

Tribal Leadership: Leveraging Natural Groups to Build a Thriving Organization¹

Reviewed by Major Joshua Wolff*

I. Introduction

Virtually every Soldier aspires to be a great leader. After all, according to the Army Chief of Staff, “[l]eadership is paramount to our profession.”² Countless books and essays propose hundreds, if not thousands, of theories and “rules” of leadership.³ No single text can contain all one needs to know to become a good leader, but those worth reading provide tools or guiding principles to apply when leadership opportunities and challenges arise. *Tribal Leadership* is a worthwhile read for the Army leader because it provides a thought-provoking framework to assess the culture of a unit and, most importantly, practical and specific guides to help improve it.

Tribal Leadership—like all other leadership books—does not provide a magic formula so that anyone can turn a poorly performing unit into a great one overnight. The book is imperfect. The research behind the theory may not be as conclusive as the authors purport. As a model derived largely from research of corporate organizations, the book’s template simply will not fit very well within any given Army organization. The book is nonetheless valuable to the Army leader because it provides an informative supplement to current Army leadership doctrine. While Army leadership literature tends to focus *inward*—on what leaders should be and how they need to act, *Tribal Leadership* provides tools for the leader to look *outward* at her organization’s culture. The result is fun-to-read, interesting material, which is valuable to anyone desiring to serve in leadership positions.

II. Questionable Research

Tribal Leadership is co-authored by Dave Logan, a business professor; John King, a consultant and “nationally recognized . . . senior teacher, coach, and program leader”; and Halee Fischer-Wright, a physician.⁴ The book’s central theme is that each organization has a dominant culture,

which defines the organization’s success and productivity.⁵ The leader’s responsibility is to assess and “upgrade” the organizational (“tribal”) culture by using “leverage points” appropriate for the organization’s stage of development.⁶ The authors conclude there are five discernible “stages,” each with its own rhetoric and types of relationships, which they helpfully summarize in Appendix A.⁷

The trio bases “each concept, tip, and principle” in *Tribal Leadership* on their own organizational study covering twenty-four organizations over an eight-year period, with more than 24,000 people.⁸ The research is somewhat explained in an appendix, but the authors deliberately omit statistics and methodology from the main text in favor of various anecdotes and individual profiles to describe their theories.⁹ This approach yields an interesting and easily digestible book consisting mostly of theory and real-life examples.

The authors began collecting data by issuing members of an organization a pretest designed to measure language themes and organizational relationships because the authors’ early research indicated these were critical indicators of organizational culture.¹⁰ The respondents then received training on ways to improve the functionality of their culture using “upgraded” language and relationship structures.¹¹ Following the training, the authors allowed a period of nine to sixteen months to pass before re-evaluating the same organization.¹² This approach seems straightforward, but a closer look at the research raises some questions regarding the methodology and conclusions.

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¹ DAVE LOGAN, JOHN KING, & HALEE FISCHER-WRIGHT, *TRIBAL LEADERSHIP: LEVERAGING NATURAL GROUPS TO BUILD A THRIVING ORGANIZATION* (2008).

² GENERAL RAYMOND T. ODIERNO, *Foreword* to U.S. DEP’T OF ARMY, DOCTRINE PUB. 6-22, ARMY LEADERSHIP (1 Aug. 2012) (C1, 10 Sept. 2012) [hereinafter ADP 6-22].

³ A query of Amazon.com’s Books Department for “leadership” yields 121,681 results. See Amazon.com, <http://www.amazon.com> (last visited Sept. 5, 2014).

⁴ LOGAN ET AL., *supra* note 1, at 281–83.

⁵ *Id.* at 4.

⁶ *Id.* at 36.

⁷ *Id.* at 253–64. The author’s gauge to assess a tribe’s stage based on their language is simple and will resonate with any reader with leadership experience. Language expressing an attitude of “life sucks” characterizes stage one; “my life sucks” is stage two culture; persons at stage three culture use “I’m great [and you’re not]” language; stage four is “We’re great [and they’re not]” is stage four; and “Life is great” is stage five language.

⁸ *Id.* at 6.

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ *Id.* at 18.

¹¹ *Id.* at 266–68. See also *supra* note 7 and accompanying text (describing the kinds of language themes associated with various stages of development).

¹² LOGAN ET AL., *supra* note 1.

