

*“When most managers say they want more teamwork, what they really mean is that they want to turn a federation into a tribe.”*

# Managers Want Tribes, Not Teams

## An Invitation to Rethink Teambuilding

*By Gervase R. Bushe*

**M**ANY YEARS AGO as a doctoral student at Case Western Reserve, I was asked to consult to the Dean of Students who wanted to increase teamwork amongst his staff. He had about a dozen direct reports who were responsible for everything from residence to campus security. Along with another PhD student, we launched three or four months of pretty standard, daylong, teambuilding activities. After a series of interviews, we began with helping them to develop a mission statement for the Dean of Students Office. We moved on to clarifying overall goals and sub-goals for each unit. We did role negotiations. We surfaced and worked through some interdepartmental conflicts. After three or four months, it became pretty obvious to us that this effort was having very little impact on the functioning of the Dean of Students Office. People would show up, politely do whatever we asked them to do, and then go back to their respective jobs and do what they had always done.

This was when I first realized the folly of treating non-teams like teams. Many of you reading are probably already aware of this. A non-team is a group of people who have no task interdependence. They have been grouped together for administrative convenience or because they share a common resource like a budget, but they don't rely on each other for their actual day to day work. Most of the managerial groups I work with are like that. Each person who reports to the senior manager has a sphere of responsibility that is pretty much separate from every other person's. Each person, in effect, feels like they win or lose separately. And structurally, they're right.

In the past 20 years, however, “teamwork” has become such a taken-for-granted buzzword in organizations that every group is now a “team.” Consultants and managers are constantly looking for improved “teamwork.” In my practice, I sometimes get called in to work with senior “management teams” after previous attempts have failed to create significant

teamwork. As I survey the wreckage of well-intentioned efforts, it seems obvious that many OD consultants need a new way to think about what managers who want improved “teamwork” are really asking for. In this article, I will present a way of thinking about managerial groups that could answer this need.

### TEAMS, TRIBES AND FEDERATIONS

In this article, let us consider three kinds of managerial groups: Teams, tribes and federations. When most managers say they want more teamwork, what they really mean is that they want to turn a federation into a tribe. I'll offer a few ideas about how to create tribes in organizations and then ask some questions about what kinds of groups are really the most useful for organization effectiveness.

### What's a team...

A real team is a group of people whom, given the structure of the situation, win or lose together. In the language of organization theory, they have high task interdependence. Each relies on the others in the team to accomplish their tasks and goals. It is not possible for one person on the team to “win” and the others to “lose”—they all succeed or fail together. Real teams are most often found at the front lines of organizations: production teams that produce whole products, sales teams whose salary is based on group commissions, multi-disciplinary health care teams whose success lies in patient outcomes and product development teams. Most of the teambuilding technologies we've developed in OD were created from studying these kinds of teams. It is crucial for them to have shared goals, to clarify roles, to understand how common decisions are taken and implemented, and so on.

One of the axioms of my work is that good processes can

only be maintained in appropriate structures. First, you have to get the structure right (or good enough), then, you can work on good process. If you want to have teams, you have to structure the situation to ensure task interdependence. Most managerial groups aren't structured that way. Most often, each manager who reports into a senior manager has a sphere of responsibility that is his or her own. Take the typical HR department. Whether the compensation and benefits manager is succeeding at his or her job seems to have little to do with the actions of the training manager, or the manager of recruitment, or the employee relations lawyer. In my experience, a group like this finds typical teambuilding activities at best a fun diversion and, at worst, an annoying distraction from their work. It's not that such departments can't be structured like teams—they can. It's just that most aren't, so they don't really feel any purpose in pretending to be teams.

Why then is there such a constant demand from senior managers for "teambuilding"? I've come to believe that what these managers want is for the people who report to them to take the needs of the whole into account and be willing to put the needs of the whole ahead of the needs of their own departments. I've found that in many management "teams," if you dig into their mental maps, this is what "teamwork" really means.

#### What's a federation....

A common type of managerial group is best described as a "federation." In a federation, representatives of various groups and interests meet together, usually to manage common resources when there is not enough to satisfy everyone. When the separate managers who report into an executive each feels that their job is to protect the interests of their departments, to maximize their access to budget and other resources, and to promote agendas consistent with the aims and perspectives of their departments, you have a federation. It's not unusual for federations to be rife with conflict, constant politicking, and an inability to achieve consensus. This is probably why managers of federations would like it to be different and want more "teamwork."

