



Book Tribal Leadership

Leveraging Natural Groups to Build a Thriving Organization

Dave Logan, John King and Hallee Fischer-Wright
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Recommendation

Tribes naturally form within organizations. Wherever people gather to live and work, groups of between 20 and 150 members coalesce – parallel to villages within nations – and progress through five stages of development. Culture consultants David Logan and John King, writing with physician Hallee Fischer-Wright, teach you how tribes and proficient tribal leadership can help you work and play well with others and bolster your career. The authors conducted extensive research on corporate tribes and interviewed many business leaders about the five-stage evolution of tribes within their organizations. Though the report seems somewhat less concrete in identifying exactly how people coalesce to form tribes, it makes for accessible reading, certainly compared to most organizational sociology. *BooksInShort* finds that this exploration of tribes and teams can open readers’ eyes to the way people function within groups. Managers will find it revelatory, as will all those who can succeed only by working and playing well with others.

Take-Aways

- Organizations inevitably develop internal tribes – groups of between 20 and 150 members with interlocking ties.
- These tribes go through five stages of development.
- At Stage One, tribe members believe that life is awful; they feel paranoid and helpless.
- A member of a tribe at Stage Two believes his or her individual life is terrible but is willing to work to improve it.
- At Stage Three, tribe members cultivate “two-person relationships,” compete against others, and believe “I’m great, and you’re not.”
- Most groups and people, however accomplished, remain stuck at Stage Three.
- At Stage Four, tribe members construct “triad relationships” and compete against other companies; they think, “We’re great, and they’re not.”
- At Stage Five, which few tribes achieve, members believe that “Life is great.”
- A tribe can reach Stage Five only if it is already firmly grounded in Stage Four.
- An organization might achieve a higher stage, only to slip back into lower stages.

Summary

Tribes, in Stages

Tribes are factions of between 20 and 150 people that develop wherever humans gather for any purpose, including, but not limited to, business. If you own or work in a company, tribes surround you, complete with their “tribal leaders.” Most people are not aware of these tribes and their influence, but their importance becomes apparent when you realize that “the members of your tribe are probably programmed into your cellphone and your email address book.”

“Every organization is really a set of small towns.”

To “build a better organization,” your leaders’ goal should be to move your firm’s tribes to Stage Four, one step at a time. A few tribes may need to move to Stage Five, which produces industry-changing innovation.

If you are a Tribal Leader, help your co-workers reach higher levels with the goal of attaining Stage Four. Sometimes this process includes employees reaching an epiphany – for example, suddenly understanding that parking their careers at their current level is unfulfilling or impeding their goals. To aid this “journey through the stages,” coach members how to develop insights into their “dominant cultures,” the language they use and the associations they develop. Tribes within organizations mature in five stages.

Stage One: A Dog-Eat-Dog World

This is the lowest stage, the one in which “street gangs” and correctional institutions operate. Stage One tribe members believe that “life sucks,” that the odds are stacked against them and that they are helpless in a hostile world. Just 2% of tribes stay at Stage One.

“Tribes in companies get work done – sometimes a lot of work – but they don’t form because of work. Tribes are the basic building block of any large human effort.”

At this point, tribe members see no options in their lives; they feel stuck and think life is terrible. They believe themselves to be singular and the world to be particularly hostile toward them. Many people can fall into Stage One, if only temporarily. Encourage people at this juncture to change their language and to see life’s possibilities. Encourage them to network with co-workers who have positive attitudes and to cut social ties with other Stage One tribe members.

Stage Two: They’re Out to Get Me

Workers at this level believe “My life sucks.” They are cynical and disengaged; they complain but offer no solutions. Approximately 25% of company tribes are stuck at Stage Two, where employees generally behave in a reactive manner. They do what the company requires and no more. Often their jobs provide few opportunities to be inventive. They try to dodge responsibility for their work and actions.

“Every tribe has a dominant culture, which we can peg on a one-to-five scale, with Stage Five being the most desirable.”

