Tribalism _in the_ Workplace: Finding Someone New _to_ Hate

by Ann McGee-Cooper, Ed.D

"America loves a winner," exclaimed General George S Patton, "and won't tolerate a loser." Patton's love for the power over life or death challenges, however, made it difficult for him to adjust to peacetime. Perhaps if he were alive today, he would find a place for his passion on a corporate battlefield?

Competition drives our marketplace, and many people believe it's the only way to motivate themselves and others, unaware of the downside to such practices. But high levels of burnout and turf warfare inside a corporation, business or organization are not beneficial to synergistic teamwork, profit margins, customers or employees. A curious form of "tribalism" has emerged as mergers and acquisitions became a popular growth strategy in the last ten years.

Several years ago, I was invited to explore and clarify rifts within a global company after a recent acquisition. In a focus group made up of about equal numbers of long-time employees from the two merged companies, we recalled schisms that came after earlier mergers. One person noted that he same kinds of bad blood existed and very similar issues or mistrust happened then. I asked when and how these schisms went away and one person commented, "They were still very much alive and active until this recent acquisition. Then, almost immediately they went away maybe because suddenly we had someone new to hate!" The room exploded in laughter as we gained a painful insight into our collective insecurities and the ways we act these out.

How often have you seen people form tribes within an organization? Craft workers unite in grievance against office staff that don't "understand or appreciate" the job they do. Older

staff resent Gen X and Y for lack of loyalty or arrogance. Long-term employees distrust new hires while the new folks shake their heads impatiently at the old ways. Regional companies going global find deep differences in the ways people communicate "overseas." The end result? Workers compete in "silos" that resist interdependent teaming and appreciation for diversity.

Message To The Field

Herb Kelleher, Chairman Emeritus of Southwest Airlines, confronted tribalism head-on in one of his "Messages to the Field" to alert his people to a silent yet deadly internal enemy. First, he carefully spelled out the clear business challenges as two major competitors threatened his beloved Southwest in new markets on the West Coast.

These two carriers had far larger financial resources to throw into the battle for Customers. "Our greatest advantage is our People and the unmatched Customer Service and Teamwork we bring to any challenge. But make no mistake about it. If we fall into the trap of internal tribalism, with one station or city competing for resources against another, or with the reservations team sparring with marketing, or any other or the many internal points of potential conflict, we will lose our collective focus and can easily join the dozens of airlines no longer in business."

Herb reminded his team of all the many insurmountable challenges they had overcome

year by year through creative teamwork. With story after story, lifting up the selfless leadership and teamwork so traditional in Southwest, he called his teammates to get a clear focus on serving the Customer by pulling together as one. He carefully noted that it's all too common to point fingers and polarize. Yet great teams stay fiercely loyal to each other and use their different perspectives to create a clearer picture of both the problem and possible solutions.

As a result of Herb's speech, Southwest Employees rose to the challenge with a generosity of spirit and selfless teamwork that others would find unbelievable. Pilots volunteered to work double shifts as volunteers loading baggage while recruiters worked to find new Employees in California with a can-do work ethic. Top leaders flew in to load baggage and work the ticket counters to take up the slack. Culture Committee members organized Employee appreciation events, cooking hundreds of burgers and serving chili dogs to lift the spirits of those on the line who were working extra hours to keep all flights on-time. Meals were served to all three shifts around the clock in maintenance hangers to show appreciation for the valiant efforts of the maintenance team.

Tribalism Explored

Why is tribalism so prevalent in corporate America? Why do Employees join hands against fellow employees? First, the impulse to join others is universal and natural. We want to belong. And in a country where the old familial and communal ties have been cut loose, that need must be fulfilled in other ways. Since we spend most of our lives "at work," many companies now encourage more than merely "professional" relationships among their employees.

Also, when people are anxious and fearful about the future, they often bond against the enemy,

whether it's the boss, the field, new talent being hired at higher wages, or new technology. "Us against them" is a common response to the unknown.

So what's wrong with that? Research indicates that those running away from a fear (of not winning) rarely match the performance of those running toward a vision or dream. Watch the Olympics and notice the difference. Those fearing failure typically perform with an anxiety focused on not making a mistake. Whereas those who have learned to visualize and expect perfection perform in what is called flow state, which is a state of relaxed focus where records are broken and the impossible becomes a new record.

We often see the bias toward win-lose competitive behavior as we conduct servant leadership classes within several Dallas-based companies. In one exercise, we divide the class into teams and assign them the task of building a bridge out of simple materials in 20 minutes. No matter how much we try to defuse any inter-team competition, almost inevitably, one group sees its challenge as "beating out" the others. We have even had one senior leader, who served as a client of all the bridge builders, cheer on one team and pronounce them the "best," unaware that he had needlessly discounted the creative teamwork of the other four teams.

How do companies counteract this competitive edge? At Southwest Airlines, the flight crews and schedulers faced off over late "fill-in" replacements for sick/absent crew members. The schedulers job was to keep the flights running on time. In order to do that, they often had to call in off- duty pilots or flight attendants at the last minute, forcing them to abandon whatever plans they had made for the next few days. As a result, the last people crew members wanted to hear from were schedulers.