A. A Problematic Sample

At first blush, the massive sample size of 24,000 people appears to lend credibility to the study.¹³ However, over 15,000 of the people in the study were trained and observed by members of their own organization instead of by independent researchers, raising some concerns of skewed results.¹⁴ The study employed no apparent safeguard to ensure any studied organization's leaders or representatives did not exaggerate their culture's improvement or progress. The authors are cognizant of this shortcoming, noting that such bias is unlikely because their study's early work consistently indicated that people accurately report, or "peg" others' stages, despite consistently exaggerating their own developmental stage.¹⁵ This assurance rings hollow for two reasons.

First, because the authors measure culture by looking to language,¹⁶ respondents taking the post-training assessment have essentially been given the correct answers to the test. Respondents taking the post-test know which language indicates a higher-functioning culture, so their use of this language when evaluated is unsurprising.¹⁷ The second problem with including this population in the sample is that the people administering both the training and test were likely the respondents' supervisors (or at least some organizational representatives) who were also responsible for the training. The authors' original assumption that people "peg" others accurately did not apply to this sample, which was infected by the magnified self-interest of the respondents' own employer interviewing them about the training that employer paid for in order to make the employee better. While the authors point to other literature to address this concern, that work appears to only corroborate the *Tribal Leadership* authors' conclusion that people tend to overestimate their own stage of development.¹⁸ An assessment where the respondents were

unaware someone was monitoring their language would provide a significantly more reliable measure of whether and how much their language and culture truly changed. If the numbers were as consistent as indicated, the authors should have left out these potentially problematic data points.¹⁹

B. Tribal Leadership Is Better Than . . . What?

The research contains no comparisons to competing leadership models and very limited research involving control groups. The majority of data giving rise to the authors' theory was taken from populations trained on the principles of *Tribal Leadership*.²⁰ The authors deemed the *Tribal Leadership* model a success because these organizations had progressed into more advanced stages.²¹ The study appears credible with its large sample size and sophisticated techniques to measure the respondents' language.²² Without meaningful comparisons, however, the only conclusion one can draw is that the respondents' language changed, not necessarily that a better culture emerged.

To measure whether groups trained in *Tribal Leadership*'s techniques ultimately outperformed others, the authors conducted a "deep" comparison study of their theory.²³ The first part of the study involved training selected teams ("mostly . . . considered problematic by management") from a commercial real estate firm and comparing trained teams' revenue against other non-trained teams.²⁴ The authors conclude that this study confirmed their theory's effectiveness, reporting that six of their trained teams finished the study ranked in the top fifteen in the seventy-five team field.²⁵ Notably, the authors did not report where these teams ranked before the study, how many total teams received training, or whether any of their trained teams regressed.

In the second part of the comparison study, the authors trained a small start-up within the same real estate firm in *Tribal Leadership*'s principles. The authors hailed the start-

¹³ *Id.* at 278.

¹⁴ *Id.* at 277.

¹⁵ *Id.* at 278. The authors reached the conclusion that someone could accurately "peg" another's developmental stage by focusing on language using a sophisticated analysis of several respondents' responses to open-ended survey questions focusing evaluation on words which appeared in close proximity to each other.

¹⁶ *Id.* at 266–67.

¹⁷ The circumstance where a respondent behaving differently when knowingly observed is known as the "Hawthorne Effect" first studied by researcher Henry A. Landsberger. See generally Rob McCarney et al., *The Hawthorne Effect: A Randomised, Controlled Trial*, BIOMEDICAL CENT. MED. METHODOLOGY, Jul. 3, 2007, <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1936999/>.

¹⁸ LOGAN ET AL., *supra* note 1, at 278 n.10 (citing DON EDWARD BECK, SPIRAL DYNAMICS: MASTERING VALUES, LEADERSHIP, AND CHANGE (1995)). According to the authors' footnote, this work only affirms the notion that people tend to overestimate their own developmental stage. In an effort to ensure the employer perceives the employee as "bought in" to the pricey consulting, the employee will overemphasize their responses in

the post-test to demonstrate that they are a "team player" with a future in the organization.

¹⁹ *Id.* at 264.

²⁰ *Id.* at 267–68.

²¹ *Id.*

²² *Id.* The authors used open-ended interviews with respondents and analyzed which popular words clustered near each other in each respondent's responses. See also *supra* note 7 and accompanying text.

