



# **Six Common Teamwork Myths put Straight**



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In 2011, Professor J. Richard Hackman, late Edgar Pierce Professor of Social and Organizational Psychology at Harvard University, [wrote an article](#) outlining “Six Common Misperceptions about Teamwork” from his considerable research in the U.S. intelligence community. Here, we revisit his findings and explore them in a little more detail from a Belbin perspective.

### **Myth #1 Harmony helps**

*Hackman discovered that disagreements were good for a team, so long as they were handled well and focused on the team’s objectives.*

We agree! In Team Role terms, it might be *easier* to work with those who have similar roles to your own, but you may not be as *effective*. A balanced team, in terms of different behavioural strengths, will provide more differing viewpoints, and the outcome is likely to be better.

### **Myth #2 Bring in new people**

*Whilst it might be assumed that mixing things up would bring in fresh ideas and energy, it was found that the longer a group stayed together, the better the performance.*

At Belbin, our take on this is that the longer we are around one another, the more chance we have to gain an understanding of how others work. Behaviour can be observed – and to some extent, predicted – so it makes sense that we’d feel comfortable when we know which Team Roles we’re dealing with, and how to get the most out of that relationship.

### **Myth #3 Bigger is better**

*Hackman found that excessive size was “one of the most common – and also one of the worst – impediments to effective collaboration”. He noted that it led to coasting and meant that it took more effort to keep things co-ordinated.*

We agree – size does matter! Dr Belbin’s ideal team size is four. This enables each person to establish a close working relationship with others in the team. The even numbers mean that consensus has to be reached for decision-making, with no one person having the casting vote. Having six in a team isn't a disaster, but once the numbers start creeping up to eight, ten, twelve, then people are going to start to feel redundant and less engaged.

### **Myth #4 Technology has replaced the need for face-to-face communication**

*According to the research, teams working remotely were at a considerable disadvantage. At the bare minimum, teams needed to be together when launched, at the midpoint of their work and again at the end.*

We hear the question 'Does Belbin work with remote teams?' on a regular basis, and of course, with home-working and the globalisation of work, this will become more common. When working with remote teams, we recommend that everyone has had the opportunity to meet at least once, face-to-face. Misunderstandings are commonplace when dealing with people via the phone or email, and having that ‘real’ connection helps provide context. ‘Social’ time via Skype can also work wonders.

### **Myth #5 It all comes down to the leader**

*Whilst leaders did make a difference, Hackman found that fostering effective collaboration within the team, helping members to manage themselves, and launching the team well, were the prerequisites for success.*

We have always stated that one of the quintessential features of small, well-balanced teams is that leadership is rotated or shared. Teamwork requires a sense of togetherness and trust which should come from within, not from on-high.

### **Myth #6 Teamwork happens by magic**

*Bring together talented people and give them a general idea of what's needed, then let it all happen – they'll figure out the details.*

Dr. Belbin's doomed Apollo teams – made up of highly-intelligent individuals – were proof positive that individual academic or cognitive abilities do not spell team success. We all know it takes effort to create the conditions necessary for success – namely, to get your Team Role ducks in a row. When designing a team, it's important to think about what the team is there to do, and which behavioural contributions might be required at each stage.

As Meredith Belbin states, and the reason why we (at Belbin) do what we do: "Simply putting together a number of people and expecting them to work as a team is not enough."

So, although separated by a 'small pond' and some cultural bias, there is a great deal of synergy between Professor J. Richard Hackman and Dr R. Meredith Belbin. And if two great minds come to the same conclusions, perhaps they just might be right?

**We can help you manage your individuals and teams. Get in touch to find out how.**

Author: Victoria Bird, our R&D Guru, with a little input from me.