



In today's pc world, **Clare Lewellyn West** risks any adverse reactions to the very idea of labelling people as A and B by taking us with her on an interesting and illuminating journey.

Making the most of the B team

Let's start at the beginning by asking who your B people are. Who is in the team? The precise definition of 'B people' would certainly differ from organisation to organisation, but I guess it would generally be characterised by words like 'capable', 'reliable', 'solid', 'stable', 'responsible' and perhaps 'unambitious'. These people appear to operate largely within their comfort zones and although they often get little recognition for their contribution they may well be sorely missed when they are not around. They are the loyal workers in the hive; they achieve the routine tasks; they keep the wheels oiled; and they look after colleagues and customers.

In a sense they are defined more easily by exception. They are not the bright and dazzling stars of the A team; nor are they the awkward squad. Just as in any normal statistical distribution they are the majority in the middle and so you really can't live without them.

WHAT PLACES THEM THERE?

In order to make the most of your B team it is worth spending a little time considering how they came to be there. What are the factors that place someone in the B team? The obvious factor – sometimes seen as the only factor – is talent, aptitude or ability. These people are there because they just don't have star quality. They are footballers without the David Beckham magic, dancers without the Darcy Bussell sparkle.

But there are other things that place people in the B team and, alongside aptitude, attitude plays a crucial part. People often stay in the B team because they lack the self-confidence to try for the A team. The B team is comfortable and safe, and these members have been getting the message all their lives that it is where they belong.

Key learning points

Getting the best from your B people is all about good management. See what is really happening, respect people as individuals, and recognise and reward their contributions.

If you see staff as individuals with differing talents, needs and preferences you will have a solid basis for investing in them in a way that will work better for them – and therefore for you. And because you understand their drivers and needs better you have a basis for building their self-confidence and competence.

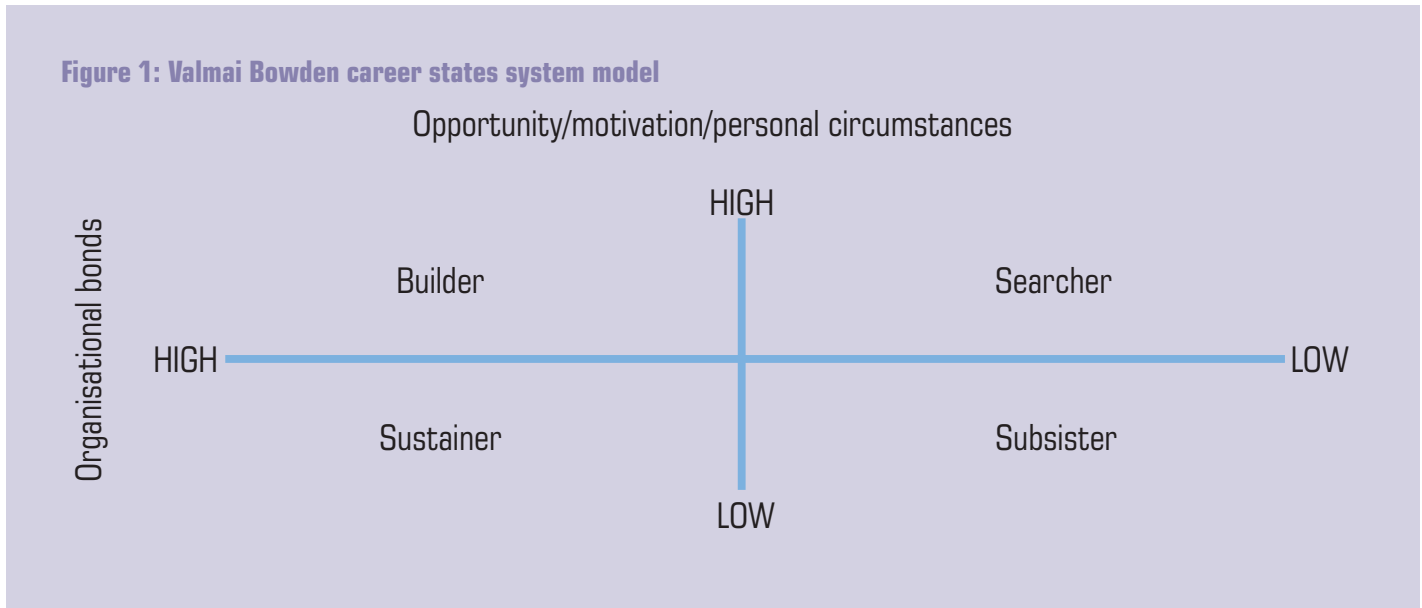
And the great thing is that these rules apply to everyone from the shooting stars to the awkward squad!