²³ LOGAN ET AL., *supra* note 1, at 278.

²⁴ *Id.*

²⁵ *Id.*

up's ultimate success as further evidence supporting their theory because this group generated "significant revenue," despite starting with essentially zero.²⁶ Whether or not this second success can be attributed to the authors' methodology, producing an "upgraded" culture is extremely questionable. Talent or simply market timing could have been the driving forces behind this start-up's success. Without a control group starting from a similar baseline, attributing that success to the team's training in Tribal Leadership is unsound.

It is ultimately unsurprising that the authors struggle to produce data that conclusively proves their leadership model to be superior because no such leadership model exists. In spite of the authors' massive study size, questions linger about whether the observed firms' culture improved at all, or whether any financial success was due to market factors, as opposed to organizational culture. *Tribal Leadership* is, regrettably, not the silver bullet its authors purport it to be. However, the aspiring Army leader should read the book as a compliment to the Army's current leadership doctrine.

III. Tribal Leadership and the Army Leader

The authors posit that "[e]very organization is really a set of small towns."²⁷ If this were true, the Army would be made up of some very strange towns. With few exceptions, the entire population of most of the Army's "small towns" would move away and be replaced by new residents every few years.²⁸ Such significant personnel turnover—particularly in the leadership of the organization—makes it very difficult to establish a long-lasting, dominant culture in an Army unit as contemplated in *Tribal Leadership*. The book is valuable to the Army leader because it elaborates on the importance of organizational culture and provides tools to assess and impact that culture.

A. Expanding the Aperture: Getting Organizational Culture into the Picture

While *Tribal Leadership* emphasizes organizational culture, the guidance on this topic found in *Army Leadership* is limited.²⁹ *Tribal Leadership*'s central theory is that each tribe has a dominant culture,³⁰ and that an organization's

success relies upon the leader's responsibility to upgrade the tribe's culture as the tribe further embraces the leader.³¹ Conversely, *Army Leadership* provides sparse and generic guidance on how a leader can assess and improve organization climate.³² *Army Leadership* suggests using a "Unit Climate Assessment" to understand the unit's climate.³³ This tool, however, is currently geared toward supporting the Army Equal Opportunity Program and sexual harassment prevention.³⁴ Such a narrow assessment can do little for a leader other than confirm whether the unit has any issues with cultural diversity and respect for others. Such a study may miss many other problems in the unit and does not serve to diagnose the causes or to propose solutions to any of these issues. In this manner, *Tribal Leadership* supplements Army doctrine on organizational culture, so it can be seen as more than a possible area of concern for treatment of others, but as a potential driving force behind a unit's success. Moreover, *Tribal Leadership* provides guidance with *how* to assess the culture and what techniques would be appropriate to advance members of the organization to a more mature, productive culture.

B. Insightful, Prescriptive Guidance

The Army's leadership literature is mostly descriptive, defining leadership in generic terms of what leaders should be, know, and do.³⁵ Perhaps intentionally, Army leadership doctrine is not prescriptive, providing very little specificity on how to implement these principles. This approach is sensible. Leadership is very individualized, so non-prescriptive doctrine facilitates leaders growing into a "style" with which they are most comfortable and encourages diverse leader development. The consequence, however, is that even the well-intended, self-aware leader could find himself following the Army's guidance in a way that is counterproductive.

For example, *Army Leadership* discusses the role of constructive feedback multiple times, but provides no guidance on what constitutes constructive feedback or even

²⁶ *Id.* at 279.

²⁷ *Id.* at 3.

²⁸ U.S. DEP'T OF ARMY, REG. 614-5, STABILIZATION OF TOURS para. 2-1 (1 May 1983). Army policy is to stabilize personnel for only twelve months after arrival on station.

²⁹ U.S. DEP'T OF ARMY, DOCTRINE REFERENCE PUB. 6-22, ARMY LEADERSHIP (1 Aug. 2012) (C1, 10 Sept. 2012) [hereinafter AD RP 6-22]. AD RP 6-22 "describes the Army's view of leadership." *Id.* at iv.

³⁰ LOGAN ET AL., *supra* note 1, at 17.

³¹ *Id.* at 5.

