



Ready - Aim - Fire *Balancing the team for quality results*

Geof Cox

Ready - Aim - Fire derives from the way to fire a gun. Before pulling the trigger you want to make sure that you know what it is that you are going to shoot, at and that you have the appropriate weapon. It is not very effective in warfare to shoot at high altitude aircraft with a rifle, and it is also not very effective to use a missile on a rifle range. The Ready stage of the weapons procedure makes sure that you have all of the possible information and options available before taking Aim.

Aiming involves selecting the right weapon for the job, focusing on the target, and taking aim. The element of chance is reduced by the selection process and the activity is to now eliminate all other options and possibilities, close the mind to all distractions and focus on the target. Only when the first two stages of Ready - Aim have been correctly completed is the order given to go into action - Fire.

If one of these steps is missed out or not completed properly then mistakes are made, and chaos often ensues. In the dangerous arena of warfare, these mistakes often have catastrophic consequences. Innocent people get injured because the target is not properly identified - even to the extent that in warfare you kill people on your own side. It is no wonder that military training programmes put so much emphasis on following the right procedures and the terms of reference for their involvement.

Ready - Aim - Fire in problem solving

I do not want to suggest that all organisations should be run on military lines, though there are a number of parallels and lessons that are applied, and Ready - Aim - Fire is one of them. The approach that limits mistakes in weapons deployment can apply to problem solving and decision making to limit mistakes in decision making. So how does Ready - Aim - Fire work in problem solving?

First complete the Ready stage: identify the target - the problem that needs to be solved or the decision that needs to be made. This means gathering all the information that you need to identify the scope of the problem, defining its limits and collecting ideas on options available. Once this stage is complete, then move on to the Aiming stage. Choose the best solution or

strategy from the information that you have amassed in the previous stage. (Very often by defining the problem and thinking about what is needed, the solution becomes much easier to identify.) Once the solution or strategy is identified, then go into action - Fire.

It is a simple process. However, it is a process that most of us find difficult to follow in practice, either individually or when we are involved in group work or in organisations. That is because of our own personal preference for working favours one or other of the three steps. We may like collecting data and developing options and therefore never get out of the Ready stage. We may favour analysis and get so paralysed by the process that we take no action. Or we may favour action and jump too readily to conclusions. Whatever our preference, we are unlikely to follow the balanced approach of Ready - Aim - Fire, unless we understand the benefits and take some positive action to learn to include the other steps. This is where a deeper understanding of our preferences when working in teams is important.

Team process roles

Each of us takes on two roles when we work in a team. There the task role—*what* we do in a team, and a process role—*how* we choose to do it. Research on what makes teams effective identify a number of different roles, ranging from the person who generates ideas to the person who finishes the job. We each prefer a particular role, and will tend to follow that role in any team that we work in, *whether or not it is appropriate for the success of that team*. The following table lists these roles and their respective characteristics.



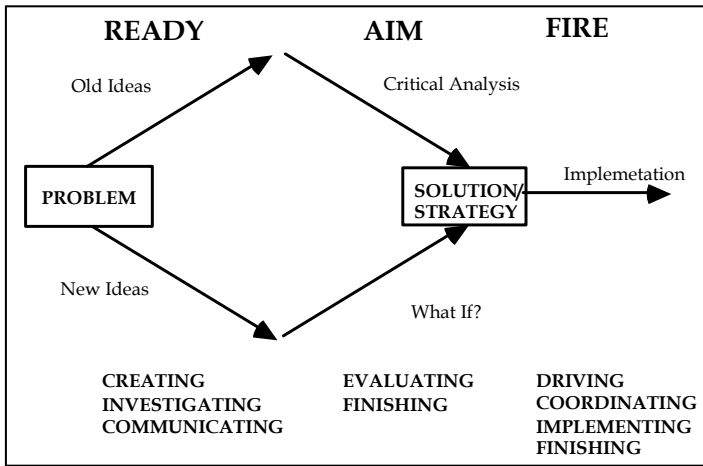
Process role	Characteristics
Creating	Creating people like generating ideas and creativity. They are interested in developing new concepts and options, often taking offence when their ideas are rejected. They do not like carrying out tasks or making decisions (but have some ideas on how you might do it...)
Investigating	Investigating does not have the primary creativity of Creating, the inputs are not brand new ideas, but are options and information from outside the team (often other people's ideas) which are new and innovative to the team. This is secondary creativity, and critically, creativity based in the real world.
Evaluating	The Evaluating process role carries the primary responsibility for weighing up the data and options and asking the 'what if' questions that allow for the correct decisions to be made. This critical judgement role often leads to conflict when experienced as tactless criticism or cold, unfeeling analysis or blocking.
Co-ordinating	Co-ordinating draws action together on an objective basis to keep focused on the outcome. Task and objective focused, this role takes on the mantle of chairing team meetings and discussions, ensuring everyone is involved and delegating tasks.
Driving	Driving uses energy to shape the decision into action, challenging inertia and time-wasting, and galvanising people into action to achieve results. Often in conflict with other team members for the informal leadership of the team, and sometimes using the role for self-promotion.
Implementing	Implementing draws up schedules and action plans to ensure that the task is well organised. Hard working and using practical common sense, the implementing role is not concerned with what the decision is, so will often push for them to be made too quickly, or jump into action without thinking.
Finishing	The Finishing process role is concerned with constraints and completion of tasks. Part of that energy is directed to making sure that the strategy or decision is feasible - that there is enough time and other resources to complete the task. The other part is directed into action - actually doing the task of completing and finishing.
Communicating	Communicating works creatively around relationships. This is the role concerned with team spirit, working with individuals to overcome internal conflicts, smooth relationships and stop individual feelings get in the way of team cohesion. Mostly carrying out this role quietly and behind the scenes, therefore tending to be undervalued in their contribution.

