

## TOOLS FOR FACILITATING HEALTH CARE TEAMWORK

Just putting people together to work does not necessarily produce effective teamwork. Teams usually need a little help but there are few resources available to them. Here we outline one relatively simple process to help understand and develop health care teamwork.

### The analysis of informal roles in work groups

Teamwork is an essential feature of contemporary health care and the diversity of teams is broad. Teams may be unidisciplinary or multidisciplinary, community or hospital teams, standing teams with fixed mandates or ad hoc teams convened to solve emergent problems then disband. They might be therapy, teaching, or task teams, their duration might be fixed or open-ended, size may vary, and they will vary in their functional ability. As well, these days, health professionals working in networks might find themselves on distributed or virtual teams. Familiarity with concepts for the analysis of teams will help the clinician to better understand the teams they are working with, assess team effectiveness and identify areas for team development.

The analysis of informal roles provides one useful conceptual framework for understanding team process. There are three broad sets of informal roles: 1) **Task roles** that are necessary for accomplishing the teams task, 2) **Maintenance roles** which help the team function as a team, and 3) **Individual roles** in which a team member attempts to satisfy individual rather than team goals. A team is most productive when all three sets are managed simultaneously.

The three broad sets of these roles comprise 16 specific role functions:

<b>Task Roles</b>		
1. Initiating/energizing	2. Information/opinion giving	
3. Information/opinion seeking	4. Reality testing	
5. Coordinating	6. Orienting	
7. Technician		
<b>Maintenance Roles</b>		
8. Harmonizing	9. Gatekeeping	10. Encouraging
11. Following	12. Climatizing	
<b>Individual Roles</b>		
13. Blocking/Aggressing	14. Out of field	15. Digressing
16. Recognition seeking		

In an effective team, all **task** and **maintenance** roles are evident. This is **role distribution**. As well, on effective teams, team members identify gaps in role performance and take on roles when they are needed. Over time everyone may play every role. This is called **role flexibility**. By observing **role distribution and role flexibility**, an important source of team strength or weakness can be readily identified. Helping a team see and discuss this element of team functioning can be a powerful impetus for team development.

<b>Definitions of Task Roles</b>	
Initiating/energizing	Defines goals and problems of team. Suggests procedures and stimulates.
Information/opinion seeking	Seeks clarification of goals, problems procedures. Asks for opinions on topic.
Information/opinion giving	Gives facts and general information. States opinions relevant to discussion.
Reality testing	Provides critical analysis and judgement of ideas, check practicality.
Coordinating	Tries to link ideas and issues, summarize, pull things together.
Orienting	Questions whether team is on track, points out deviations from purpose.
Technician	Doing things for the team e.g. keeping records, getting supplies, arrange seats
<b>Definitions of Maintenance or Group Building Roles</b>	
Harmonizing	Mediates conflict, reduces tension, explores differences of opinion.
Gatekeeping	Facilitates participation, ensures ideas, questions, opinions are expressed.
Encouraging	Provides friendly and warm response and praise for comments and ideas
Following	Goes along with team process and provides accepting audience.
Climatizing	Follows team's emotional climate and reflects on team climate.
<b>Definitions of Individual Roles</b>	
Blocking/aggressing	Persistent attack, argument, resistance, returning to "dead" issues.
Out of field	Withdraws from discussion, daydreams, fiddles, flirts, and whispers to others.
Digressing	Goes off topic, makes brief statements into long nebulous speeches.
Recognition seeking	Attention seeking by boasting, seeking sympathy, being loud or acting unusual.

Observing a team function using a simple informal roles checklist like the one found below is usually of great interest. The process reveals that on many teams, even ones that have been together for some time, very few roles are played and/or they are played by the same people over and over again.

## Example 1

Consider the following example. A team on a dementia unit was troubled by an agitated, combative gentleman who was striking staff and other patients. When the informal roles checklist was completed during a team meeting it was noted that few maintenance roles were being played by team members. If differences appeared no-one **harmonized** them, if someone waited to say something the group would often move on without paying attention because no one was attending to the **gate keeping** function it was clear that someone had something to say. Few words of **encouragement** were evident and as the meeting drew tiredly to an end no one commented on how everyone was feeling – the **climatizing** function.

But not only were few maintenance roles evident, **task roles** were largely limited to people **opinion giving**. In this context the opinions revolved around why the patient was doing what he was doing. It became evident that there were many opinions about this. Seldom were opinions **reality tested** and there was no **coordination** of these opinions into a progressive care-plan.

As a result, on the ward, the agitated patient was being treated differently by team members depending upon their opinion regarding why he was doing what he was doing. In this confusing context it was likely the case that the team was contributing to the agitation that they wanted to eliminate.

A discussion of role distribution and flexibility during the team meeting led to an agreement to make a list of the hypotheses on why the patient was doing what he was doing. Each opinion was reality tested and an appropriate care plan developed for the opinions that remained. The team agreed to work with one opinion and care plan at a time until they could find the one that worked best.

## Example 2

Like most teams this one spent little time examining its own process. As a result team difficulties smouldered beneath the surface. Did you know that hidden conflict on care teams can provoke patient distress and agitation?

One day, an evening nurse had not entered the team physicians written order for a patient. As usual the physicians writing was illegible but no one ever said anything about this. The next day at the team meeting, the day nurse apologized that her colleague had missed the order, whereupon the physician lost his cool and berated the nurse who broke into tears. The rest of the

team looked off in other directions. After the meeting anger seethed through the team and the physician felt awful because she had blown her cool.

In this instance attention to informal role distribution and flexibility on the team would have revealed that as is typical the team focused almost entirely on its task functions.

The member who usually played the peacekeeping role was not working and her harmonizing function was unavailable and while many afterwards said that they had felt like saying something, no one played the gatekeeping function – noticing that people were about to say something and encouraging them to speak up.

Review and discussion of team roles on this team helped to resolve the conflict and the team agreed to periodically review its process using the checklist and be guided by its principles of **role distribution and flexibility**.

**A CHECKLIST OF INFORMAL ROLES IN TEAMS**

<b>Task Roles</b>											
Put a team members initials at the top of one column											
Initiating/energizing											
Info/opinion seeking											
Info/opinion giving											
Reality testing											
Coordinating											
Orienting											
Technician											
<b>Maintenance Roles</b>											
Harmonizing											
Gatekeeping											
Encouraging											
Following											
Climatizing											
<b>Individual Roles</b>											
Blocking/aggressing											
Out of field											
Digressing											
Recognition seeking											

**SUMMARY PAGE FOR TEAM MEMBER ROLES EXERCISE**

<b>Task Roles</b>	<b>Role Distribution</b> Indicate the number of times each role that was played	<b>Role Flexibility</b> Indicate the number of team members playing each role
Initiating/energizing		
Info/opinion seeking		
Info/opinion giving		
Reality testing		
Coordinating		
Orienting		
Technician		
<b>Maintenance Roles</b>		
Harmonizing		
Gatekeeping		
Encouraging		
Following		
Climatizing		
<b>Individual Roles</b>		
Blocking/aggressing		
Out of field		
Digressing		
Recognition seeking		