



## CHAPTER 1

# Corporate Tribes

Every organization is really a set of small towns. If you're from a small town, think of the people there. If you're not, think of, as Don Henley sings, "that same small town in each of us." There are the business executive and the sheriff. There's the town scandal—the preacher's wife and the schoolteacher. There's talk of who will be the next mayor, who will move away, and the price of grain (or oil or the Wal-Mart starting wage). There's the high school, where the popular kid, the son of the town's sheriff, throws a party the weekend his father is away. There are the church crowd, the bar friends, the single people, the book club, the bitter enemies. There are also the ones who are the natural leaders, who explain why the party at the sheriff's house seemed like a good idea at the time and how sorry they are for the beer stains on the carpet.

The people are different in every town, and the roles are never exactly the same. But there are more similarities than differences, and the metaphor itself always holds, from companies in Nebraska to ones in New York or Kuala Lumpur.

We call these small towns tribes, and they form so naturally it's as though our tribe is part of our genetic code. Tribes helped humans survive the last ice age, build farming communities, and, later, cities. Birds flock, fish school, people "tribe."

A tribe is a group between 20 and 150 people. Here's the test for whether someone is in one of your tribes: if you saw her walking down the street, you'd stop and say "hello." The members of your tribe are probably programmed into your cell phone and in your e-mail address book. The "150" number comes from Robin Dunbar's research, which was popularized in Malcolm Gladwell's *The Tipping Point*. When a tribe approaches this number, it naturally splits into two tribes.

Some of the corporate tribes we've seen include the high-potential managers of one of the world's largest financial services companies; the doctors, nurses, and administrators of one of America's most respected healthcare institutions; the research and development division of a mammoth high-tech firm; the operational executives of a major drug company; and the students of the executive MBA program at the University of Southern California.

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, including earning a living. As such, their influence is greater than that of teams, entire companies, and even superstar CEOs. In companies, tribes decide whether the new leader is going to flourish or get taken out. They determine how much work gets done, and of what quality.

Some tribes demand excellence for everyone, and are constantly evolving. Others are content to do the minimum to get by. What makes the difference in performance? Tribal Leaders.

Tribal Leaders focus their efforts on building the tribe—or, more precisely, upgrading the tribal culture. If they are successful, the tribe recognizes them as the leaders, giving them top effort, cultlike loyalty, and a track record of success. Divisions and companies run by Tribal Leaders set the standard of performance in their industries, from productivity and profitability to employee reten-

tion. They are talent magnets, with people so eager to work for the leader that they will take a pay cut if necessary. Tribal Leaders receive so many promotions in such a short time that people often spread buzz that they will be the next CEO. Their efforts seem effortless, leaving many people puzzled by how they do it. Many Tribal Leaders, if asked, can't articulate what they are doing that's different, but after reading this book, you will be able to explain and duplicate their success.

A Tribal Leader many of us know from history is George Washington. His single major contribution was in changing thirteen diverse colonies into one people. If we look into what Washington actually did, he built a single identity (measurable by what people said) to a series of networked tribes. One was the affluent class in Virginia society, perhaps fewer than a hundred people. Another was the Continental Congress, originally fifty-five delegates. The third was the officer class of the Continental Army. Each time, Washington led the group to unity by recognizing its "tribalness," by getting its members to talk about what unified them: valuing freedom, hating the king's latest tax, or wanting to win the fight. As he built the common cause in each tribe, a mission gelled and they embraced "we're great" language. Washington's brilliance in each case was that the man and the cause became synonymous, with the leader shaping the tribe and the tribe calling forth the leader. This is how Tribal Leadership works: the leader upgrades the tribe as the tribe embraces the leader. Tribes and leaders create each other.



Before we move on, a few words about our method. We're at the end of a ten-year set of research studies that involved twenty-four thousand people in two dozen organizations, with members around the world.

We derived each concept, tip, and principle in this book from this research. What moved us, and what we hope moves you, is not the statistical side of the analysis but the people we met along the way—people who live the principles, who make life better for millions of employees, customers, and residents of their communities. As a result, we've written this book around the individuals who moved us.

Our guiding metaphor is this: most popular business books are like log cabins, cozy and warm with a blazing fire. They're comfortable, life affirming, and filled with snapshots of people and moments. They're fun to read, and the principles in them resonate within our experiences as true. The log cabin is built on anecdotes, however, and as we look back to fifty years of them, many have collapsed as times and economic cycles change. Although comfortable, they need structural reinforcement. Another set of books rests on statistical evidence, and while we trust their conclusions, reading them is like visiting a skyscraper with cubicles built in the 1970s, containing steel desks under fluorescent lights that flicker. Their structural integrity stands up during storms, but we find being in them tiring and draining.

