

People Behind the Projects: Roles, Personalities, and Cultures in International Development Work

6.6.2025

International development projects are much more than strategic plans, budgets, and work packages. At their core, they are human endeavors — collaborative efforts between individuals from different countries, cultures, disciplines, and institutions. Whether the goal is to internationalize research, promote innovation, or solve cross-border challenges, success depends on understanding both who is involved and how they work together.



Photo: Teamwork, Source: SEAMK Image Bank

This article gives insights about the personalities and team roles that frequently appear in international projects, enriched by the Belbin Team Roles (Belbin, 2010) framework and Geert Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010). These models help explain not only individual behavior but also how diverse teams can function — or fail — when navigating cultural complexity.

Diverse Roles in International Projects

In today's complex and collaborative landscape of international research, development and innovation (RDI), success rarely depends on individual brilliance alone. It requires deeper understanding about roles, complementary strengths, and how people work together (Salas et. al, 2005). Drawing from Belbin's team role theory (Belbin 2010), this overview explores six key roles that commonly emerge in European and global RDI initiatives. Whether navigating the complexities of a Horizon Europe project or co-developing strategies within a European University Alliance (European Commission, 2024) like HEROES, understanding these roles helps teams harness their collective potential and deliver meaningful results more effectively.

The following role profiles illustrate how different personalities contribute to the success of large-scale RDI initiatives. Each role plays a distinct part in shaping vision, ensuring delivery, maintaining team cohesion, and driving innovation across borders.

1. The Visionary (Belbin: Plant / Resource Investigator)

The Visionary is the team's creative engine. Like Belbin's Plant, they generate new ideas, while also acting as

a Resource Investigator, exploring opportunities and partnerships. Visionaries often lead conceptualization and strategy in Horizon Europe projects, university alliances, or large-scale research, development, and innovation (RDI) ventures.

Visionaries are known for their innovation, future orientation, and big-picture thinking. However, they may overlook implementation details or lose interest after the initial planning phase.

2. The Organizer (Belbin: Implementer / Completer Finisher)

Without the Organizer, ideas would remain on the drawing board. Combining the discipline of the Implementer with the attention to detail of the Completer Finisher, they manage the practicalities—timelines, reporting, budgeting, logistics.

Organizers bring efficiency, strong organizational skills, and a focus on quality control to the team. They can, however, struggle with ambiguity or resist excessive change.

3. The Diplomat (Belbin: Teamworker / Coordinator)

When collaboration stretches across institutions and borders, relational skills are vital. The Diplomat aligns with Belbin's Teamworker, who promotes harmony, and the Co-ordinator, who facilitates consensus. They ensure voices are heard and misunderstandings are avoided.

Diplomats contribute empathy, effective communication, and intercultural sensitivity. Yet, they might avoid necessary conflict in an effort to maintain harmony.

4. The Innovator (Belbin: Plant / Specialist)

The Innovator brings fresh ideas and often deep technical knowledge. They may resemble the Specialist, who contributes niche expertise, and the Plant, who brings originality. Innovators are commonly found in RDI settings, especially within European University Alliances like HEROES (HEROES European University Alliance, 2024).

Innovators offer novel thinking and deep subject expertise that enrich the team's capacity for problem-solving. On the downside, they may resist standard procedures or collaborative teamwork.

5. The Pragmatist (Belbin: Monitor Evaluator)

The Pragmatist plays the role of the Monitor Evaluator—analytical, sober, and realistic. They help the team avoid groupthink, challenge assumptions, and ask, "Is this really feasible?"

Pragmatists provide critical thinking, objectivity, and heightened risk awareness. Nonetheless, they can sometimes appear overly cautious or emotionally detached.

6. The Connector (Belbin: Resource Investigator / Co-ordinator)

The Connector thrives on networking and opportunity finding. A blend of the Resource Investigator and Coordinator, they unlock synergies and keep the team connected to broader ecosystems—regional partners, funding agencies, industry, and policymakers.

Connectors excel at relationship-building, adaptability, and offering an external perspective. However, they may become distracted by novelty or spread themselves too thin across projects.

Together, these roles form a dynamic ecosystem essential to international project success. The Visionary initiates direction, the Organizer ensures execution, the Diplomat maintains cohesion, the Innovator pushes boundaries, the Pragmatist ensures realism, and the Connector opens doors. Recognizing and valuing these diverse contributions not only strengthens collaboration but also enhances the overall impact of international RDI efforts. As European University Alliances and global partnerships evolve, teams that strategically blend these roles will most probably be best positioned to innovate, adapt, and lead.

The Cultural Layer: Insights from Hofstede

While personality plays a key role in team dynamics, cultural values also shape how individuals behave in groups. Dutch social psychologist Geert Hofstede identified six dimensions that vary across national cultures and directly impact collaboration in international development projects (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010).

One of the key dimensions is **Power Distance**, which refers to how much inequality and hierarchy are accepted in a culture. In high power distance societies, team members may expect a clear chain of command and defer to authority figures. In contrast, low power distance cultures often promote flat structures and informality. Another influential dimension is **Individualism versus Collectivism**. In individualistic cultures, people tend to prioritize personal goals and autonomy, whereas in collectivist societies, group harmony, shared responsibility, and loyalty are emphasized. Additionally, the level of **Uncertainty Avoidance** reflects how comfortable a culture is with ambiguity and risk. Cultures with high uncertainty avoidance prefer detailed planning, structure, and predictability, while those with lower scores may be more open to change and improvisation.

