

TRIBAL LEADERSHIP

Leveraging Natural Groups to Build a Thriving Organization

We effectively [summarized Tribal Leadership on the blog](#). The following piece for the Farnam Street Learning Community builds upon that understanding.

Triads and Stage Four Networking

In Stage Four (Tribal Pride), your ability to create relationships between two people is what propels you forward.

These relationships should be “based on core values and mutual self-interest” and should be somewhat independent of you.

Most people in Stage Three (Lone Warrior) are hoarding information. They think that the key to getting ahead is to be the linchpin. They see themselves as the key for everything. And they have a large enough network to find the answers if they don’t have them. The limiting factor here is that they want to be the focal point. They want everything to go through them.

These people don’t understand the value of the triad, and it limits their potential.

The dyad is a two-person relationship. This is the fundamental building block of the Stage Three culture. The triad is a three-legged relationship, which forms the basis of the Stage Four culture.

“People operating at ‘I’m great’ (Lone Warrior) tend to form a set of dyads, so that if they have to tell lots of people the same thing, they’ll have a series of one-on-one conversations. As a result, they hit several barriers. First, the person at the other end of the relationship often feels commoditized, valued only for his or her service or information. Second, the person forming the dyads feels he never has enough time or support, since the overhead maintenance required to keep a series of dyads together is enormous. Third, people are quick to spot inconsistencies in what the person says as he tells slightly different versions of the same thing to others, which damages his credibility and reduces their loyalty to him. (While most of these issues come down to simple misunderstandings, the sheer number of dyads within Stage Three tribes almost guarantees that such bungled communication will happen.)”

Everything that’s successful in Stage Three (passion, drive, competence, strategic thinking, etc.) exists in Stage Four. Only it’s reorganized.

The Anatomy of a Triad

“At its most basic level, a triad has three parts. In its most stable form, the three parts are people. ... The three form a triangle, with each leg of the structure responsible for the quality of the relationship between the other two parts.”

The example of a triad given in the book is that of Bruce Cutter, the former CEO of the Cancer Care Northwest. The authors toured the facility with him and “a single moment shows how triads immunize tribes against spats.”

A staff member came up to him, glanced at us, and then looked back and him and rolled his eyes. “he’s doing it again,” the staff members complained. We learned later he was referring to another physician who wasn’t following an administrative procedure, and as a result the staff had to do extra work. Cutter’s steady voice said, “You and [the doctor] should work it out. You both want the same thing but see different paths for how to get there. You’ll find a path that works for you both, and tell him I said that.” With those few words, Cutter resumed the tour. We later learned that the two had met and resolved their dispute. In the process, both were reminded to work together (the most important element in employee development), they solved the disagreement in real time without having to wait for Cutter’s involvement, and his time was free to do what was most important: gaining respect for the tribe by showing it off to visitors.

Values lead to alignment. **When you’re solving problems at Stage Four, remind people they share the same values.**

A Stage Three operator would have said “I’ll look into it.” He’d then talk to the physician, get one side of the story, go back to the staff member and get the other side of the story. He’d offer sympathetic views to both, telling the doctor the administrator wasn’t a doctor and “didn’t get it”, and tell the administrator that the doctor wasn’t an administrator and thus “didn’t get it”. The next time a spat arose, he’d do the same thing. (He likely works incredibly long hours, but he’s not working smart .. just hard.)

“Once tribal leaders see the concept of the triad, they see them everywhere. ... Triads are undermined when senior decision makers solve problems themselves. What’s even worse is when they say, “Don’t go behind my back,” as this crushes triads before they form. Some people resist building triads because they think they’ll lose control. Their thought is that this technique may encourage people to undercut them. However, the opposite is true.

The rule of reciprocity implies, “whatever you give out, you’ll get back.” If you build the relationships between two people and then walk away, most of them will praise your efforts. You’ve increased

the respect you get by showing the same to other people. ... Not only do forming and nurturing triads save the Tribal leader time, they encourage a level of followership that is unimagined at Stage Three. A test of a true Tribal leader is why people would come to their funeral: Do their words of praise stem from their hearts or a desire to be politically correct.“

What if your boss is at Stage Three?

Stage Three derives its power from knowing more. This means people hoard information and don't share it. The Stage Three mindset is threatened by triads.

“So it’s important to think through the risks and rewards. If you want to move ahead (to Stage Four), then begin triading with the people you need to work with—probably people at late Stage Three—to accomplish something remarkable. Prove that Stage Four is more effective in terms of its results, and leverage the accomplishment into an invitation to join the emerging group at Stage Four. In short, take great care not to offend people and triad around the Stage Three individual.”

Triads need not necessarily be between people to be effective.

Farnam Street successfully creates triads between you and some nugget of knowledge, a book, or people in the learning community.

How to get the most out of triads:

1. “Know the values and current projects of every person in your network.”
2. “Use the theory of small gifts. ... Do little things for each person such as sending them an article that is about their interests, remembering their birthday, and so-on.”
3. “Be great at something, world-class if possible.” This is your hook into why people should pay attention.
4. Effective triading requires authenticity.

Things to do differently:

1. Start introducing people in your network who are working on solving similar problems.
2. When you're connecting people refer to shared values as well as personal accomplishments and what each person will get out of meeting.
3. Use "small gifts" to build your relationships with people.

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