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Tribal Leadership: An Interview with David C. Logan and John King

By George Hall

In *Tribal Leadership: Leveraging Natural Groups to Build a Thriving Organization*, authors David C. Logan and John King draw from several decades of consulting experience to examine the corporate cultures at a number of leading companies, including Amgen, Intel, American Express, and Prudential. What makes these companies so successful? Tribes—the groups that naturally form within the company—are the secret to lasting success, the authors say. Birds flock, fish school, and people “tribe.” The authors learned that what separates average tribes from those that excel is culture, and they contend that tribal culture exists in stages, on a scale of 1 to 5, going from undermining to history-making.

In your book you comment, “Roughly 75 percent of tribes are stuck at the stage of *My life sucks or I’m great, but you’re not.*” Do most tribes slow or impede their leader’s forward movement by default? If the rest of the culture is not where you are, for example, is one of your stabilizing anchor points missing?

David Logan (DL): Yes. That is exactly the point that really got me started on this journey. Why, when you go into some environments where leaders seem to do everything wrong, does it still work, get results? It’s because if you go into a Stage 4 tribe, if you get the most bumbling leader and put them into that group, the group is going to compensate for what the leader does. As in your example, if you have a group that is largely composed of Stage 2 or 3 and the leader is talking about infinite potential and “Let’s change the world,” nobody can hear that. No one can understand what they are saying.

John King (JK): I’d like to offer another example from another world. I grew up and came of age in the world of entertainment. There is a term, when you are a performer, called a tough room. A tough room happens when an entertainer goes on stage and they can’t find someone to connect with in the audience. Connecting to just one audience member is not enough. If you can get two to connect with in the audience, then you can actually play your act. But if you don’t have at least two you’ve connected with, you have got a tough room.

Are some companies tough rooms?

JK: Yes. Some companies are indeed tough rooms. A tough room company would be one with an operating state or their center of gravity somewhere around 2.2, 2.3, or 2.5.

In your book you state, “Each person in a tribe is on journey through the stages, and the tribe makes that journey long or short. The job of the tribal leader is to expedite the journey for each person, so that a new critical mass forms at Stage 4. Without any external coaching, people advance through stages very slowly.” How slowly?

DL: People do move through the stages as individuals, but remember, a generation may pass before people get very far. Most of us are going to get to high Stage 3, and that is about the extent of it.

Why is this journey so difficult to complete?

JK: People advance through stages slowly because our educational systems are more focused on training than education. The design of our very first and lowest level of education, kindergarten, involves learning by rote memorization. The purpose of training is to enable the person to use routines and practices that produce results. Most of our educational systems are designed this way. This is very good when you don't want workers thinking for themselves but rather automatically going into action, say in the military, police, or firefighting.

The next level up in the hierarchy of learning is called coaching. Coaching has a different design from training. Coaching encourages you to alter your routines, your practices. We all know that if we alter our practices then our routine will start to fail, results are going to go down. So, many people resist coaching because it will involve altering the practices that are already successful. Now, a level above that—and a really good coach goes to here—is a level called inquiry. The design of an inquiry is for you to have an *Aha*, a *Duh*, or a *Wow* reaction, and for you to derive a principle. When you derive a principle, that insight allows you to coach yourself to alter your practices, affect your training, and impact your routines and enhance your results.

How much work would the average company have to do to upgrade their company culture and achieve your ideal range, where the real bottom-line payoff is achieved?

DL: To answer this question, let's first look at how one typically changes a large organization—say a company of 10,000 people or more. Current best practice indicates that businesses manage change by creating strategic plans, implementing policies, delivering workshops, investing in training and development, firing the low performers and rehiring, or merging in search of synergy. Unfortunately, none of these actions affects the basic, underlying building block of organizations—tribes. If you really wanted to change a large company, you would focus on changing one tribe at a time. There is no magic bullet. Fortunately, one tribe can be changed in a very short order of time. First of all, you have to show them what the system is, what the different culture stages are. You want to get them to assess where they are. You want to get other tribes to assess where they are, almost like a 360-degree feedback survey, but not on the person; on the tribe.

After tribes assess where they are developmentally and there is some basic consensus, the question becomes, "What do you want to do about it?" If the answer to that question is that they don't want to change, there is really nothing you can do. If one tribe is invested in the status quo and doesn't want to change, then move on to the next tribe. Most tribes, however, will want to try something. Taking some action improves their job security, their quality of life, and their productivity. Bottom line—a motivated, open-minded tribe can change very quickly.

It is not uncommon for companies to improve one full culture stage (say Stage 2 to 3 or Stage 3 to 4) in a period of two to three months. That said, you have to realize that the economic benefit of moving a full stage is almost mind blowing (to the company). Our editor, for example, made us pull data out of our book because it seemed hyperbolic. Essentially, if you compare a company that's Stage 3 and bordering on insolvency to an organization that has truly embraced Stage 4, you'll find the Stage 4 culture enormously different. The Stage 4 organization will produce innovations, collaborate, and generally do things that are almost unimaginable in Stage 3.

What sustains top performance? What keeps this process going?

DL: The answer becomes clear if you reframe the question. What is the bottom line? To begin with, you're not just upgrading the tribe and walking away. You're upgrading the tribe until you get them to Stage 4 and then you are launching a strategy, a medium-term strategy that people can hold in their heads, people are excited about, and that does something significant. And as soon as a medium-term strategy is complete, you do it again, and you do it again. And, over time, the strategies are going to get

more complex, add more value. In a nutshell, your employees are going to start reaching for the stars more and more. What is keeping the whole thing going is not culture; it is the desire to make an even greater impact. Culture is simply the means to this end.

Dave Logan is co-founder and senior partner of [CultureSync](#), a management consulting firm specializing in cultural change, strategy, and negotiation. Logan teaches leadership and negotiation in the USC Executive MBA program and is on faculty at the Center for Medical Excellence in Portland, Oregon, and the International Center for Leadership in Finance in Kuala Lumpur.

John King is a founding partner and president of [CultureSync](#). King is part of the leadership development team at Sierra Health Foundation and is on faculty at Collier's University, CB Richard Ellis University, and The California Leadership Institute. John is also a frequent guest lecturer at the USC Marshall School of Business and USC's School of Public Policy, Planning, and Development.

ASTD Links Field Editor **George Hall** teaches in the college of business administration at the University of Phoenix and Strayer University. Hall has also written articles for publisher John Wiley & Sons, which were featured in The 2008 Pfeiffer Annual—Training, edited by Elaine Biech; georgehall@comcast.net.