



A 21st Century Talent – A Context for Managing Groups

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The Rhetoric of Group

In order to have some facility with the way people organize themselves in groups, how they live and work together – how they coordinate, collaborate, and communicate - we need to think beyond our habitual perceptions about people in groups. One place to start is to look for and distinguish that which *unconsciously* organizes human beings in groups.

What is the underlying context for human behavior in groups? What history unconsciously organizes us in groups, predetermines what we can do and can't do, even what we can actually think or not think? What is the paradigm we have named with the word *group*? What does that paradigm allow? Where are the boundaries? What lies hidden as unthinkable - has not yet even *occurred as possible* in seeking the highest good? Do groups by definition, seek the highest good? What are the limits and impact implicit in the current paradigm?

What happens to us as individuals when we become a member of a group? How do we differ from our default personalities and practices? What behaviors do we temper, give up altogether; or maybe, pull out of storage and turn on for group? Where and when did these different ways of being get developed and learned? And are they still useful? Practical? Effective?

The Center for Creative Leadership in Greensboro, NC found in a recent survey, that 91% of the executives who responded to their survey agreed that "teams are central to organizational success." A separate but equally revealing study determined that "collaboration [and managing for collaboration] is becoming a central part" of the required skill sets for executive leaders.

Yet, while nearly every executive surveyed (97%) believe that the “leaders in their organization must collaborate to succeed”, less than half (47%) believe the executives or leaders in their organization are “highly skilled in collaboration”.

As executives in today’s global market, what future does this create for us and our businesses? What is this phenomenon we call teams/groups? And how do we and/or other executives and leaders relate to, and manage groups? What can we expect or not expect from groups? Management lore chides us that groups are less productive than individuals; the admonition being if we want to accomplish something, don’t give it to a group.

Suspend for a moment what you already think is true – what you know about groups. Set it aside and look at this phenomenon newly. Consider that as humans we see our world through terministic filters¹, [word] filters through which we view the world. Allow that we don’t really see the world as it is – as if someone out there *really* did know what *it* is. Instead, notice that we have an interpretation of the world given by and represented through our rhetoric. In other words, we have the power to term - to *name* things – and so we have the power to create so-called reality. For humans, our internal and external worlds are worlds of *meanings*. We are meaning making machines. We seek and give meaning to everything. And we do it through our use of language.

For example, take a collection of individuals and put them into a room. They are a room full of individuals. It means no more and it means no less – just a room full of individual people. However - *name* them “group” and *instantaneously* you’ve created a new reality – a new meaning - around that entity. Formerly they were just a collection of people, now they are a new entity, group. Just by the act of naming them “group” you’ve created a whole new meaning. Instantly, there are members of the group and non-members – insiders and outsiders. The insiders, the group members, are also instantly somehow related, though for our example group we don’t yet know how. But the fact that we even wonder or seek to answer questions such as, “How are they related?”, or “What is the purpose of the group?” is an act of seeking meaning.

The expectations regarding our new group – this *named* phenomenon now living as an entity - any expectations of insiders or outsiders for that entity, possible actions and relationships in the future of that entity, and the purpose of that entity. Notice that by definition, groups always seem to have a unifying

¹ Burke, Kenneth, *Language As Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968,

relationship, what we most often call a purpose. All of these questions and expectations now have meaning, meaning given by simply *naming* that collection of people “group”. So when you say “team” or “group”, you’ve magically created new meanings, new realities.

Think of a group you have created - a project group, or a social group. To begin with, by using the words “group” or “team” you make the *actions of anyone affiliated in any way with that group or team, almost automatic*. You create meaning for the entity and a dialog that includes all those touched by the dialog. From that created and filtered view of reality, you do not see the group or its members in all the ways it or they *could possibly* be. Instead you see them as you think they *already are* or *should be according to your intentions*. You’ve actually already preordained and limited what’s possible for that entity. You *automatically* create some sort of purposeful future for that group. That purpose both defines what you expect of that group and what you do not.

But hold on a minute -- there are other people involved! And no matter what you’ve told them and what you think they understand, they bring their own perceptions and filters to the equation. They each are doing exactly the same creating you are, some sort of purpose, and some sort of *fit* and *role* for themselves. Fit and role are no small matter. It is crucial and necessary for every participant in every group. We haven’t yet proven it to be genetic, however, by observation, we can say it is invariably part of what humans seek to resolve for themselves and each other when becoming part of a group.

So when your new team meets for the first time, you may think the team members are organized around your particular realities, purposes, and expectations for that group. Not! In formulation and indeed throughout its existence, as a team, there is *always* a mix of realities organizing the assembled individuals. Even when launched from well formulated plans, with clear purposes, rigorous communication, and the best of relatedness, groups are *always* in a state of formulation, reformulation, reformulation, and reformulation. *Grouping*, as I call the process of forming and evolving of groups, is never a static phenomenon. Success is a momentary outcome for a group/team rather than a static state. Even sports teams that seem to win and win, season after season, the ones we talk about as having a “tradition of winning”, are constantly reforming, refining the fit and roles of their players, and redefining the price of tribal membership.

