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Steve Waddell

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

George Hall

Learning and Performing through Hastily Formed Networks

George Roth

The Defining Features of a Megacommunity

Chris Kelly, Mark Gerencser,
Fernando Napolitano,
Reginald Van Lee

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John Ehrenfeld

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Tribal Leadership

An Interview with David C. Logan and John King

GEORGE HALL

In *Tribal Leadership: Leveraging Natural Groups to Build a Thriving Organization* (Collins Business, 2008), authors David Logan and John King draw from several decades of consulting experience to examine the winning corporate culture at Amgen, Intel, American Express, Prudential and other leading companies. What makes these companies so successful? Tribes – the groups that naturally form within the company – are the secret to lasting success. It's a fact of life, say the authors: birds flock, fish school, and people "tribe." The authors learned that what separates average tribes from those that excel is culture. Tribal culture exists in stages, evolving from undermining to history-making. The book contains a wealth of interventions to grow and sustain a winning tribal culture. In this interview, the authors address several intriguing questions:



George Hall

- How can leaders use tribes to maximize productivity and profit?
- Why do great leaders often fail in a new environment?
- Why do average leaders seem better than they really are?
- Why do great strategies fail more often than they succeed?

George Hall: What is a "tribe," and why is the notion of a tribe so central to your thinking?



David Logan

David Logan: A tribe is a group of between 20 and 150 people in which you either know everyone or you know of everyone in that group. People tribe so naturally that we often don't see the phenomenon at work – it's like water to a fish; it's largely invisible.

George Hall: What do you mean by "tribal leadership"?



John King

David Logan: A tribal leader is someone who is actively upgrading the culture within the tribes to which they belong. For that to make sense, we have to back up a few steps. The big insight in the book is that while everyone tribes, not all tribes are the same. What makes the difference is culture. In our research of over 24,000 people over eight years, we found that all tribes have one of five types of culture. These go from everything you don't want (stage one) to everything you do want (stage five). And by calling these "stages," we're saying that tribes move from one stage to the next, and they can't skip stages. At Stage One, people form criminal clusters, such as gangs and prisons, where the theme is "life sucks," and people act out in despairingly hostile ways. Only about two percent of employed tribes are at stage one. Stage Two, the dominant culture in 25 percent of work-

place tribes where people say, in effect, "my life sucks," exhibit behavior of apathetic victims. At Stage Three, which is the dominant culture in almost half of U.S. workplace tribes, the theme is "I'm great." This

personally competitive cultural stage produces only limited innovation and almost no collaboration. Stage Four represents 22 percent of tribal cultures, and there the theme is “we’re great.” Stage Four is the zone of Tribal Leadership where the leader upgrades the tribe as the tribe embraces the leader. Stage Four is the beginning of high

People in our study who were exceptional tribal leaders described a sudden, compelling, and often personal awareness that they had been manipulating people and didn’t want to do that anymore.

performance. The theme of Stage five, the culture of two percent of the workforce tribes, is that “life is great” and people focus on realizing potential by making history. Teams at Stage Five have produced remarkable innovations, leading their industries and the economy. So to answer your original question, tribal leadership is: (1) figuring out what cultures run your tribes, and (2) moving the tribes to the next stage, and then the next.

George Hall: Who is your favorite tribal leader? Why?

David Logan: Without a doubt, my favorite tribal leader is George Washington. Washington was a member of three tribes: (1) the Continental Congress, (2) the Militia or military leaders, and (3) the Virginia landowners. In every case, if you examine how he thought, you can see how he consistently looked for core values. He heard “Independence,” “Freedom,” and “Equality.” So, when he finally did speak, although he was not the most intelligent of the group, nor the most well read, he was someone to whom people listened. Why? Washington was someone who actively upgraded the culture of the tribes to which he belonged. When he spoke, people said, “That person speaks for me.” As a result, the tribes became aware of their own

existence. They went from being a collection of people to a group that said, “We’re taking on this charge together.” The colonists went from State Two to Stage Three to Stage Four, all the way up to Stage Five because of Washington’s leadership.

George Hall: How does someone become a tribal leader?

David Logan: You learn and use the simple set of techniques to move a tribe from one stage to the next. But there is something deeper. People in our study who were exceptional tribal leaders described a sudden, compelling, and often personal awareness that they had been manipulating people and didn’t want to do that anymore. There were two universal themes that ran through all these experiences: (1) there was a new self-awareness and (2) there was a bit of a sting to it. The awareness helped them see what had previously been a blind spot, about their personal behavior: they credited that moment with making them the leader that they were. This same epiphany, however, also made them humble.

George Hall: You mentioned tribal strategy in your book. How does that work?