One of the hardest but most rewarding tasks is to see individuals as they are without allowing our assumptions and prejudices **to colour the picture**

And attitude matters. After all, we have probably seen or read the definition that success is '10 per cent aptitude and 90 per cent attitude'.

Other factors relate to the relationship between individuals and their organisation. Even stars may turn into also rans when they are not comfortable with the style and culture of their surroundings. We have seen the red hot player who somehow never lives up to our expectations after a high profile transfer. We have felt disappointed by the favourite actor whose latest performance just didn't light up the screen. We have been startled by the ignominious departure of yet another top executive whose ►

By recognising and working with a whole range of intelligences you will get the best out of individuals



► reputation led us to believe they would turn around the fortunes of some ailing company. And on a personal note, at some point in our careers most of us will have spent time in an organisation whose culture just doesn't suit our needs and values. If you have been in that situation, then just remember how hard it was to perform to your potential.

Of course, the failure to fit into an organisation is, in turn, one of the reasons why motivation slips – and low motivation is another factor that reduces performance so that even the brightest and best may not perform to their optimum.

It's fair to say that for some people a niche in the B team is the place where they feel comfortable. They may get more pleasure and satisfaction from playing a supporting role, or prefer to avoid the demands or stress of high profile situations, or they may simply enjoy standing on the sidelines observing the stars at work.

Finally people are sometimes in the B team because of the larger context in which they are working. It is not just about their jobs, it is about their lives. In her excellent analysis of career states Valmai Bowden defines four positions (see Figure 1 above).¹

Sustainers

These are individuals who are comfortable and fulfilled in their current role. They are not ambitious, and their development is lateral (broadening and deepening their current skills) rather than horizontal.

Builders

These are ambitious individuals who visualise career development within their current organisation and are highly attuned to its needs and demands. This is the high flyer taking the traditional *rungs of the ladder* career route.

Subsisters

These individuals show little personal interest in developing their careers and get little organisational encouragement. They are marking time – a state that often reflects greater responsibilities or demands outside work and/or a lack of organisational encouragement.

Searchers

These individuals are looking beyond their current organisation to develop their careers. They include frustrated builders who are not getting the recognition or support they feel is appropriate. People on short-term contracts are often in this category. They also include individuals who are disillusioned by the career prospects within their organisation or indeed within their chosen career path.

What is interesting and significant about Bowden's analysis is that she sees this model as dynamic. People will move between the positions at different points in their careers. So the star player who blazes into the 'builder' zone full of talent and energy may choose to become a 'sustainer' when family commitments increase or they decide to get an Open University degree or they just want some time and space to enjoy what they are doing now rather than pushing for the next rung of the ladder. If outside pressures are considerable – or inside support is minimal – they may well move into the limbo of the 'subsister' area. However, at some point in the future they may be ready to move again. If they are not talent spotted because you have decided they are permanent members of the supporting cast they will probably move on and become stars somewhere else.

WHY SHOULD YOU CARE?

You may be tempted to read these descriptions and ask: 'Why look after them? Won't they carry on anyway whatever I do?' But when you realise how many good reasons there are for taking care of them, you might decide you would be a fool to risk neglecting them.

You need these people because they are the solid and stable centre ground of your enterprise. You need them because they are often the ones who carry the company history in their heads and hearts. You need them because they are the understudies when the star is sick or otherwise occupied or even off to pastures new. And finally you need them because every so often the Cinderella party produces a princess.

HOW DO YOU MAKE THE MOST OF THEM?

Having spent some time exploring the factors that place people temporarily or permanently in the B team, the question still remains to be answered: how do you make the most of them? To find out I think we need to examine three key areas of activity.

1. What we see

How clear sighted are we when we look at these individuals? Are we taking them for granted, and failing to recognise the qualities and contributions that make them important to the organisation? Are we making assumptions about them because they don't quite fit our personal model? Are we noticing how much of their situation is due to ability and how much to circumstances or prejudice? Are we taking someone with low self-confidence at their own valuation?