If these workers receive promotions, they will stay at the firm; if they don’t, they will eventually leave. Stage Two employees who are recent escapees from Stage One remain at risk of falling back. Take five steps to coach employees in Stage Two:

1. **Outlaw “Stage One behavior”** – Make the consequences of such deportment clear.
2. **Tell employees you appreciate them** – Ask open-ended questions to find out how you can improve their situation.
3. **Hear the problem and seek a cure** – Meet with your unhappy workers privately to address their grievances and to find solutions.
4. **Help employees evolve** – Identify employees at higher levels of Stage Two – that is, those who appear willing to change – and develop them.
5. **Encourage Stage Two employees to interact** – They should establish “dyadic relationships,” or two-person interactions, with colleagues who wish to improve.

Stage Three: Nobody Appreciates What I Do

This large cohort accounts for 49% of tribes. Members believe “I’m great, and you’re not.” Many members of Stage Three teams are high achievers who compete against one another. These “lone warriors” bemoan the inadequacies of those working around them. Nearly half of working professionals operate in “the zone of personal accomplishment.”

“The essence of advancing stages is giving up the language and behavior of one zone and adopting the practices of the next.”

While Stage Three workers can be talented overachievers, they may suffer self-doubt and try to resolve it by competing against their peers. Their strong professional and personal ambitions erase leftover Stage Two thinking. Even as supervisors, they feel bereft of organizational support. They believe that they are good performers but that the firm does not recompense them sufficiently.

“Most anthropologists say that human society started at Stage One, clans scratching out an existence while fighting with one another.”

Stage Three has seven hallmarks: 1) forming solely dyadic or two-party relationships, which can be exhausting to maintain; 2) accumulating intelligence without sharing it; 3) refusing to connect members of their network with one another; 4) using clandestine networks to gain inside information; 5) employing aggressive “military or mafia” terminology; 6) seeking out methods and strategies to increase their effectiveness and feed their sense of greatness; and 7) discussing values only in terms of their own priorities.

“As long as people are in Stage Two, they believe their destiny is not their own. As a result, they avoid accountability.”

Many Stage Three people remain at this stage their whole lives. To move workers to Stage Four, get them to break their competitive habits. The rush of satisfaction they get from a new achievement or from besting a team member is holding them back. Help them develop beyond this point by teaching them the following:

- **People are talented in various ways** – Stage Three performers should not apply their stringent standards to everyone. They should lead and inspire, not control.
- **Staying at Stage Three exacts a high price** – Stage Three is limiting. Those stuck there should find a Stage Four role model whose practices they can emulate.

- **Their terminology has a deleterious effect** – Stage Three workers say “I” a lot. They need to move to “we.”
- **They should give up their dyadic relationships** – They should try to form “triads,” or three-person interactions, that can augment their success.

“Tribes emerge from the language people use to describe themselves, their jobs and others.”

These tips alone will not move a person to Stage Four. That often requires an individual to undergo an epiphany: a sudden realization of the inadequacies of Stage Three. This abrupt, personal experience can cause people to question their values, to fear that their careers are going nowhere or to feel exhausted. To lead Stage Three employees through their epiphanies, help them answer these questions:

- **“What have I achieved?”** – People in Stage Three tribes should analyze their victories and determine if they were ephemeral and narrow or long lasting and meaningful. When they identify meaningful victories, they can see the value of their accomplishments in the context of their teams, not just themselves.
- **“How can I fix this?”** – Now that these people know Stage Three isn’t working, help them clarify “What’s next?” Finding this answer is the first step to the next stage.
- **“What’s the real goal?”** – Stage Three people asking this question realize that accomplishments should be collective. They grow by maturing beyond the need to tout their own success and by learning to focus on the organization.
- **“How does a Tribal Leader use power?”** – Stage Three performers should determine on whose behalf they exercise their influence – their own or their tribe’s?

“The gravity that holds people at Stage Three is the addictive ‘hit’ they get from winning, besting others, being the smartest and most successful.”

Stage Three people who work through these questions can advance successfully to Stage Four because they now understand the tribe’s value. Their language changes from “I” to “we,” their two-person networks become triads and they express themselves only in terms of the tribe.

