



Apollo Syndrome – Information Sheet

The 'Apollo Syndrome' is a phenomenon discovered by Dr Meredith Belbin where teams of highly capable individuals can, collectively, perform badly. Dr Meredith Belbin is one of the original 'gurus' of Team Building. In his first book on Management Teams (Belbin, 1981) he reported some unexpectedly poor results with teams formed of people who had sharp, analytical minds and high mental ability - he called this the Apollo Syndrome.

His criteria for selecting these teams have elements in common with criteria for selecting IT, academic or scientific staff - using ability and aptitude tests to select those with high analytical skills. The initial perception of Belbin's Apollo teams was that they were bound to win in the team competitions. However, the results were quite the reverse, and the Apollo teams often finished near the bottom of eight teams.

This failure seemed to be due to certain flaws in the way the team operated:

- They spent excessive time in abortive or destructive debate, trying to persuade other team members to adopt their own view, and demonstrating a flair for spotting weaknesses in others' arguments. This led to the discussion equivalent of '[the deadly embrace](#)'.
- They had difficulties in their decision making, with little coherence in the decisions reached (several pressing and necessary jobs were often omitted).
- Team members tended to act along their own favourite lines without taking account of what fellow members were doing, and the team proved difficult to manage.
- In some instances, teams recognised what was happening but over compensated - they avoided confrontation, which equally led to problems in decision making.

There were successful Apollo teams, however, that were characterised by

- the absence of highly dominant individuals, and
- a particular style of leadership.

Successful leaders were suspicious and sceptical people who sought to impose some shape or pattern on group discussion, and on the outcome of group activities. They focused attention on the setting of objectives and priorities, and shaping the way team effort was applied. Rather than 'drawing out' team members, the successful leaders were tough, discriminating people who could both hold their ground in any company, yet not dominate the group.

A key lesson from Belbin's work is that putting together a team of the cleverest individuals does not necessarily produce the best results, and the team needs to be designed ensuring that there is a blend of team roles. The term 'Apollo Syndrome' has also been used to describe the condition where someone has an overly important view of their role within a team. It is based on the (supposed) claim of someone to have played a vital role in the success of NASA's Apollo missions to the Moon, where scientists had to work all through the night on many occasions, battling against fatigue. One person claimed a vital role to the whole programme - by making the coffee that kept them awake!

Perhaps a 'Double Apollo' is where a team is composed of highly capable people, that achieves little, but claims great success!

References

Management Teams - Why They Succeed or Fail, (Belbin, 1981), ISBN: 0-7506-0253-8

From <http://www.teamechnology.co.uk/tt/t-articl/apollo.htm>