Each of the individual team process roles is vital to the successful working of the team. The absence of any one role will weaken the team. Equally, the presence of two people in one process role or a very strong person in a process role may produce imbalances that make the team less successful. The ideal team has one person strongly representing each of the team process roles and every person understanding and valuing the role of each other person.

There are three process roles aligned with the Ready stage: Creating, Investigating and Communicating. All three process roles are more concerned with the ideas and the data than they are with the implementation of any of them. People who are strong in these process roles find them difficult to follow any routine, are bored with carrying out projects and often find it difficult to make decisions between options. They much prefer to allow others to make the decision and carry out the plan while they carry on developing options and amassing data.

The analytical process of Aim is only favoured by two of the team process roles, and in the case of Finishing, that is only a part process role. Once again, individuals who have a strong preference for one of the Aiming process roles will value that function more than any other. They are not concerned with idea generation or options. In fact they often see new ideas as being irrelevant to the process of making a correct decision.

The majority of the process roles in the team process role analysis are action roles. They are concerned with the Fire process of implementing the decision. This 'majority' vote in a well-balanced team can cause an overemphasis on action, unless there is a clear understanding and valuing of the previous two stages. Coupled with the strength of influence of the Co-ordinating and driving roles, and especially in the fast-moving environment of today's business, the tendency to jump into doing without thinking is overwhelming.



Fire-Fire-Fire

With imbalance, either in the make up of the team, or in its lack of understanding and valuing of the need for process balance, the implications are clear to see. Despite the changes being wrought in management style and culture over recent years, most organisations are still dominated by action-oriented managers who continue to recruit and promote in their own image. The demand is for action, often without thought—*Fire, Fire, Fire*. In the military context this is tantamount to firing a machine gun in all directions in the hope that you hit the target. The results are catastrophic, and often the target itself is missed. The same happens in teams, and even in whole organisations.

An example from the oil industry involved a maintenance crew, who for years continually modified, adjusted and worked on a piece of equipment that, when reviewed properly, would never work effectively. It had been designed for one environment (a refinery) and was installed where the conditions were different (an offshore oil platform). The maintenance and operating management were so concerned with the day to day that they were incapable of stepping back to see the bigger picture. The teams were composed almost entirely of Fire roles.

Ready-Fire and Ready-Fire-Aim

Many organisations have woken up to the need to be innovative and inject creativity into their task focus. This is great, but many efforts fail when someone leaps at the first creative idea and then implements it, often with disastrous results. Ready-Fire then often becomes Ready-Fire-Aim, when the aiming is at the poor individual or team that implemented the new idea and failed. Shooting the messenger is not a satisfactory way of implementing feedback and innovation! In all of the organisations where the CEO is telling staff 'it's OK to make mistakes', you will find the staff with their heads down behind the barricades waiting to see what happens when the first person makes a mistake. It takes a long time to change from a blame culture.

There is a positive side to Ready-Fire-Aim, and that is in piloting ideas - doing something and then making the adjustments from the learning derived from the pilot in fast-cycle repeat of the process. But this is difficult to implement in organisations where there has been a strong culture of 'right first time' or low risk taking. The trick is to keep the iterative process moving at a pace, otherwise people will fall back into traditional processes of looking for the perfect solution, or not taking risk. Just think of the Toyota Creative Idea Suggestion Scheme – it nets over 2 million suggestions a year from 95% of the workforce – and it tries out around 90% of the ideas. That's fast cycle innovation.

