



THE IMPORTANCE OF ROLE

BY
REBECCA REYNOLDS

REBECCA
REYNOLDS
CONSULTING



HOW WE BRING PEOPLE IN TO OUR ENDEAVORS – NO MATTER WHAT THEY ARE – DETERMINES WHAT WE ARE ABLE TO ACHIEVE.



As conveners of any human gathering, whether a team, an organization, or a party at our home, our mission is to create the right combination of people to achieve the desired result. When we find the right mix, and bring them together in a way that recognizes each individual and his or her role as part of the group, we move toward our collective purpose with greater ease. And we achieve more together than we could separately, whether our aim is simply to enjoy an evening together or to change the world.

At the core of this practice of bringing people in well is the concept of role. Note the use of the word “role” here, rather than “job.” This is intentional. The focus on role has myriad benefits for both the host and the guest.

First, people work at a job, but they play a role. What’s the difference?

Fifty years ago, work meant a relationship between companies and their employees, which were often paternalistic, mutually committed, and lifelong. The result of the relationship was a job - which was a kind of resting place, providing both financial security and identity, and bestowed by someone in power. Today we see work differently. The boundary between work and life is ever more porous with home offices, telecommuting, and 24/7 access.

This fluidity means people can do more than one job, can start their own business from home, can work from an ocean away – which is changing what “workplace” and “job” mean. Rather than a resting place for life, people are looking for the places where they can express themselves and grow as human beings, while contributing to something greater. And this means they choose their work environment, and the role they will play there, as much as the employer chooses them.



People in search of a great role are looking to be inspired by it, and to see how it will enable them, not only to utilize what skills they have, but to develop beyond them.

For this reason, a well-described role inspires much more than by a To Do list. Unfortunately, too many employers still use job descriptions that are really just a list of duties.

People working to a task list constantly need to be given new tasks, which takes time for the supervisor and also diverts that individual from her/his own role. This is both inefficient and tedious.

The urge to bring in someone new does often stem from the realization that we don't currently have someone to do something. There's a sense of urgency about it, which is good since that demonstrates its importance. But like most perceived problems, the reaction is to hurry up and fix it.

Rushing into a search without the foundation of what the role is, a clear description of its purpose and the contribution it will make, and how it will fit into the team or department or organization as a whole will likely result in an unsuccessful search, or worse, a bad hire.

So, ideally, we want to bring people in who can be very good at their role and all that it involves, rather than simply able to accomplish a set of tasks. And to attain this end, we need to begin with a carefully considered description of the role.



So, what's the difference between a job and a role description? As an example, a duty on a job description might read, "Schedule team meetings." The more effective role-based approach sees past each discrete task to the purpose behind it: "This role's purpose is to cultivate collaboration and a sense of community as an intrinsic part of how our team operates." Not only does the purpose enliven how the person will schedule the meetings, but it also enables the team to discover the character—not just qualifications—of the person who will fill the role well.

The best organizations routinely manage to role as a way to empower people not only to get tasks done, but to activate themselves within their role. This encourages the individual to explore new ways to play the role to increase efficiency and results. An emphasis on role actually fosters creativity and innovation, which are premium qualities in these changing times.

And that brings up another core benefit of role: it signals impermanence – no one plays the same role forever. Why is this important? Change: people, situations, the world.

Within this changing context, it's helpful to begin from the idea that all roles are evolving, as are the people playing them. In this way, the old employer as King and employee as vassal is replaced by a partnership, the goal of which is the evolving contribution of the worker resulting from his/her own development. The focus on role helps us all embrace the fluidity of our work lives, and enables us to expect and prepare for the day when the role no longer fits. This is the new paradigm – work as growth and change, with remarkable contributions the result.

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ABOUT

ADVANCING INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY TO BRING ABOUT LARGE-SCALE CHANGE

Author, Rebecca Reynolds is CEO and Principal of RRC, a firm specializing in supporting large-scale change endeavors.



Reynolds is a pioneer in building individual and group capability to achieve visionary leadership and strategy, collaboratively developed alignment on innovative solutions, and institutional rigor in their implementation.

Reynolds acts as strategic adviser to executive leaders on complex business and leadership challenges across industries as diverse as natural resources, the arts, public policy, and IT, on issues involving diverse stakeholders and long-term effects.

RRC advances visionary strategy development and then builds the requisite capacity to achieve it. Core capacity areas include executive leadership advancement, governance redesign, IT solutions, human capital development, and collaborative process—all to enable success in dynamic and complex environments with long-term impact.

Founded in 1991, RRC has served hundreds of clients in the government and non-governmental sectors on a broad range of issues. Government clients include the USDA Forest Service, the National Park Service, the Bureau of Land Management, and the US Environmental Protection Agency, as well as collaborations involving the spectrum of stakeholder interests on land management and business enterprise issues.

A photograph of a theater interior. The stage is dark with a large, detailed mural depicting a landscape with a tree and figures. In the foreground, several rows of empty theater seats are visible, with a few people standing in the aisle. The lighting is dim, creating a dramatic atmosphere.

**APPROACHING
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FOR ADVANCEMENT
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