your team members are inexperienced. Which role is needed in this situation?
7. Imagine your team is composed of a diverse set of members with different values, levels of communication ability, and attitudes. The team context seems to be emotionally demanding and stressful. One might characterize this team as a socially sensitive one. Which role is needed in this situation?
8. Imagine your team has just been formed—everyone is new and has little experience working with one another. Not enough time has elapsed to allow trusting relationships to form and there seems to be a large amount of conflict within the group. Which role is needed in this situation?
9. Your team has recently been given a task and you have noticed that the strategy and decisions have all been made hastily with little regard for contingencies or consequences. To make matters worse, there seems to be complete agreement about which strategy to implement. In this situation, which role is needed?
10. Imagine that your team worked in an environment where there was a large amount of interaction and reliance on other teams. One might characterize this situation as one with high external activity interdependence. Which role is needed in this situation?

Answer Key
 1. Creator 2. Consul 3. Completer 4. Cooperator 5. Contributor 6. Contractor
 7. Communicator 8. Calibrator 9. Critic 10. Coordinator

Endnotes

1. Hackman, J. R. (1990). *Groups that work (and those that don't): Creating conditions for effective teamwork*, 1. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. Mumford, T. V., Campion, M. A., & Morgeson, F. P. (2006). Situational judgment in work teams: A team role typology. In J. Weekley & R. Ployhart (Eds.), *Situational judgment tests*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum. Stewart, G. L., Manz, C. C., & Sims, H. P. (1999). *Team Work and Group Dynamics*. New York: John Wiley and Sons.
2. Mumford, T. V., Van Iddekinge, C. H., Morgeson, F. P., & Campion, M. A. (2008). The team role test: Development and validation of a team role knowledge situational judgment test. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 93, 250–267.