Ready-Ready-Ready and Aim-Aim-Aim

The highly creative or overly cautious teams don't occur very often. You find the creative teams in organisations that are by their nature creative – advertising agencies and design organisations, for example. You buy their creativity, but at a risk – the risk of the idea not working, the cost of implementing the idea escalating, the changing of specifications up to the last minute (and often beyond). Aim-Aim-Aim teams don't get much done, so they tend not to survive, except in small naysayer groups controlling investment funding or auditing operations.

Balancing for success

The essential action to make the team work effectively, even in a team where each of the process roles is represented, is that each member of the team must value each other's process role and not play their own process role to a point where it becomes dysfunctional. That means each team member understanding their own process role and the importance of that process role in the team performance; understanding everyone else's process role and their value and place in the team performance; how the process roles work together and balance each other; and how they relate to the problem solving process.

Very few teams in existence will be balanced in the team process roles. Because they will have been assembled on other criteria, the team process roles will be mixed and there will be a bias towards one of the stages of the Ready - Aim - Fire process. These teams will have an even greater problem to follow a balanced decision making process, and will be less effective. Team leaders can also lead the team into inappropriate action by over-valuing her or his own preferred process role.

One could envisage that the most effective team would be one that had a balance of all of the process roles where each person understood and valued the other's process role, but also operated on a self managed basis. Leadership would be shared in the team and the leader at any particular moment would be the person with the team process role most appropriate for the stage of the problem solving process.

Thus, Creating and/or Investigating might take the initial lead. Evaluating would lead the team to a decision with Finishing checking that the decision is feasible given the resource constraints. To get into action, the leadership would be shared between Driving and Co-ordinating who would keep the team focused on the outcome and objective with sufficient drive and enthusiasm to complete the task. At the same time Implementing would schedule the work and lead the team in getting the task complete, and Finishing would ensure that all of the loose ends were tied up and the project completed on schedule and on budget. Finally, should any conflict occur throughout the project, Communicating would take the lead in developing a solution and recreating harmonious working relationships.



A flight of fancy, perhaps. Though my experience is that where these ideas of team balance and the problem solving sequence have been put across in a work situation, even imbalanced teams have adopted such a pattern of working. No longer is the most senior person the leader of the team. The leadership choice is made on the ability of the individual to co-ordinate a project or on the basis of their suitability for the stage of the process. Leadership is not fixed, it is a flexible activity shared by the whole team.

But as most realities will be that the team you have will not have a natural balance of process roles, we need to have a way of creating that balance before considering sharing leadership. Again, you will probably not be able to re-form your team to create a natural balance - even if you were given a clean sheet, the likelihood of finding eight people in the organisation who were suitably qualified and with the right preference is the proverbial needle in a haystack. Corporate recruitment policies will mean that there is a bias to the organisation's preference for Ready, Aim or Fire. So how do we make best use of the hand we have been dealt? Three ways:

- 1 Teams can learn to balance their roles by using the flexibility of team members who close secondary preferences. The closer the second preference, the easier it will be for that person to act up that role and help the team balance; the wider the gap, the greater the difficulty. If no-one has the second preference to fill the gap, or only with a remote second preference, then another option needs to be tried...
- 2 The team can import the missing role from another part of the organisation when it is needed. Very often there is someone who is renowned for being creative, or evaluative, or for putting together great action or project plans. When that role is required in the problem

solving process – bring that individual into the team on a temporary basis. If the role doesn't exist in the organisation – bring in a consultant. Many organisations now see the role of chairing a meeting (part of the Co-ordinating role) to be so critical to the success of a project or board discussion that they bring in professional facilitation help. Then the team or board members can focus on the task discussion. However, this may not be an option for you, in which case...

- 3 The team can use a technique to make up for the lack of a particular role— for instance, using brainstorming when they lack creativity. That way the whole team is taking ownership of the imbalance and doing something about it together. What is important is to recognise the role that is missing. Awareness is 90% of the solution.

Each of us can learn from our role. We can learn to contribute effectively to the problem-solving process. We can learn to make effective alliances with other roles rather than do battle with them. We can learn to value each other's different contributions to an effective team effort. In short, we can start to knock spots off the competition rather than knocking spots off each other.

Geof Cox is Managing Director of New Directions, a consulting company based in Bristol, England. This article is based on ideas from his book Ready-Aim-Fire Problem Solving: A Strategic Approach to Innovative Decision-Making published by Oak Tree Press, Dublin, 2000. ISBN 1-86076-172-0

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Paul Dorrian

The Dorrian Consulting Group
P O Box 100620
Scottsville 3209
KwaZulu – Natal
South Africa.

Tel: +27 (0) 33 386 2916
Fax: +27 (0) 33 386 2851

E – Mail : paul@dorriangroup.com
Website: www.dorriangroup.com

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