To try and come up with a third-right answer, they formed an action team of representatives from both groups to explore creative solutions. Out of these discussions, an exchange was set up whereby flight crew members subbed for schedulers while schedulers flew with replacement crew members to get an idea of what it was like dealing with the pressures and complexities of each other's job.

Another creative alternative to tribalism within Southwest is their annual "Heroes of the Heart" celebration which happens every Valentine's Day. Each year a team within the Culture Committee invites nominations for departments within the company that are vital to the success of Southwest, but may be unsung heroes. Then, on Valentine's Day, there is a special celebration complete with videotape as the suspense builds. The winning team is awarded special trophies, special flight passes, and their department's name is added to a special heroes plane that flies in their honor for a full year.

Root Causes

One of the roots of tribalism is firmly anchored in the soil of hierarchical structures. Highly stratified business cultures often create a perceived, if not real, gap between upper management and those they supervise. Misunderstandings between these two groups quickly lead to lack of trust, signaled by resentment, backbiting, high turnover, competing visions and lowered productivity.

In addition to these two commonly found "tribes," new hires and old hands often face off. The company treats new people as foreign and "dangerous." The pride of prejudice, "we are better than you," shows its ugly head as the tribe closes ranks to defend against new ideas and cultural differences.

It can also work in reverse. An existing belief or practice can have merit, but be rejected by newcomers just because it is coming from the "old regime." Either way, flawed thinking and collusion contribute to polarization. This at a time when we know we must reinvent ourselves rapidly into a flexible, agile, lean, synergistic team of strength through difference if we are to be successful in the new competitive markets.

Within a global company we serve, one of the perceived rifts related to a recent acquisition. On the positive side, the acquired company appreciated the support they received in being allowed lots of room to run their businesses without a great deal of interference. I heard a lot of appreciation for one senior vice president and the way he supported others as a mentor, helping people know who to contact and how to make things work. Also greatly appreciated was the overall support from the CEO and another vice president during the early transaction, respecting concerns from new Partners rather than exhibiting "we-bought-you" behavior.

Both companies saw the wisdom and great advantage of shifting from a regional strategy into a true global business. Both were eager to share their Best Practices and experience entering the non-regulated market, but feared the "other" group's door was not open to hear them.

A highly successful business team in the UK shared some of their Lessons Learned. When parts of businesses needed to be sold or traded or other restructuring which would impact careers, they learned the importance of making sure that leaders clearly understood the vision and business strategy so they could communicate clearly, honestly and convincingly with all Employees. They didn't want to be seen as "faceless," instead supporting shoulder-to-shoulder with those whose lives and careers were going to be impacted. They sent leaders to support Employees at an acquired company's facilities that were being closed. They wanted each person to feel that s/he was a valuable part of a family, that s/he was winning, not losing, in the sale. They celebrated with individuals who found new positions and remained humble, knowing that they could not provide ongoing employment for all.

Employees and Customers tend to understand better if changes are linked to the business. For example, they talked about out-sourcing contracts for Customer Service — 1300 people. The only way to succeed was to upgrade their IT. T hat would require a huge amount of money, which they didn't have. So, the options were: stay the same (and Employees were telling them this was not workable); or sell this part of the company to a parent company whose core business was IT. People understood the business need. Leaders shared their timetable and the companies selected, making it a win-win. This, it should be noted, was very hard work, high risk and doesn't always work.

Instead of thinking in terms of a career ladder one climbs with only one spot at the top (which

automatically pits one ambitious person against all others) and a scarcity mentality, what if we think of a circle of teammates and an abundance mentality? As each new person joins the circle, we all have even more support and resources to leverage for the good of the whole.

In hierarchy, the larger the team, the slower it moves, changes and reacts. In a self-organizing, INTERdependent network, the larger the team, the more fertile the resources and support network. Because each person has learned to measure actions/decisions, guided by the core values and business strategy, change happens everywhere at once. The organization is far more flexible, responsive and self-correcting as each person and group works from a transformed set of assumptions and teaming skills, such as learning to create Third Right Answers.

It is a well-known scientific fact that when geese migrate on long flights, they rotate the lead position (which requires the greatest strength) and as a result, can go significantly farther (estimated to be approximately 70% farther). Also, they fly in formations that provide an aerodynamic benefit for each from the other. And, if one goes down, a partner goes down a support. This is a classic example of achieving team synergy (1+1=3 or more).

With the increased demand and need for diversity in our work places even as our world of

Customers, vendors and stake holders become far more diverse, an artificial sense of tribalism becomes an increasing threat to any and all institutions. Success in fast change mandates not just servant-leaders well matched to their very different tasks, but also high-trust teamwork to quickly assess and shift resources as needed to garner the best synergy for all stakeholders.

When we look carefully at companies identified by their people as great places to work, we see convincing evidence that their leaders have learned to view problems and complaints from within and without as opportunities for continuous improvement. And by involving those impacted by problems on diverse problem-solving teams, Employees become truly empowered through their own creative solutions. "If I'm not part of the solution, I am part of the problem" is a reminder used to reframe ownership of any and all problems. This spirit of turning problems into opportunities can quickly knock down the walls of tribalism as we learn to view differences as simply a new perspective providing opportunities to become stronger together. And then, maybe we won't have to look for someone new to hate!

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