

BELBIN AND SELF-AWARENESS:

THE KEY TO HIGHER-PERFORMING TEAMS



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The Team Role Company

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Teams succeed not only because they assemble the right technical skills, but because individuals understand how their behaviour contributes to, and interacts with, the behaviours of others.

Self-awareness – understanding one’s own tendencies, strengths, pressures and impact – is therefore essential to both personal development and team effectiveness.

Yet in many organisational contexts, the pursuit of self-understanding defaults to the language of personality: stable traits, preferences and styles. Useful as these can be, personality descriptors do not directly address what teams can see, respond to and request from one another – namely, behaviour.

The Belbin Team Roles framework offers a practical route from personal insight to collective performance because it focuses on observable behaviours in a team context, rather than abstract traits. By illuminating the roles individuals are most likely to play, and by incorporating feedback from colleagues, Belbin provides a shared language for aligning expectations, enhancing contributions and managing friction.

In this paper, we argue that if you want a self-aware, high-performing team, you must start with self-aware, high-performing individuals – and then teach them how to hone their self-awareness and collaborate in light of it. We also examine why, in a team setting, behaviour is the primary domain for change and measurable improvement.

Self-awareness is widely recognised as a cornerstone of personal development, effective collaboration and sustained team performance.

When individuals deepen their understanding of their own motivations and behaviours, they develop the capacity to make intentional choices rather than responding instinctively.

This becomes especially important in team settings. Teams flourish not simply because of the collective skills of their members, but because individuals understand the unique contributions they bring – and how these combine with the strengths of other team members.

While many frameworks focus on personality, teams experience – and can influence – behaviour. Personality may describe tendencies, but behaviour is observable and changeable.

“*Personality may describe tendencies, but behaviour is observable and changeable.*”

The Belbin Team Role model provides a practical, evidence-based framework through which this kind of behavioural self-awareness can be developed and translated into awareness that informs collective capability.

Belbin emphasises how individuals tend to behave in a team context, rather than how they perceive themselves in the abstract.

By doing so, it offers a language that empowers individuals to reflect on strengths, and develop strategies for development or support from individuals in the team with complementary strengths.

Crucially, this awareness is not an end in itself, but becomes a basis for improving collaboration, reducing conflict and enabling teams to deploy their collective strengths more strategically.



“*High-performing, self-aware teams are built from high-performing self-aware individuals*”

From a Belbin perspective, high-performing, self-aware teams are built from high-performing, self-aware individuals who:

- Understand, work with, and develop their strongest role contributions;
- Are attuned to how others experience their behaviour, and
- Actively manage the associated weaknesses which are the flipside of their strengths.

Using a Belbin lens, the pursuit of self-awareness becomes a practical pathway to building resilient, balanced and high-performing teams.

Teams can: measure and reflect on individual behavioural preferences; integrate observer feedback to calibrate external self-awareness, and use a shared language to collaborate more effectively, manage conflict, and build capable, adaptable teams.

We emphasise that sustainable, measurable change in teams must be grounded in behaviour, incorporating feedback loops which enable intentional adjustments where needed.



The importance of self-awareness in team performance

Why self-awareness matters

Self-awareness underpins key team processes – communication, decision-making, conflict management, co-ordination and learning. Individuals are better able to play to their strengths intentionally, and seek complementary input or adjust their approach to mitigate limitations.

This reduces unproductive friction, accelerates the formation of trust and improves the quality and speed of collective problem-solving.

Moreover, self-awareness is not static. It can be cultivated through reflection, feedback and deliberate practice – especially when anchored to the clear, shared model of behaviour that Belbin Team Roles provide.

Why personality alone is insufficient

Personality frameworks describe stable tendencies. However, teams experience behaviours in context – what people do, when, how often and with what effects. This is because:

- **Feedback requires observables** – to avoid assumptions, misconceptions or prejudice, it is important for colleagues to pass comment on what they witness in the workplace. Behaviour offers specific, actionable feedback loops.
- **Change is enacted behaviourally** – teams cannot ask someone to change a trait, but they can request a different behaviour. Sustainable change is therefore behavioural.
- **Team contribution is situational** – the value of a behaviour depends on task, timing and team composition. Behavioural models accommodate this contextual variability more readily than trait descriptions.

Defining self-awareness

Self-awareness is relational as much as it is introspective

Understanding ourselves involves attending not only to our internal perspectives but also to the ways in which we are perceived by others.

This dual focus is cited in several well-established psychological frameworks. The Johari Window, developed by Joseph Luft and Harry Ingham (1955), illustrates this interplay through a four-quadrant model that contrasts what is known or unknown to oneself with what is known or unknown to others. It explicitly supports the development of both internal and external self-awareness by using feedback and disclosure to illuminate blind spots and reduce discrepancies between self-perception and others' perceptions.

This emphasis on balancing inner insight with external feedback is also central to the work of organisational psychologist Tasha Eurich, who distinguishes between two key forms of self-awareness:

- **Internal self-awareness** – understanding one's motivations, preferred ways of contributing, sources of energy and stress responses.
- **External self-awareness** – recognising how others experience one's behaviour and identifying alignment or disconnects between self-view and observer feedback.

