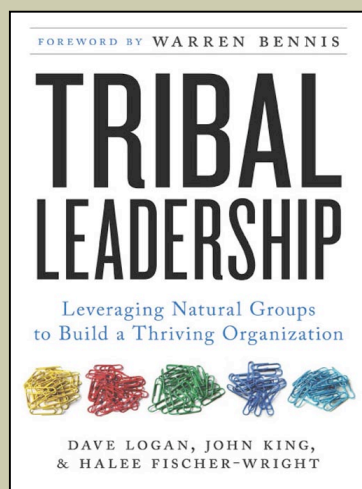


Tribal Leadership: Leveraging Natural Groups to Build a Thriving Organization

Dave Logan, John King
and Halee Fischer-Wright



Why do people in organizations behave the way they do?

And what can you do about it?

I once worked at a small college that hired a new President – a very capable enthusiastic woman – whom the staff did not like. As a body they did not accept her. Try as she might to break through, as a body they resisted. In two years the board that had hired her, fired her. Why did intelligent, reasonable people behave like that? Why did she fail?

A team of consultants, Dave Logan, John King and Halee Fischer-Wright, after ten years of research and interviews with over 24,000 people, believe they have the answer. Their book, *Tribal Leadership* (Collins Business, 2008), identifies the cultures in the workplace that can stymie an organization or carry it to greatness.

The authors identify in people's attitudes on the job five broad stages – from wholly self-defeating misery, "life sucks," to brimming with confidence "Life is Great." Organizations (or the people in them) progress through these stages with most being in the middle levels – often stuck there. The goal of the book is to help you, the "tribal leader," move your middle level culture to the "Life is Great" nirvana where people are at their most productive and satisfied.

But what is a "tribal leader" and what indeed is a "tribe"? It's an odd term for a corporate work place and indeed the book includes a disclaimer:

"Tribalism (in a different sense than we mean the term) has been responsible for torture, war and genocide."

The authors hasten to explain that they use the word "tribe" to describe the close bonding that occurs when people have something strongly in common. And there the merits of their word choice are apparent – this is not just a bunch of acquaintances, this is a group of people who feel bonded together by some common cause. Friendships form naturally wherever people gather – small towns, work teams, industry groups – but once you bond, for whatever reason, you shift from simple friendship to a tribe.

In this sense it harks back to De Tocqueville who long ago observed the compulsion of Americans to associate.

"... they look out for mutual assistance; and as soon as they have found one another out, they combine."¹

He thought it was great, one of the best natural expressions of democracy in action.

The authors of *Tribal Leadership* see this natural tendency having critical impact in the workplace. It matters hugely because the Tribal Leader who understands it can manipulate it – identify the stage a tribe is at and move it forward to the next stage and greater levels of accomplishment.

¹ Alexis de Tocqueville *Democracy in America*, 1840, Vol II, Section 2, Chapter 5 "Of the

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Tribes have five stages they can pass through and the stage they are at is revealed in the language people use. Stage 1 is the despairing "Life sucks"; Stage 2 the not much better "My life sucks." Not much bonding there! The middle stages progress from the individualistic (Stage 3) culture "I'm great and you're not"; to the Stage 4 culture "We're great and they're not" where team work is gelling and members of the group are shifting from individual one-on-one relationships to team achievement.

The book provides helpful tips (or "leverage points" as they call them) for tribal leaders to bring their tribes through each stage (you have to progress stage by stage) until they reach Stage 5 nirvana "Life is Great" and are so wholly customer and service oriented that outsmarting the competition ceases to be an overriding concern. At the same time, thanks to members being perfectly attuned, their performance is dramatically better than it was in their earlier stages of development.

It's a tricky business since, as the authors acknowledge:

"The way to move the entire tribe's performance to the next level is to move the critical mass to the next stage. This process involves moving many people forward, individually, by facilitating them to use a different language, and to shift their behavior accordingly. As that happens, the tribe itself will produce a new, self-sustaining culture."

Culture Rules

The most useful contribution of this book is to bring home the power of culture. The massive research shows how culture can make or break a leader's strategy and without an understanding of where the group is culturally the leader, like that college President, cannot succeed.

Interestingly, the study is in tune with what Peter Drucker wrote 30 years earlier about nonprofit management. In his short book ² – a mixture of his own observations and fascinating interviews with successful leaders – Drucker has made very similar observations, but in the context of nonprofits. It's helpful to recall his key ideas since they can help us translate the work of Logan, King and Fischer-Wright to the nonprofit world.

Drucker has to establish how nonprofits differ from business or government, because the differences present different challenges. His short definition is characteristic of his uncanny genius for clarifying what so many of us find fuzzy and hard to grasp—

"...nonprofit institutions are human-change agents. Their 'product' is a cured patient, a child that learns, a young man or woman grown into a self-respecting adult; a changed human life altogether."

² Peter Drucker, *Managing the Nonprofit Organization, Principles and Practices*, Harper Collins, 1990

“What’s emerging for the future, and I hope for the nonprofit, is not organizing in the traditional fashion – special gifts, special events – but around value groups. Make each one of these value groups an identified market, with their own materials, their own strategies, their own support system.”

That said, Drucker sees tribes as very important. And the distinguishing factor here is that, besides the corporate *internal* tribes, the nonprofit world has all-important *external* tribes to be understood and worked with. Drucker hammers the importance of these multiple constituencies (that is, multiple tribes)—

“..in the non-profit institution there have always been a multitude of groups each with a veto power. A school principal (for example) has to satisfy teachers, the school board, the taxpayers, parents and, in a high school, the students themselves.”

In an interview with Dudley Hafner of the American Heart Association, Drucker (Hafner actually) raises the need to treat each tribe according to its culture. He calls them “value groups”³ but they have the unified, mission driven characteristics you expect of a tribe:

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This is a terrific insight. The leader who can understand the value groups/tribes engaged with his or her non-profit can successfully devise a strategy for moving them to a higher more collaborative stage.

Drucker’s strength was such insights – he could be prescient – but he was known for neglecting to back them up with research. He also tended to stop just when you wanted to know more! The hard-working authors of *Tribal Leadership* have supplied that need – and then some! – and in addition they offer practical tips and tools at each stage, as well as a “cheat sheet” in an appendix which would make an excellent foundation for a tribal strategy.

Insights are important, but, for the entrepreneurial fundraiser, tools are even better.

³ op cit ch. 4 interview of Dudley Hafner, CEO of the American Heart Association.