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### THREE KINDS OF MANAGERIAL GROUPS

#### FEDERATION (e.g., different functional heads who report to the same general manager)

- A collection of representatives of different groups or interests
- Little sense of shared mission or purpose
- Independent tasks, and often, competing fiefdoms
- A tendency to think of each other as "us-and-them"
- Formal communications and procedures prevail

#### TRIBE (e.g., different department heads who report to the same functional head and have built a "team spirit")

- A collection of individuals who share a sense of identity
- Some sense of shared mission and purpose
- Independent tasks within an interdependent goal structure
- A tendency to think of each other as "we"
- Formal and informal communications and procedures

#### TEAM (e.g., different people on a project with a common task and deadline).

- A group of individuals who depend on each other to accomplish work outcomes
- A strong sense of shared mission, purpose and tactics
- Interdependent goals and tasks - need each other to get the work done
- A strong sense of "we"
- Mainly informal and frequent communications

#### What's a tribe...

A less common type of managerial group, and the one I think many managers are looking for, can be described as a "tribe." In a tribe, everyone has his or her own sphere of responsibility, but each role is required for the well being of the community, and each person is attuned to the well being of the community. People's competence and "success" in their role is judged individually, but few would put the greater good of the community at risk for their own personal success. Structurally, people win or lose individually but that's not how people *feel* about it. They have emotional ties with the rest of the community that makes them care about how everyone else does.

What makes a federation into a tribe? In my experience, the key is the extent to which people *identify* with the group. It's not about goals or roles or procedures—though they can be helpful in the identification process. It's about how much one feels a sense of belonging to the group and how much membership in that group is a part of each manager's personal identity. Before a person identifies with a group, any group may be viewed as one more element in his or her personal environment that can be an opportunity or a threat in the pursuit of personal needs and goals. But once a person identifies with a group, he or she takes the needs and goals of the group into account as well. In groups with which people highly identify (say, their family), people are even willing to sacrifice their own needs for the group's needs.

From my point of view, we need to increase our focus in OD research and technology on the processes by which people come to identify with collectives, whether those are groups, organizations, communities or whatever. In the remainder of this article, I'll briefly describe where my research on this question has taken me lately.

## HOW PEOPLE COME TO IDENTIFY WITH GROUPS

A common belief is that shared visions and common goals are needed for people to work together collectively. It may ultimately be true, but I think that is an edge in our paradigm that we need to keep questioning and re-visiting. How are we going to find ways to build collective, cooperative action across boundaries where people and groups hold very different views on reality, if we think it can only happen when they share a common reality? While a shared purpose certainly helps with identification (and a shared *inspiring* purpose may be all that's required), I have also come across groups that members identify with that don't have clear common goals. How many families, for instance, have articulated a common vision for the family?

I am interested in ways in which people come to identify with their groups that don't necessarily rely on a shared vision of the future. These days I'm paying attention to two things when I try to understand the opportunities and challenges of increasing member identification within organizational groups. The first relates to individual positive social value, the second relates to ideal group images.

### People identify with groups that support the positive social value the individual wants to claim for him or herself...

I think each of us has an image of ourselves at our best, and we are naturally more attracted to those groups where we see that image reflected back to ourselves. One person wants to have his creativity noticed. Another wants to be valued for her hard work and persistence. A third wants to be admired for her balanced and fair-minded judgments, while a fourth wants his courage and risk-taking applauded. I think the groups they identify with will be those in which those qualities are noticed, valued and encouraged. There are two parts to this. First, if creativity is the quality I claim as my positive social value, I need to feel that I am seen as a very creative person by others in the group. But that may not be enough. In addition, the group may need to have some of that quality as well, or at least be perceived that way by others outside the group. The "creative person" is probably not going to identify with a group with a reputation of being conservative and stuck in the mud—even if her creativity is valued within that group.

To enact each positive social value requires that others provide complementary co-constructions of reality. Whether a person is seen as creative or wacky, hard working or obses-

sive, balanced or a fence sitter, courageous or fool hardy, depends on the way the meaning of their actions is co-constructed by other members of the group. How those actions are perceived is the result of many things. One of the most important for understanding group dynamics is the problem of role-complements. In order for anyone to take on a role in groups, others have to be willing to take on its complement. For me to be the creative one, you have to be the intrigued one. For me to give balanced and fair-minded judgments, you have to be looking for advice. For me to be courageous, others need to support the risk. I don't think problems come so much from people in groups wanting to deny the positive social value that others bring to the group, but more often, problems come from the role complements. People don't necessarily like the role complements they are forced to take on to support others in living out those roles. Because the dilemma of role complementarities is not widely understood, conflicts emerge among members that get labeled as personality clashes. If I want to be the *experienced, seen-it-all, been-there person*, but you are working on being the *creative person*, I won't realize that I am feeling put out by the role complement of being *intrigued by something new* that you are, in effect, asking me to take. And you won't realize that as I act out my *been-there, done-that* role, you dislike the *bowing-to-experience* complement this puts you in. Instead, we'll just notice that we annoy each other. And, we'll decide that this is not a group to which we really want to belong.