2. Where we invest

How much are we investing in these individuals – not just in money spent on training and rewards but in time and effort to understand them better, appreciate them more, and give them the feedback and personal rewards that may be crucial to retaining and developing them?

3. How we build

What are we doing to build the confidence of these workers so that they can achieve more than they believe? How are we developing their competence so that they can deliver their best? How are we encouraging their loyalty so that we have that sound and reliable centre to the business?

I will go a stage further and say that if we get the first step right the others follow quite naturally. On the other hand, if we miss out the seeing stage we are very unlikely to make the right investment or be successful in our building. This reflects the first principle of the Buddhist eightfold path to enlightenment – the idea of right understanding. The aim is to view the world exactly as it presents itself to our eyes without imposing any preconceived notions about what we see, avoiding the temptation to categorise things too quickly and miss what is actually there. We are unlikely to say or do the right things until we have acquired that right understanding. So the focus of this article is on finding ways to see your B people as clearly as possible.

SEEING PEOPLE CLEARLY

One of the hardest but most rewarding tasks for any of us who have the responsibility for managing or developing others is to see individuals as they are without allowing our assumptions and prejudices to colour the picture. Our aim is to be as open and objective as possible, but we still need a frame of reference whenever our role requires us to make judgements about an individual's capabilities, contribution and potential.

We are likely to make the most unhelpful assumptions when we have a very narrow frame of reference. This, after all, is the essence of prejudice. *She can't possibly run a major company because all the people I know who do that are white, male and middle aged; and he can't look after young children competently because all the childcare I have seen was done by women* represent some familiar narrow frames of reference.

And, of course, prejudice leads to self-fulfilling prophecies. Remember Rosenthal's famous educational experiments in which teachers were told that certain randomly chosen children had special potential?² They proceeded to treat those individuals in such a way that they did indeed outstrip their peers. That should act as a warning to us. And just in case we are tempted to dismiss this as only applying to young children it is worth being aware that Rosenthal and others have spent many decades studying this phenomenon and found similar effects in higher education and the workplace.³

On a personal note, I read about this work many years ago when I first became a teacher and it has informed my practice ever since. When I take on a new NVQ candidate or a group of ▶

CASE STUDY: Remembering Dave by Valerie Stewart

Dave had been a pain in the neck in the development centre. He'd fallen naturally into the leadership role for all the group exercises: on two of them he had led them to superb performances, and on another had led them completely up the garden path. His irascibility was the first thing you noticed about him: glaring at the others when they obviously didn't follow his explanations, over-riding and over-talking people who were slow in coming to the point. From time to time you could see him notice how overbearing he was, and he would sit on his hands – literally, for Dave gestured like a windmill – and make himself shut up. But it didn't last long; as soon as the pace slowed to any degree, he'd be back in there, flaying the others alive.

It fell to me, of course, to give him his psychological test feedback. He appeared slightly shame-faced when he entered; he was expecting unpleasant news. He shuffled uncomfortably into his chair, and I began by explaining how the personality questionnaire worked. Yes, he had to agree: he was very dominant, very controlling, and not particularly consultative. Yes, he did have a high energy level, and he was so tense that he felt like a coiled, angry spring. He wanted to make things happen faster than other people, and he couldn't stand the slowness and conservatism of the people around him. I wasn't telling him anything he didn't know. He looked more and more depressed. I let it sink in a bit.

Then I turned to the two tests of critical reasoning – verbal and numerical – that had also been part of the development centre. I took it slowly. I explained that the scoring system calculated how he stood in relationship to managers and professionals, not to the general population; that when he got his percentile scores, they would reflect how he compared with the top 15 per cent of the population, rather than the whole world. Yes, he understood percentiles.

Slow reveal. 'Dave,' I said, 'you come on the 97th percentile on the verbal critical reasoning, and on the 95th on the numerical critical reasoning. I think this may explain something.'

He was having white-out. He couldn't take it in. Time for some concrete analogies: if he were on a plane with 99 other managers and professionals, he could out-reason 97 of them. I told him, without mentioning names, how his scores compared with some internationally known experts in their field, with people I knew who got invited to lecture at Harvard and INSEAD. I told him what the cut-off points were for graduate entry into some of the crunchier government departments. I did it slowly, because he was starting to cry.