Other dimensions also influence teamwork and leadership styles. **Masculinity versus Femininity** distinguishes cultures that value assertiveness, competition, and material success (masculine) from those that emphasize cooperation, quality of life, and caring for others (feminine). The **Long-Term versus Short-Term Orientation** dimension contrasts a focus on future rewards, perseverance, and adaptability with a preference for tradition, immediate outcomes, and social obligations. Finally, **Indulgence versus Restraint** describes the extent to which societies allow free gratification of human desires. In indulgent cultures, expressing emotions and enjoying life is more accepted, while restrained cultures tend to emphasize self-discipline and control.

The above dimensions are now reviewed vis-à-vis HEROES partner countries in the following Table 1. Recognizing these dimensions helps international project teams navigate communication styles, leadership expectations, and collaboration dynamics. For example, a partner from a highly individualistic and low power distance culture may expect open co-creation and shared decision-making, whereas a partner from a collectivist and high-power distance culture might prefer structured coordination led by a designated authority figure. Cultural awareness not only prevents misunderstandings but also unlocks the creative and adaptive potential of truly international cooperation.

Table 1. Geert Hofstede’s Dimensions applied to HEROES countries.

Country	Power Distance	Individualism vs. Collectivism	Masculinity vs. Feminity	Uncertainty Avoidance	Long-Term Orientation vs. Short-Term Normative Orientation	Indulgence vs. Restraint
Belgium	High	High Individualism	Moderate Maculinity	High	Moderate Long-Term Orientation	Moderate Indulgence
Czech Republic	Moderate	Moderate Individualism	Moderate Macsculinity	High	Moderate Long-Term Orientation	Moderate Indulgence
Denmark	Low	High Individualism	Low Masculinity (High Feminity)	Low	High Long-Term Orientation	High Indulgence
Finland	Low	High Individualism	Low Masculinity (High Feminity)	High	High Long-Term Orientation	High Indulgence
Germany	Moderate	High Individualism	High Masculinity	High	High Long-Term Orientation	Moderate Indulgence
Netherlands	Low	High Individualism	Low Masculinity (High Feminity)	Moderate	High Long-Term Orientation	High Indulgence
Lithuania	Moderate to High	Moderate Individualism	Moderate Masculinity	High	Moderate Long-Term Orientation	Low Indulgence
Portugal	High	Low Individualism	Moderate Masculinity	Very High	Low Long-Term Orientation	High Indulgence
Sweden	Very Low	High Individualism	Very Low Masculinity (High Feminity)	Low	High Long-Term Orientation	High Indulgence

Based on the Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions, there are intercultural challenges and actionable strategies that the HEROES European University Alliance can use to foster effective collaboration across its diverse membership as highlighted in the Table 2.

Table 2. Strategic Implications for HEROES Collaboration.

Challenge	Opportunity/Approach
Differing views on authority & hierarchy	Use hybrid governance models that accommodate both flat and directive expectations.
Contrasting communication & work styles	Foster intercultural training and set clear but flexible protocols.
Varying tolerance for risk and ambiguity	Provide structured frameworks with room for experimentation.
Differences in motivation & success metrics	Develop shared values and inclusive key performance indicators (KPIs.)
Diverse time horizons and planning styles	Balance short-term deliverables with long-term roadmaps.

With partner institutions representing a wide range of cultural profiles—from low to high power distance, and from highly individualistic to more group-oriented—understanding these differences is essential for designing

inclusive and productive collaboration frameworks.

For instance, differing expectations regarding leadership and hierarchy necessitate **hybrid governance models** that balance decentralized, consensus-driven decision-making with clear guidance where appropriate. Similarly, variations in uncertainty avoidance levels highlight the importance of combining **structured planning** with **creative flexibility**, allowing room for innovation while maintaining reliability. Contrasting communication styles and motivational drivers also call for **intercultural training**, **shared performance metrics**, and a nuanced approach to time horizons—ensuring that both short-term outputs and long-term vision are addressed. Overall, the strategies listed in the table aim to transform cultural diversity into a strength by creating adaptable and culturally intelligent and acceptable approaches to the HEROES Alliance partners and personnel. Cultural awareness not only prevents misunderstandings but also unlocks the creative and adaptive potential of truly international cooperation.

Building Effective International Teams

Successful international teams blend different strengths, personalities, and cultural perspectives. Effective teamwork requires not only technical expertise but also a deep understanding of team dynamics and cultural differences. Tools like Belbin's team roles help project managers and team leaders recognize the unique ways individuals contribute to a team—whether through creativity, coordination, or attention to detail—thus enabling more balanced and effective collaboration. At the same time, Hofstede's cultural dimensions framework offers (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010) insights into the underlying value systems that shape communication styles, attitudes toward hierarchy, and decision-making across cultures. By using both tools in tandem, leaders can foster trust, reduce misunderstandings, and build cohesive teams that leverage diversity as a strength.

At SEAMK and within the HEROES European University Alliance, we recognize that investing in team understanding — beyond just expertise — creates stronger, more innovative, and more resilient partnerships. Whether you identify as a Visionary, a Pragmatist, or a Diplomat, your role matters. And so does your cultural lens.

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