

Tribalism in the Workplace: What to do about it

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Tribalism - the behaviour and attitudes that stem from strong loyalty to one's tribe or social group

In a complex business environment where organisations are made up of more and more specialists, a great value is placed on leaders who can bring diverse groups together in a spirit of co-operation to get things done. As collaboration experts, these leaders must guard against tribalism, an attitude that arises when subgroups fixate on their activities and fail to look at the organisation as a whole.

Tribalism starts when employees and leaders view their organisation as divisible and compartmentalised. They see their immediate co-workers and their part of the organisation as special, alienating people from other tribes within the same organisation whom they paradoxically rely on to get things done.

Most job seekers tend to favour companies or organisations that are run by the majority of their ethnic community. This is not because they want to work in that company or organisation, but a feeling that they have a better chance of gaining employment where the employer comes from your tribe/community.

It is a sad situation that is exemplified by the political appointments, in university lecturers' appointments, and the private sector to name a few. I think it will be nice for employers if the private and public sector also had an ethic code, obligating them not to discriminate on tribal lines.

Tribes at Work

In the business world, even when we are in the same company, we often find ourselves at cross-purposes with our colleagues. Sales organisations want the flexibility to meet changing customer demands while engineering and operations need stability to drive scale and efficiency. Offices in different countries or regions want solutions specific to their unique markets, while corporate headquarters requires all units to align to a single, clear strategy. Centres of expertise are set up to create long-range, big-picture, innovative strategies to assist client-facing, front-line employees who typically want immediate fixes for customer pain points.

Even though everyone is on the same team, the goals and needs are different. This environment sets the stage for functional units to adopt a mindset that is more "us vs. them" rather than "us vs. our competitors." The functional groups stop communicating effectively with each other and that is when things start to go tribal. At this point, you will start to see several red flags.

Here are some of the negative implications of hiring one or a few tribes.

1. Tribalism kills a variety

When you have employees from different tribes, you will be sure of different approaches and viewpoints. Since different cultures have different lifestyles, the employees will have varying ideas on how to execute a task.

From these diverse ideas, you can easily find one that works.

When you hire from one tribe, on the other hand, you are limited to the number of unique ideas from your employees.

2. Tribalism creates a negative working environment

In 2018, Muthoni Ndegwa interviewed a candidate for a finance manager position. At the end of the interview, the interviewee had a few questions for him. One of the questions was how diverse the working environment would be if she got the job.

When asked why she told him of her previous position. All the employees were from a single tribe. During lunch, they would huddle together and converse in their mother tongue. At times, they would freely discuss work in their mother tongue.

This made her quite uncomfortable. She addressed the matter, but there was little change. In the end, she had to leave.

Having employees from different tribes creates a conducive working environment for everyone.

3. Tribalism creates separation and isolation

When most of your employees come from certain tribes, everyone else will feel as though they do not fit in. As in the case shared above, the lady did not feel as though she fit in the working environment.

A thriving working environment should be inclusive of everyone. When you have different tribes working for the organisation, everyone feels they have a voice in the company.

As we can see above, having only a few tribes in your workforce can negatively affect the company.

What can you do?

Here are a few tips which have proven to be useful to other leaders in this situation:

1. Manage the psychology

This is probably the most important. When there are conflicting goals in a competitive environment, you cannot let human nature run on autopilot. Deindividuation may begin to take place with battling departments starting to demonize one another.

1. Reframing

It is the responsibility of the leader to frame the situation and environment for their followers. Be careful with how you define the mission or goal for the teams that will be going after the goals. If collaboration or a new way of working is important, then say so.

1. Break down silos

Companies in the 21st Century will need to be far less siloed than those in the 20th Century. Expertise, knowledge, and skills are widely distributed and it is imperative to break down information and data silos to be competitive.

1. Manage executive egos

An old consulting rule of thumb is to spot where the problem is occurring and then look one level above. Are your senior leaders sending the right messages around collaboration and cooperation? Are they being rewarded to do so? If the senior leadership is not displaying the behaviour that is needed then it will not happen at lower levels.

Actively managing the human dynamics at play will help your organisation reap the benefits of having different speciality areas in your company, while at the same time mitigating the downsides of tribalism.

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