Stage Four: Where Leadership Starts to Happen

The 22% of tribes working at this level believe “We’re great, and they’re not.” Proud of their firm, members compete with other companies, not one another. The person who identifies the tribe’s chief competitor often emerges as the Tribal Leader.

“Power in Stage Four is abundant; the more you give to others, the more you get back.”

When individuals reach Stage Four and understand the worth of their tribe, they often follow one of several routes: They assemble a group of fellow Stage Four members with whom to start a new business, they seek out other Stage Four people in their firm to pursue new projects or they find fellow Stage Fours to help them on an existing project. All three courses lead to new tribes and an explosion of Stage Four behavior and leadership development. At this level, tribes have a strong “sense of their own identity” – their purpose and principles – and they act upon it.

“Stage Five...is marked by ‘life is great’ language, devoid of any competitor. It’s not that competitors don’t exist; it’s that they don’t matter.”

“Core values” and “a noble cause” are important underpinnings of Stage Four. Values connect to meaningful personal experiences and emerge when people respond to such questions as “What are you proud of?” A core value gives a person’s life meaning; an individual needs that to thrive. Learning fellow tribe members’ values and helping them express those touchstones can lend significant strength to a tribe.

“A tribe will seek its own competitor, and the only one who has influence over the target is the Tribal Leader.”

A noble cause is a tribe’s supreme goal, what it desires to be. A tribe’s hopes and desires naturally inspire people to align with one another and make things work. If you aren’t sure of your organization’s noble cause, ask what purpose your activities serve. “What’s working well?” “What’s not working?” “What can we do to make the things that aren’t working work?” and “Is there anything else?” The noble cause will reveal itself in your answers, and you will be able to express it easily, often in a short sound bite. Tribal leadership begins to form when tribe members ask, “What activities will express our values and reach toward our noble cause?”

“Tribal leadership focuses on two things, and only two things: the words people use and the types of relationships they form.”

Having a noble cause can be dangerous. Tribes such as al-Qaeda wreak havoc in service to their beliefs. Such tribes don’t follow a noble cause because they’re obsessed with strict adherence to certain tenets. This is not Stage Four behavior, because it emphasizes agreement; it focuses only on keeping the tribe’s sense of great accomplishment.

“Great leaders, from time to time, need to use shocking methods to strengthen the tribe.”

Stage Four is marked by tribe members’ adherence to triads and extensive networking. A triad offers three benefits: “stability, innovation” and “scalability.” Stability occurs when large groups work together to find solutions to problems – even across tribes – rather than relying on leadership to direct them. Innovation springs up because more diverse voices address issues and think creatively. Scalability occurs when co-workers function as partners who teach one another, rather than as experts who tell one another what to do. At this point, Stage Three individuals have a tendency to feel somewhat intimidated; they prefer to be experts on everything.

Stage Five: Magic

Once your company reaches Stage Four, it might – might – be able to reach Stage Five. At this level, a tribe’s mantra is “Life is great.” These highly evolved groups discard the need to compete and strive solely for the “innocent wonderment” of discovery and accomplishment. Fewer than 2% of tribes operate at Stage Five.

Your “Tribal Strategy”

Ask three questions to determine whether your firm has the right tribal strategy:

1. “What do we want?” helps you determine the result of pursuing your core values and your noble cause.
2. “What do we have?” locates the resources you can call upon.
3. “What will we do?” identifies the behaviors you must employ.

A “company is only as strong as the culture of its tribes.”

Addressing these goals potentially allows your organization to attain Stage Five, where the noble cause is the only thing that matters.

The 1980 US ice-hockey team is a tribe that moved to Stage Five and unexpectedly beat the Soviet Union in the Olympic final. At Stage Five, the seemingly impossible actually occurs: a tribe at this level becomes so accomplished that it inspires others to pursue their own noble causes. A tribe can only achieve Stage Five if it is already firmly grounded in Stage Four.

About the Authors

Dave Logan and **John King** founded CultureSync, a consulting company. Logan teaches at the University of Southern California. King lectures internationally. CultureSync partner **Halee Fischer-Wright**, a physician, teaches at the University of Colorado School of Medicine.