Self-awareness in Belbin terms

Self-understanding is most robust when internal insight is balanced with meaningful, credible feedback from others.

The Belbin Team Role model incorporates this same duality by drawing on individuals' self-perception (via the Self-Perception Inventory) alongside Observer Assessments (feedback from colleagues) to create a more complete and reliable picture of how people contribute and behave within a team.

In his groundbreaking book, *Team Roles at Work*, Dr Meredith Belbin identified four categories or levels of confluence between internal (self-perception) and external (observer) views.

These coherence levels enable practitioners not only to identify alignment and blind spots but also to understand their implications for team contribution, development needs and behavioural flexibility.

“*Self-understanding is most robust when internal insight is balanced with meaningful, credible feedback from others.*”

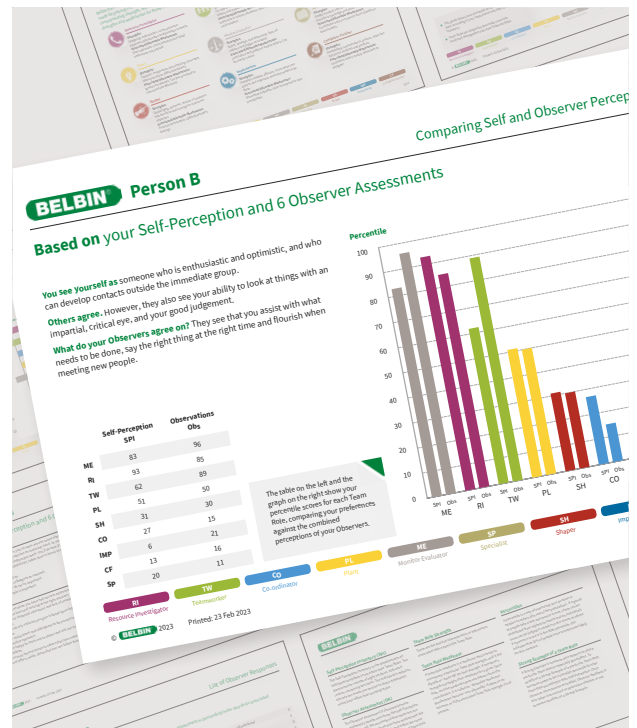
Coherent profile

A highly effective individual demonstrates a clear understanding of their strengths and expresses them in ways that are visible and valuable to others.

There is a good degree of alignment between what they expect to contribute and the behaviours that colleagues observe, resulting in contributions that are not only clearly understood but reliably delivered.

It is worth noting that coherence does not require an exact match between an individual's self-perception and others' views.

In fact, a degree of flexibility can signal strong emotional intelligence, showing an ability to adapt behaviours to suit different relationships and working environments. Overall, however, contributions remain stable.



Discordant profile

An individual's view of their own strengths differs markedly from what colleagues observe.

The result is often a set of contributions that are less predictable or less aligned with team expectations.

Such discrepancies may arise when people overestimate certain strengths and overlook others, or when they shift their behaviour across contexts in ways that others find difficult to interpret.

In these instances, there is less certainty that the individual's intentions will translate into the impact they hope to have. If the mismatch is not to become a source of problems, the gap needs to be reduced.

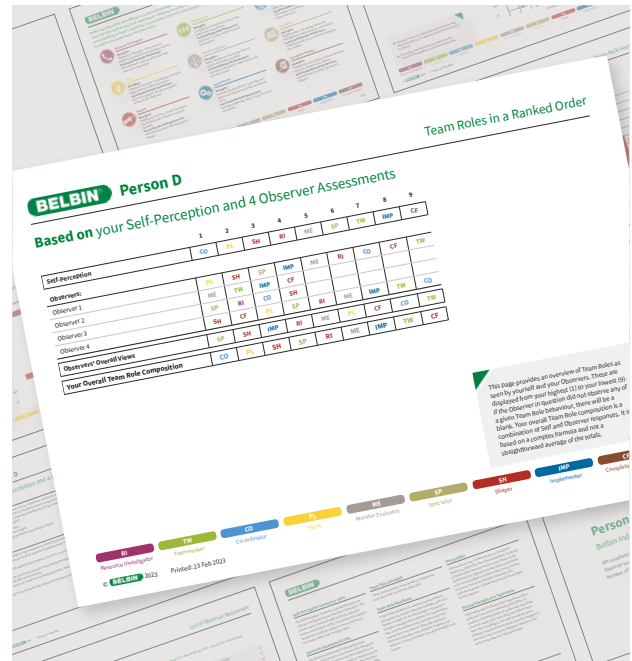


Confused profile

Neither an individual's self-perception nor the feedback from colleagues converges into a coherent view of their behavioural contributions.

Contradictory observations may indicate that the person's behaviour varies widely across contexts, or that others experience them in inconsistent ways that make their impact difficult to assess.

Where no stable pattern can be identified, it becomes challenging to form reliable expectations about how the individual will contribute, and the absence of a clear behavioural profile underscores the importance of ongoing observation, structured feedback, and opportunities for role clarity to support more consistent and effective performance.