Dave had left school at sixteen and gone into a clerical job in a small town. He'd never moved from the town or from his employer. He was now in his mid-40s; family almost grown up. All his working life he had been boiling with frustration because the people around him seemed not to grasp things as quickly as he did, didn't follow him when he tried to put across his point of view. He found it difficult to make friends at work or outside; people liked him when he could put his energy to work on their behalf, but he had a reputation as an appalling team player. And now he could see why. Very simply, he was seeing things more quickly than other people, by a country mile.

When he'd dried his eyes and finished talking about the times in his life when he'd made a nuisance of himself, we started to talk about what he was going to do with it. Get himself an education: that was what he wanted to do. And, to cut the rest of this story short, he's now doing a PhD on one of the many subjects represented in the houseful of books he'd accumulated.

Why am I telling you about Dave? Because there are lots of Daves around, and it's easy to miss them. It's a not uncommon career history, especially in people of his generation: small-town school, leave early and never get the chance to measure yourself against the tough competition you deserve. I've found people like Dave on the railways, in banks, selling insurance, bashing metal in workshops. Roughly one time in 20 we find someone like Dave on a development centre, and that's the time you go away knowing that you've given someone their life back.

Why am I telling you about Dave? Because you might work with someone like him. Chances are, it would pay to look.

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Table 1: Gardner's nine intelligences

Howard Gardner defines intelligence as 'the ability to solve problems or create products that are valued ... an ability expressed in the context of specific tasks, domains and disciplines' and delineates nine different intelligences:

- mathematical/logical
- linguistic/verbal
- naturalistic/worldly aware
- visual/spatial
- auditory/musical
- kinaesthetic/physical
- philosophical/existential
- interpersonal
- intrapersonal.

► management trainees their managers or colleagues are often only too keen to tell me all about them. I listen politely, then store the positive comments and ditch the bad ones. It is a very effective start to our relationship.

Whatever the context, if we decide someone has potential then we tend to treat that person in such a way that they perform better. If we decide the person is second rate, they are likely to meet our expectations. It is the social variation on the old axiom, whether you believe you can or believe you can't you are absolutely right.⁴

THROUGH THE ROUND WINDOW

So in order to see your B people as clearly as possible you need broad and positive frames of reference. For example, if you are assessing their ability to do a job you probably need to make a judgement about their intelligence. Using the traditional narrow IQ approach you may come up with a limiting response. But if you use Howard Gardner's nine intelligences⁵ as a framework (see Table 1, above), you may see them differently.

Someone who did not do all that well academically may have excellent interpersonal intelligence and be really good at getting the best out of other people. Someone who is not strong on linguistic intelligence may be superb in visual/spatial areas, and be able to develop models and graphs that communicate really effectively. By recognising and working with a whole range of intelligences you will get the best out of individuals and enhance the effectiveness and scope of the team.

Another inclusive approach to seeing individuals at their best lies in team roles. Whether you use Meredith Belbin's famous model or one of the others – like Peter Honey's⁶ (see Table 2, above) – you have a framework for looking at and valuing a whole range of essential contributions. You can look at a team and see the individual shortcomings ...

Sam never comes up with a new idea, and Kim is not too good at making tough decisions, and Alex keeps going off at a tangent, and Jo criticises everything you suggest.

... or you can see the complementary strengths at work ...

Table 2: Honey's five team roles

Peter Honey defines five team roles.

- The 'leader', who ensures the team has clear objectives and makes sure everyone is involved and committed.
- The 'challenger', who questions effectiveness and presses for improvement and results.
- The 'doer', who urges the team to get on with the job in hand and does practical tasks.
- The 'thinker', who produces carefully considered ideas and weighs up and improves ideas from others.
- The 'supporter', who eases tension and maintains harmony.

Sam keeps us focused on the key tasks and makes sure things get done, and Kim really looks after people and keeps us on an even keel, and Alex is full of bright ideas and inspired lateral thinking, and Jo is very analytical and clear sighted about what is possible and what the difficulties may be.

Another model that helps us to recognise and value different contributions is the Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI; see Table 3, page 35). It has two crucial features that enable us to see people more clearly. First, it is based on the premise that all types are of value and have something to contribute. Then it relates to innate preferences rather than abilities or aptitudes and so involves no judgements about how 'good' or 'bad' anyone is. I can share my psychological preferences with a Nobel prizewinner for astrophysics and an axe murderer without being anything like as clever as the one or nasty as the other!