David Logan: Tribal strategy has a dual purpose: it gives the tribe something to work on that’s important. It also is a key to moving a group from Stage Three to Four. In tribal strategy, the leader says, “the first thing we have to do is figure out our values.” So the group reads off the corporate values. OK, those are the corporate values, but what do WE value? The leader starts a discussion about the tribe’s values. After a discussion of the tribe’s values, you walk them through our strategy model (see Figure 1). Tribal strategy is a series of three discussions in which the tribal leader starts to learn where the group wants to go. The first is, “what do we want?” The resulting answer is “outcomes.” The second is “what do we have?” The tribe’s answers constitute “assets.” The third is “what will we do?” and the answer gives the group its behaviors.

Along the way, tribal leaders ask the group three “test questions”:

- Are assets sufficient for the *outcomes*?
- Are there enough assets for the *behaviors*?
- Will behavior accomplish *outcomes*?

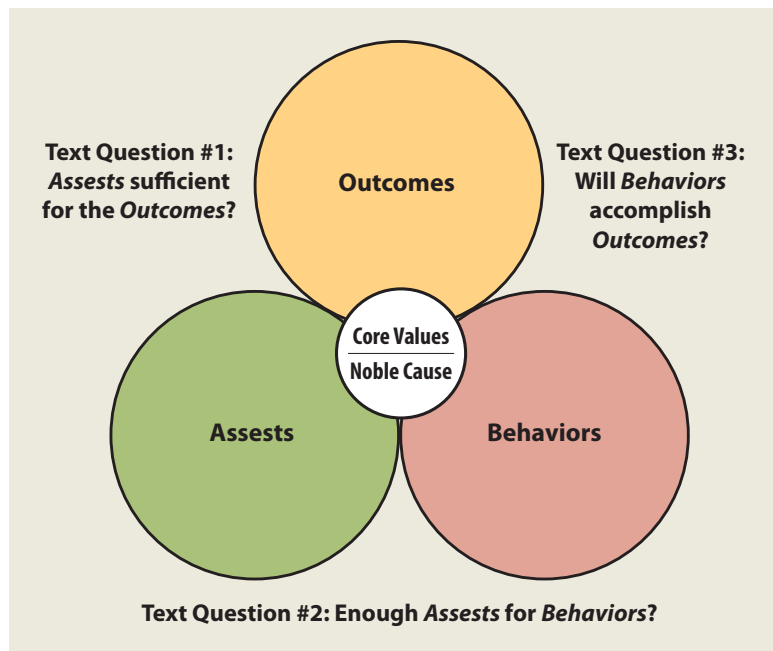
To seamlessly maintain the positive change, our research indicates that it takes a team meeting for about half a day every 90 days. The tribe is working more closely together now – a “Stage Four” culture has probably developed.

George Hall: In your book you comment, “The journey through the stages is literally not one you can make alone. Your tribe will either help you or prevent your forward movement. In fact, you can move forward only by bringing others with you.” Are tribes more influential than individuals, no matter how smart or talented they are?

David Logan: Yes. If you look at the writings of psychologist Abraham Maslow, you’ll see that people self-actualize alone. If someone takes Maslow’s hermit route, they become enlightened alone. This approach to enlightenment has become the de facto standard all over the world. In contrast to Maslow, what we are talking about is culture. You cannot have a culture of one. It doesn’t make any sense. To move through a stage theory of enlightenment, you must move through them with other people. If you are going through this growth process as a single person, for example, say from Stage Three to Four to Five, you will be unable to develop yourself through all the stages. It’s just not going to happen. In order to develop yourself, you are going to have to pull other people up as well. You are going to have to start forming partnerships and implementing strategies together. It’s impossible to operate on these more collaborative, more advanced levels alone.

John King: I would also add that fundamental to the concept of Stage Four in an organization is the idea of stable effective partnerships. From our experience over several decades of consulting work, nobody actually gets over the “hump” to

FIGURE 1 **Tribal Strategy Model**



Stage Four by themselves and nobody is actually in there by themselves. When we do see people who are individuals who are Stage Four types, they are not stable unless they have at least two other people around them who are also Stage Four. The members of this triad, all Stage Four, act to stabilize each others’ development.

David Logan: I’ll give you a very specific example. Imagine, for example, that there is a newly married couple. The husband and wife have a “family” culture, because you can have a culture of two. Let’s say they take the view of, “It’s us against the world.” Nobody else understands their relationship; no one appreciates them; no one else matters, and “we’re in it for us.” As soon as this couple encounters any kind of marital conflict, for example, her friends are going to say to her and his friends are going to say to him, “Well, we couldn’t wait for this relationship to end.” The chances of that relationship surviving are actually quite small. In other words, it is really not a partnership until other people get involved. Again, by definition, you can’t move through developmental stages and grow alone.