In Belbin terms, we define self-awareness as having a coherent profile.

When people understand both their own strengths, and the impact their team contributions have on others, they create the conditions for more accurate expectations and more aligned contributions.

But how do individual insights translate into team dynamics? The next section explores how self-awareness not only shapes personal performance but also scales to influence collective behaviour, team coherence and overall effectiveness.

17.7%

Our findings

Despite the centrality of self-awareness to personal effectiveness, leadership success and team performance, research consistently shows that genuine self-awareness is relatively rare in the general population.

Dr Tasha Eurich's large-scale study of 5,000 individuals, cited in Harvard Business Review, indicates that only a small minority of individuals (around 10-15% of people) can be considered sufficiently self-aware, possessing accurate insight into their own behaviour, strengths and impact.

When we analysed our dataset of over 78,000 individual Belbin profiles from more than 30 countries, we discovered that 17.7% had a coherent profile, and are considered self-aware.

These findings have important implications for understanding how individuals function within teams and organisations.

If most people begin with limited self-awareness, teams are unlikely to achieve collective clarity about strengths, risks and behavioural patterns without structured support.

In addition, many of the challenges that arise in teams – miscommunication, misalignment of expectations, friction between working styles – are not simply interpersonal issues, but symptoms of an underlying awareness gap.

When individuals lack clarity about how they tend to behave, how they are perceived by others or how their habits affect group dynamics, even well-intentioned collaboration can become inefficient or strained, leading to avoidable conflict, duplication of effort or underutilisation of strengths.

Without mechanisms for identifying and understanding these awareness gaps, teams are likely to operate with partial information: individuals may assume shared understanding where none exists, or interpret others' behaviour through inaccurate or incomplete assumptions.

Understanding the prevalence of low self-awareness therefore underscores the importance of incorporating processes that help individuals reflect on their behaviour, integrate feedback and develop a more grounded understanding of their impact.

From individuals to teams – how self-awareness scales

Why self-aware teams begin with self-aware individuals

High-performing teams depend on members who:

- **Understand** how they work best and the conditions under which they add the most value;
- **Anticipate** where their behaviours may cause difficulties or tension within the team and take steps to mitigate it; and
- **Communicate** needs and boundaries constructively, reducing misunderstandings and rework.

Individuals who can articulate their strengths, seek complementary input from others, and address risks early enable the team to organise work more intelligently and to resolve tensions before they escalate.

How individual awareness becomes collective capability

Team-level self-awareness emerges when individuals:

- **Share their Team Role profiles and discuss implications** – making strengths visible, and normalising – and accounting for – the existence of the associated weaknesses that make up the flipside of the strength.
- **Value diversity of contribution** – recognising that different roles are essential at different stages of a project and that constructive conflict can be essential to progress.
- **Create social contracts** – specifying how to work together given the behavioural mix present within the team.
- **Monitor dynamics over time** – noticing when dominant roles are having an undue influence on team culture, when under-represented roles need to be cultivated or brought in from outside the team, and when rotation of responsibilities could unlock better results. As teams build this collective understanding, the need for a shared language becomes increasingly clear.

Without one, behavioural preferences can be misinterpreted, strengths can be underutilised and tensions can become personal rather than productive.

This is where the Belbin framework plays a powerful role.

By offering a common vocabulary for describing and discussing behavioural contributions, Belbin helps teams transform potential friction into a constructive conversation about needs, strengths and contributions, rather than personalities or fixed traits.

It enables individuals to articulate how they tend to behave in a team setting and helps colleagues interpret that behaviour accurately, reducing ambiguity and supporting psychological safety.

Through this shared language, individual self-awareness can more easily scale into an evidence-based, collective understanding of how the team functions.

Conclusion

Self-awareness is the bridge between individual potential and collective performance.

In team settings, behaviour is the key measurement – what others experience, what can be requested and what can be adapted.

Belbin's behavioural lens, multi-perspective measurement and shared language make self-awareness practical, measurable and generative.

If you want a high-performing, self-aware team, start by cultivating high-performing, self-aware individuals, then teach them to hone and co-ordinate their behaviours in light of that knowledge. The result is a team that can deploy its strengths wisely, manage its pressures proactively and adapt its contributions to the demands of the work.



Global figures

A breakdown of coherence figures by geographical area.

Note: Data from China were not included in this analysis.

Area	% Coherent profile/ self-awareness levels
Africa	16.7%
Asia	18.8%
Europe	17.8%
Latin America	16.2%
Oceania	17.6%
USA & Canada	15.3%

References and further reading

- Belbin, R.M. and Brown, V. (2023), Team Roles at Work 3rd edn. London: Routledge
- <https://hbr.org/2018/01/what-self-awareness-really-is-and-how-to-cultivate-it>

BELBIN®

The Team Role Company

Improve team performance through evidence-based behavioural insight.

Providing the science behind high-performing teams.

Belbin is a research-based Team Role framework used in organisations worldwide to improve collaboration and performance.

Based on work-based behaviour, not personality types, we help teams unlock their value and deliver business results.

We've been working with teams for over 50 years. It's what we do.

Get in touch to find out how Belbin can help your teams and organisation.

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