Roles Played by Team Members

If you are going to function well as a team member, you have to develop an understanding of the roles others play, and the roles you are willing and able to play.

Willing and *able*...to *play*.

Each word is meaningful. You have to be *willing* to play a role in order to be successful at it. You also must be *able*. And you must *play* that role, which means you must *enact* it and convince others that you are the one to do that part of the work.

None of this is done in a vacuum. You must watch and analyze what roles others are taking and fit yourself to the scheme. Sometimes, for some tasks, you may be the person who will analyze. Other times someone else does the analysis and you can take another role. Sometimes you are the one who gathers the data. Perhaps this time someone else is better suited for that. You may have played the cheerleader on the last project undertaken by the team, pointing to successes and encouraging team members to move toward the goal. This time around you may take the role of the critic, raising questions about assumptions that are driving the enterprise.

Some people play the same role all of the time. They are the constants.

Here are some of the roles people take when a team goes about its work:

The institutional memory. Remembers what the organization did last time this situation occurred. Has been around long enough to know what works and what doesn't work. Can name the events and the players from the last time around. Can be very helpful in preventing repetitions of past failures. Can be a hindrance to progress by dredging up old ghosts. Needs to understand the benefits of learning from the past, but also needs to understand that new solutions sometimes benefit from the successful parts of past solutions.

The disinterested party. Doesn't go to either pole when others are dividing into opposite camps. Listens to what is being said and raises questions that may help bring people back to the center of the issue.

The devil's advocate. When the team is moving too easily toward a course of action, raises non-threatening but provocative "yeah, but..." and "what if..." types of questions. Slows the team down when it is moving too rapidly toward an expeditious action.

The clarifier. Helps the team when it is bogging down in detail by identifying key issues that must be addressed. Stands back from complex discussion and then is able to jump in and synthesize discussion into a series of clear options.

The reality checker. Steps outside of the team and its processes, referring to the larger organization and its goals, then returns to say, "Hey, guys, we've lost sight of something fairly important."

The whip. Helps the group to realize it has spent long enough on one phase of the project and is ready to move on to the next.

The cheerleader. Helps the group to realize when it has reached a milestone and suggests ways to celebrate success before moving on.

The organizer. Recognizes when the group is bogging down on details and suggests ways to complete sub-tasks expeditiously in order to move on.

The summarizer. Recognizes when the team is bogging down on discussion about its tasks and is able to draw a succinct picture of where the group can go next as a result of its past work.

The healer. Recognizes when disputes have slowed team efforts and is able to calm fears, assuage hurts and mend differences.

The record-keeper. Is able to remind team members, when tasks become complex and people lose sight of the objective, of data-points that were important and decisions made previously that are driving current activity.

The problem-solver. Identifies issues that have slowed team progress and seeks data or support from outside the team that alleviates the problem and allows progress to continue.

These roles people can play on a team are just a sampling of what theorists know about human behavior in groups. But it's sufficient to demonstrate that you can find one, several or many roles to play within your team that will make you a valuable member...and that will advance the goals of your team.

Remember that the word role is used to refer to what actors do. An actor must find what roles suit his personality, his voice, his self-perception and the way he is perceived by others. You also must try various roles to discover those where you have the most success.

Above all, listen to what others say about the role(s) you are playing. When you are lauded for taking a successful role, place it in your repertoire and work on perfecting it.