MBTI is too big a subject to go into in any detail here,⁷ so instead of an outline let me just tell you a true story of its application. Last year, a colleague and I worked with a group of volunteers who were taking on a tough role working with young first-time offenders and trying to keep them out of the criminal justice system. We had a splendid group of people – with a great variety of personalities and opinions. They did not always see eye to eye with us or each other and it was clear that

they would not necessarily find it easy to work in pairs as the role demanded. We worked with Myers Briggs and were able to encourage entirely opposite types to work as a team.

It was particularly striking with one pair who really had very little time for each other in the early stages of the programme. In separate private conversations the enthusiastic improviser told me how great it was to work with someone as organised and reliable and clear about procedure as her colleague, and he told me how good it was to work with someone who had the wonderful ability to come in from left field with a totally unexpected idea or question that he would never have considered. They had learnt to see their difference as a valuable advantage instead of a reason to avoid each other!

Making the most of ALL your staff: a checklist

WHAT ARE YOU SEEING?

- Do you recognise the widest possible range of qualities and contributions?
- Do you value difference as a source of wider skills and perspectives?
- Do you notice the external factors that make an impact on status and contribution?
- Do you listen to positive comments about potential?
- Do you reserve judgement about limitations?
- Do you confuse low self-esteem with low potential?
- Do you respect their priorities and needs?

HOW ARE YOU INVESTING?

- Do you invest in training that meets their needs and matches their style?
- Do you invest time in understanding their motivation and concerns?
- Do you invest in recognition and reward for each aspect of their contribution?

WHAT ARE YOU BUILDING?

- Are you building confidence so they can achieve more?
- Are you building competence so they can deliver their best?
- Are you building loyalty so that you keep a sound and reliable heart to the business?

Looking more closely at what B people have to offer simply reminds us **what good management is all about**

Table 3: The Myers Briggs Type Indicator

The Myers Briggs Type Indicator is based on a Jungian model and explores innate preferences in four areas:

- where you focus your energy – and where you get your energy from
- how you prefer to obtain information and perceive the world
- how you prefer to make judgements and take decisions
- how you prefer to relate to the outside world.

Finally, consider Valmai Bowden's career states model described earlier and in Figure 1 (see page 32).

- Are the individuals you are looking at in a stage of their careers where they have chosen to ease back a little?
- Are they getting what they need from their jobs?
- Are they unambitious because they are really happy and fulfilled with their current achievements at present?
- Or are they in a backwater and needing help to move on?

One of the crucial elements of Bowden's dynamic model is that individuals will move between the states but sometimes need management support and encouragement to do it successfully. So respect their current needs and priorities, and recognise when they change.

INTO THE BOX?

But wait a minute. Having said we should avoid prejudice and stereo typing, aren't I suggesting putting everyone into a series of boxes which may be another way of limiting their potential? *He is an extroverted organiser and doer with strong visual/spatial intelligence – and currently preoccupied with organising his daughter's wedding. I know just what to do with him!*

However, that is not what I am proposing. My belief is that the frameworks suggested are there as a starting point – along with many other sound tools and instruments you will be aware of. When we recognise and reward people's strengths and preferences, we can offer them ways to work and develop that grow from those strengths and respect those preferences. It is not about putting them into a box, but giving them a solid platform on which to stand.

INVEST AND BUILD

So now you have a solid basis for investing in individuals in a way that will work better for them – and therefore for you. And because you understand their drivers and needs better you have a basis for building their self-confidence and competence.

And, of course, everything I have said actually applies to ALL your staff. This approach will help you to make the most of the stars and get good performances out of even the most entrenched members of the awkward squad. All the time I have been writing this I have been thinking, 'Come on Clare, there must be more to this. This is just about good management: see what is really happening, respect people as individuals, and recognise and reward their contributions.' But the more I look at it, the more I am convinced that I am right about this.

The reason these basic management principles come out so strongly when we look at the B people is that the stars will nearly always do well – their own drive and determination will take them there (although *there* may not be with you if you get it wrong) and

we can all make excuses for the failures of the awkward squad. But the B people are always with us and often taken for granted. Looking more closely at what they have to offer simply reminds us what good management is all about. •

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