John King: Yes, that's exactly right, Dave. A dyad or partnership of two, without something else around it to stabilize it, is inherently unstable. You definitely need a third, stabilizing element. This element, however, doesn't have to be a person per se. It could be an inspiring project that two people are engaged in. Either way, the dyad, just like any object in space, for example, needs three anchor points to be stable.

George Hall: Most professional models of self-actualization are based on Maslow's work. These models describe stages you move through as you develop yourself. They have not been updated meaningfully since the 1950s. Your work updates and expands Maslow by placing development in a broader, group context. Learning and development no longer have to be defined by or limited to Maslow's hermit route.

John King: You are right. It is interesting to note that the systems-based thinking we encourage in our work is starting to arise naturally in the culture in the Net generation, the kids who are 19, 20 or so. This generation thinks in terms of systems, tribes, teams. It is a very natural expression for them. They are doing it on the web. They don't know that they are doing it, just as we didn't know we were doing command and control. We didn't know we were doing Stage One, Stage Two, Stage Three and that there was a ceiling to what we were doing. We paid lip service to the "we" conversation, but when push came to shove, it was "me," it was "you." We didn't really know; that was just the way it was. My 18-year-old granddaughter, for example, has 167 people in her MySpace net. They are all players in her life. She has an experience of her "self": I'm good at what I do and I am who I am." She also has an experience of her tribe – her relationships are very interdependent with all the people around her.

George Hall: Does the process of training influence tribal culture?

David Logan: Yes. The training process frequently produces a Stage Three culture, which often impedes further development – a vicious circle of sorts. You can graduate from high school and college, and get all the way through a doctorate, for example, and still be focused at a Stage Three level. Stage Three is about individual accomplishment. What holds us back as we move through the stages, then, is the Stage Three tribal culture created by decades of training methods. If you look around at many so-called leadership books, you will find that most of them tell you to master Stage Three. You go to a bookstore, and look up

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most books on "leadership," they are either Stage Five, which nobody really understands, or what passes for leadership (time management, how to set goals), which has nothing to do with leadership.

George Hall: A tribal leader has an unmistakable toughness, a tenacity of spirit. They try to improve their group, from cultural stage to cultural stage, and invest the required time – months to years – to really do this. I'm imagining the tribal leader as a sort of culture Hero, a sort of Rocky Balboa, or someone of Rambo size proportions. Do you agree?

David Logan: No. Your examples of tribal leaders – Rocky and Rambo – are actually examples of anti-tribal leaders. They are people who are doing it for themselves. Rambo is supposed to be doing it for other people, but it's really the Rambo show.

It's the Rocky Balboa show. You know, leadership can be boring. If you look at what a lot of tribal leaders do in practice, and we have, it's not sexy, it's not L.A. Law, Boston Legal, and it's not an exciting reality show. Instead, good tribal leadership is not dramatic but it is dramatically effective. When you take a model of the Stage Three hero, like a Rambo, you are really taking a look at a life that is events-driven, but there is very little process. On the other hand, if you take a look at the Stage Four hero, a Mother Teresa, a Martin Luther King, Jr.,

while there may be drama around them because they are doing heroic things, it isn't about Martin Luther King. We tend to idolize Martin Luther King, but Martin Luther King to himself was just another soldier in the battle. He would say, "I'm just a cheerleader for possibilities." Stage Four leaders are engaged in the process where there are events, but it isn't about event, event, event. It is about the process and the collaborative way we work together. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Interviewer **George Hall** runs the Amtrak Leadership Institute and teaches in the College of Business Administration at the University of Phoenix. He is the ASTD Links "In Practice" Field Editor for Management Development. Georgehall@comcast.net

Dave Logan is co-founder and senior partner of CultureSync, a management consulting firm specializing in cultural change, strategy, and negotiation. Currently, he teaches leadership and negotiation in the University of Southern California's Executive MBA (ranked fifth in the world), and is on faculty at the Center for Medical Excellence in Portland and the International Center for Leadership In Finance (ICLIF) in Kuala Lumpur, endowed by the former prime minister of Malaysia. He has written two books in addition to *Tribal Leadership* and is currently at work on a 2009 release recently selected for the "Warren Bennis" line of books at Wiley. His work has also been published in numerous academic and professional journals, including a 2006 "agenda" in MIT-Sloan Management Review. logan@culturesync.net

John King is a founding partner and president of CultureSync LLC, a consulting firm that focuses on leadership, strategy, cultural change and executive coaching. John 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 in the Marshall School of Business and the School of Public Policy, Planning, and Development at the University of Southern California. king@culturesync.net

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reflections@solonline.org

Reflections: The SoL Journal

PO Box 381050

Cambridge, MA 02238-1050

+1.617.300.9515 (phone)

+1.617.812.1257 (fax)

E-mail: reflections@solonline.org

reflections.solonline.org



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