We have attempted to put together a book that has the structural integrity of the skyscraper but with Persian rugs, cherrywood tables, floor-to-ceiling windows, perhaps even a stone fireplace or two. In short, you'll be reading about people, but with the assurance that the principles behind the stories are based on research. In presenting our findings, we have done our best to avoid academic concepts like theoretic frameworks and research agendas. When it was necessary to bring in others' research, we went and sat with them (when possible), to bring their personalities into the story as well as their findings. When our research gave us solid conclusions, we sought out people who epitomized what we were seeing in the data, to give a human face to the main points of this book. As you

take this journey with us you'll meet former Amgen CEO Gordon Binder; NASCAR Chairman, Brian France; IDEO Founder, Dave Kelley; Gallup CEO, Jim Clifton; authors Ken Wilber and Don Beck; *Dilbert* creator, Scott Adams; actress Carol Burnett; Nobel Laureate Danny Kahneman; and Mike Eruzione, captain of the 1980 Olympic Gold Medal U.S. Hockey team—the basis of the movie *Miracle*.

We are indebted to these individuals and many others, and to a lineage of research that is fairly new to business. If you want to see the academic side of our research, you might start with Appendix B, which is about the story of our methodology. Simply put, it's that tribes emerge from the language people use to describe themselves, their jobs, and others. For most people, language is something they just live with and don't think about. Tribal Leaders know how to nudge language in a way that makes it morph—just as Washington's efforts created a common tribal language in the colonies, the army, and the Continental Congress. Change the language in the tribe, and you have changed the tribe itself.

As we derived principles and tools we put them to work in companies and organizations that were willing to test new methods. Some worked and some failed. We folded these lessons learned back into our studies, so that what you're reading has a basis in both research and practical experience.

## **A Road Map to Tribal Leadership**

Most people describe Tribal Leadership as a journey, in which they understand themselves and the people around them better and, as a result, know exactly what actions will affect their workplaces.

Most people are blind to tribal dynamics. Our clients have described the moment when it all clicked for them, when they

were able to see their company as a tribe, and suddenly they saw exactly what do to, in the same way George Washington somehow knew what to do more than two hundred years ago. The first part of this book will give you the insights and vocabulary of a Tribal Leader. Chapter 2 introduces the main thrust of this book: tribal stages.

The tribal stages operate like a slow conveyor belt that keeps sticking. When the belt is moving, people naturally move from one stage to the next. The early chapters in this book will remind you of the early stages of your career—the days right after college when you didn't know people and it was hard to find traction for your ideas. You'll recognize some clusters of people who have gotten stuck at this stage and built their part of the tribe accordingly. The vast majority of people become stuck in the middle stages, then seek out tribes that speak their language and do things in a familiar way. The later chapters will describe you on your best days and give you insight into people you know who can make things happen wherever they go.

After the five stages are introduced, later chapters go into each stage, highlighting exactly what actions will affect it and how to know when you're succeeding. Because each stage has a unique set of "leverage points" that will unstick it, it's critical to understand each one. Apply the leverage points incorrectly, and you'll reinforce tribal mediocrity.

This book is written at three different levels. First is the story—the main text of the book. Second are the "technical notes" in the margins, which answer the many questions we've been asked as we explain the Tribal Leadership system; those of you who like detail and fine gradations, we hope, will find these points useful. Third are the "coaching tips," which are specific steps that will accomplish the main goals of the chapter. Also, if you like summaries, turn to

Appendix A—a “cheat sheet” for Tribal Leaders; it gives the key action steps that will help you build great tribes.

We’ve written this book to share everything we’ve learned along the way. The goal of this book is for you to become a Tribal Leader without our help. The lessons we offer are ones we observed around us, so we believe we are students of Tribal Leadership, the same as everyone. That said, we hope you’ll share your successes and failures with us, so that we can learn with you. Appendix C gives our contact information. What we learn from you we’ll make available through our Web site ([www.triballeadership.net](http://www.triballeadership.net)), articles, classes (many of them through the Universities), and speeches.

## **The Goal of Tribal Leadership**

The goal of this book is to give you the perspective and tools of a Tribal Leader: someone who can unstick the conveyor belt—and make it run faster—for whole groups of people, no matter which stage they’re in. The result is more effective workplaces, greater strategic success, less stress, and more fun. In short, the point of this book is for you to build a better organization in which the best people want to work and make an impact.

The means to building great organizations is the use of these “leverage points,” which are ways of unsticking people so that they naturally glide to the next stage. Unstick enough people, and you’ve swapped one set of tribal dynamics for a higher-performing set and a more capable tribe. Each stage gets more done and has more fun than the one before it. The ultimate expression of Tribal Leadership is companies filled with people who know how to unstick themselves and others—a tribe of Tribal Leaders.

We now turn to the main thrust of how to build greater organizations: the five tribal stages.

### **Key Points from This Chapter**

- ◆ A tribe is any group of people between about 20 and 150 who know each other enough that, if they saw each other walking down the street, would stop and say “hello.”
- ◆ They are likely people in your cell phone and in your e-mail address book.
- ◆ A small company is a tribe, and a large company is a tribe of tribes.