³² AD RP 6-22, *supra* note 29, paras. 7-5 to 7-7. It is worth noting that Army doctrine distinguishes "culture" from "climate." Culture is "the shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterize the institution over time," while climate is a more short-term expression of "how members feel about the organization."

³³ *Id.* para. 7-20.

³⁴ *Id.* Army Command Climate Surveys focus on Army Equal Opportunity and Sexual Harassment policies. U.S. DEP'T OF ARMY, REG. 600-20, ARMY COMMAND POLICY paras. 6-1, 7-1, and app. E (6 Nov. 2014).

³⁵ ADP 6-22, *supra* note 2, para. 22. The Army Leadership Requirements Model consists of "attributes" that the Army leader must "be" and "know," and "competencies" the Army leader must be able to "do." Leader attributes are character, presence, and intellect; competencies are leads, develops, and achieves. *Id.*

contemplates that there may be different types of constructive feedback.³⁶ In contrast, *Tribal Leadership* urges subtle, but important, differences in constructive feedback for persons who are at different developmental stages.³⁷ This extra insight can help the Army leader formulate how she wants to approach providing constructive feedback in order to yield a more productive result.

Perhaps the most obvious area where *Tribal Leadership* supplements Army leadership doctrine is in the “Develops” arena.³⁸ Like the *Tribal Leadership* authors, Army doctrine recognizes the critical relationship between an organization’s leader and its culture (although *Army Leadership* refers to it as “climate”).³⁹ The Army’s guidance, however, can be summarized with the simple and unhelpful phrase “create a positive climate by setting goals.”⁴⁰ *Tribal Leadership* would encourage the leader to carefully consider and assess the current cultural and developmental stage of the organization before setting goals. The same goal could have vastly different responses with people at different stages—perhaps even causing more harm than good. For example, if the organization is dominated by stage two culture, with only one stage three “star” performer,⁴¹ achievement of a goal could drive them apart with the stage two people convinced nobody appreciated their role in achieving the goal and the stage three person believing that the group only succeeded because he dragged everyone across the finish line.⁴²

IV. Conclusion

Tribal Leadership is a suitable supplement to Army leadership doctrine with its insight into organizational culture. This book is a valuable read for the Army leader because it provides specific guidance to assess and leverage culture within the organization, an area the Army’s current leadership doctrine does not fully explore. The organizationally-oriented approach is an excellent companion to the Army’s current inward-focused leadership doctrine. The Army leader who has read *Tribal Leadership* is equipped with more tools to assess their unit’s culture and—most importantly—tools to improve it.

Reading *Tribal Leadership* will prompt the Army leader to view her leadership experiences differently. She will think about what constitutes “tribes” and reflect on the developmental stages of different organizations in which she has previously served. Perhaps the most valuable takeaway from *Tribal Leadership* is the ability to identify persons in lower stages and employ some of the practical “leverage points” to move them—and hopefully the organization—to a higher level. A quick and fun read, *Tribal Leadership* will open the aperture of any leader and provide some additional tools to assess and work with subordinates who appear “stuck.”

³⁶ ADRP 6-22, *supra* note 29, paras. 5-15 and 7-60.

³⁷ See LOGAN ET AL., *supra* note 1, at 258–59 (providing distinctions on how to provide feedback to persons with different dominant cultures).

³⁸ The “Develops” competency charges the Army leader to, among other things, “create a positive environment.” ADP 6-22, *supra* note 2, para. 22. See also *supra* note 35 and accompanying text.

³⁹ ADRP 6-22, *supra* note 29, para. 7-20. “Leader behavior has significant impact on the organizational climate.” *Id.* See also *supra* note 33 (*Army Leadership*’s definition of “organizational climate”).

⁴⁰ ADRP 6-22, *supra* note 29, paras. 7-20 – 7-23.

⁴¹ Stage two people are generally disconnected from organizational goals and feel underappreciated. Stage three people are focused on “winning,” and are marked by complaining about the low level of talent surrounding them. LOGAN ET AL., *supra* note 1, at 35. See also *supra* note 7 and accompanying text (describing the kinds of language themes associated with various stages of development).

⁴² See LOGAN ET AL., *supra* note 1, ch. 3. The authors’ detailed explanation regarding how the complex and counterintuitive relationship between Stage Two and Stage Three people can stagnate an organization is worth the read alone.