Sometimes, team building processes that use personality inventories help people identify these role complements. I think one of the reasons these inventories are popular is because they help people claim differentiated roles in groups. This, in turn, can help to create a space where people can bring out the positive social value they would like to claim in the group. Using such teambuilding processes are, I think, much more appropriate for non-teams than using task-oriented teambuilding processes. But whether they lead to greater identification is a hit or miss affair. It's far more powerful to deal with the issue directly—what is the positive social value I bring to this group and what role complement does that put other people in—but more vulnerable and risky as well.

I have written elsewhere on how I think appreciative inquiry, done in groups, can overcome this problem of role complementarities and increase group identification (Bushe, 2002), but I don't think that AI is the only intervention for this purpose and is, perhaps, not the best for groups that have existed in a federation for a long time. I am always on the lookout for new ways of helping group members understand, support and encourage the positive social value they and others bring, and want to bring, to their groups and would love to hear from anyone who has ideas about how to do that.

### People identify with groups that match their ideal image of a group...

The second thing I am paying attention to these days is

the difference between people's images of an ideal group and the group as it actually is. This is not about a vision for the group but a vision of the group. Research that Graeme Coetzer and I are doing has found that: 1) The more congruence between people's images of their ideal team and of the team as it actually is, the higher the group cohesion and the more satisfied people are with the team; 2) convergence between people's images of the ideal team and actual team from the beginning to the mid-point of a project team's life is a predictor of higher quality task outcomes.

I think what the research results mean is that we all have an implicit or explicit image of an ideal team and compare the teams we are in with that image. If there isn't much of a match, then we don't really want to belong to that group. Many managerial groups exist with members who have never really psychologically joined the group. In order for them to want to join the group, they have to believe that the group is close enough to their ideal image. When members come to believe that the group can be like their ideal, they begin the process of identification and invest themselves in the group, which in turn makes the group more attractive and effective.

For a group that members have not psychologically joined, the process of surfacing and discussing the incongruence between their ideal image and their image of the actual can lead to change when they discover that they have fairly common ideal images. This may be a key outcome of appreciative inquiry in teams. Similar processes are used in conflict reduction and prejudice reduction. As we come to appreciate our similarities, we identify more with each other. When group members discover they share images of the ideal team, it makes the possibility of the group being more like that ideal more achievable. The process of building a tribe has begun.

It's important to note that using these kinds of processes with groups where members already are identified with the group doesn't seem to be useful—it's often experienced as navel-gazing. I think when members are already identified with the group, then a different image is focal—not the ideal team, but how this group *ought to be* given its tasks, constraints and responsibilities. In most people, the *ideal image* is fairly stable; it doesn't change from group to group. The *ought image*, however, is specific to each group of which a person is a member. In the research I described before, we found that convergence between people's images of the actual team and how the team ought to be only predicted group effectiveness if it happened in the second half of the project team's life. What I think this means is that people have to identify with and psychologically join groups *before* they get too concerned with the group's needs and outcomes. If they do, however, their focus turns to how the group ought to be to accomplish those outcomes. There is a developmental pattern here of first, managing the task of joining, then managing the task of group effectiveness. But without identification, they're not really concerned with the needs of the larger whole—just how the group's actions will affect their personal needs and interests.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

When consultants try to use teambuilding processes with federations that have come from research on real teams, the results are usually not great. Even if they don't voice it, many participants can't see the point. If they haven't psychologically joined the group, and the structure of the situation means they can individually go on "winning" without ever joining the group, a lot of teambuilding is irrelevant. We need to see through the haze of the T word to look more closely at what, exactly, managers are asking for and what, in each instance, we are dealing with. And we need to be sure that we aren't the proverbial hammers where everything starts to look like a nail.

I've argued here that what is often more relevant is to build a sense of tribe—to increase people's identification with their group, and, therefore, their willingness to potentially put the needs of the whole ahead of their personal needs and interests. If I'm right, it opens up a new way of thinking about the purpose of "teambuilding" and invites us to create new interventions that focus not on task processes or relationship processes but the process of identity. Where does identity come from? How is it co-constructed? What makes us choose one identity over another? How can we build groups people will identify with? And this opens up ethical issues as well, for once we start to manipulate identity, we are crossing into shady areas that we need to shine a light on so that we may understand the implications for human freedom and dignity.

A lot of people get into OD because they like teams and they want to make groups great for other people, too, but does that mean teams are always the most effective form of collective action? Managers often don't want their reports to act like a federation, they want them to act like a tribe—but is that what's best for the larger system? I'm intrigued with the possibility that in some situations a federation might actually be more effective for the common good than tribes or teams. What if keeping the conflicting interests and points of view that create paradoxical tensions in a federated system helps to ensure a more resilient, more vigilant and more vigorous organization? What kinds of processes lead to excellent federations? I think we should consider the possibility that rather than holding up the team as the ultimate expression of collective efficacy, that tribes, teams and federations each have their place in the high performing organization. Maybe in some instances, rather than help turn a federation into a tribe, what we really need to do is help the manager cope with the anxiety that appropriate conflicts and paradoxical tensions create in him or her. ■

## REFERENCES

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