Naming is neither sinister nor extraordinary. It’s just what we do. Nor is the unconsciousness of it bad or wrong. It’s human. Richard Weaver postulates: *Rhetoric’s highest use is bringing people into relationship*

*with their values, creating an appetite for the good*². Confronting the power we have as naming animals, the power to actually create our reality and future may be freeing for some, but it is often daunting and scary for others. And it's not a simplistic process. Just as when we say "cold", there is created a range of experiences for each reader/listener, loosely organized around body sensations and temperature scales, so too, when we say *group* or *team* the *best* we can hope for is that those involved in the conversations that define that particular group, are all starting from *somewhere in the same ballpark*. Separately ask twenty people for a rigorous definition of the word group and you'll get twenty slightly varying descriptions. Granted, the definitions will likely be organized around a theme, but none-the-less they will differ. And the differences will remain, even when you put those twenty people together and do the work to define the purpose and relationship of their group.

Just as no two people have exactly the same experience at the same time, in endless subtle ways every individual has different perceptions and interpretations of either themselves, or any given *group*. From a different place, each of us sees 1) our own "strengths" or "weaknesses", and/or 2) the "strengths" or "weaknesses" of members of our groups, and/or 3) what's "possible" or "not possible" for ourselves and our groups, and/or 4) what outcomes could be planned and reliably delivered by our groups. We are all always negotiating who we are by virtue of our relationship to our group. We are all always judging and evaluating our teammates, ourselves, our leaders, and our purposes. We are meaning making machines. If there isn't enough meaning, we'll make it.

Individually we do not exist as identities without the context given by *group*. *Groups* intrinsically form the arena in which we define ourselves and give meaning to our actions - they contextualize what's possible for us as individuals. Ernest Becker writes about the individual identity-forming phenomenon in *Revolution in Psychiatry* when he says, "*The individual says to himself, 'I am this because this is what I am to others'*"³. So groups play a critical role in establishing who we are and where and how we *belong* – or equally as informative, where or how we don't.

John Shotter addresses this in his work on *Conversations*. Shotter says:

“...even as adults acting all alone, people still face the task of making what they do relevant – if not to the immediate conversational situation in which they are placed – then to the social, cultural, historical, and political ‘situation’ they ‘imagine’ themselves to be in. And again their task is

² Weaver, Richard, *The Ethics of Rhetoric*, p. 213. Davis, CA, Hermagoras Press, 1975.

³ Becker, Ernest. *Revolution in Psychiatry: The New Understanding of Man*. New York: Free Press, 1960, p. 60.

responsively (and responsibly) to judge intelligently (and legitimately) how felicitously to fit their responses into the requirements of that situation. Where again, it is the joint activity between them and their socially (and linguistically) constituted situation that ‘structures’ what they do or say, not wholly by themselves. It *is* just as if we had to conform ourselves to an objective reality existing independently of any of the individuals involved; but we have to conform ourselves to it, not because of its material shape, but because we all require each other *morally* to conform to the ‘situations’ emerging in existence between us. They exist as third entities, between us and the others around us. Thus, to us as individuals, such situations may seem like one or another kind of ‘external’ world, as something lying at the other end of a person-world dimension of interactions I mentioned above. However, such situations are not external to ‘us’ as a social group. As neither ‘mine’ nor ‘yours’, they constitute an Otherness that is ‘ours’, our peculiar form of Otherness.⁴

Given the intrinsic diverse perceptions of the participants in any group of people, there is always a rich conversation swirling in and around our groups – a *naming* and *negotiating* conversation. All those involved with the group, invent, manipulate, and fiddle with the messages within these negotiating conversations. At some point, various messages and exchanges begin to stick and a kind of melded reality emerges so some kind of future becomes possible. While the conversation is designed to negotiate the future of the group and the work of the group, the *real work* is the creating of a *model of workability* – the structures and processes for *collaboration*, *coordination*, and *communication* in order to deliver the results desired to satisfy the values and concerns of the group and its customers.

Let’s get back to the way in which worlds are created by *naming a group*. As we’ve said before about this *naming* business, each of us relates to *group* from a different point of view. Each one of us have our individual perceptions (stated more rigorously: our own *reality*) of the peculiar human phenomenon we call group. Granted, our versions *seem* similar; at least enough so that we think we know what we all are talking about when we say “*group*”. The truth is, *group* emerges as a negotiated phenomenon. The negotiation occurs over time in the rhetoric within and around the group.

Most people would argue that there will be behavioral consistencies from group to group and certainly within the activities of a given group from one meeting or conversation to the next. However, if we could somehow remove our habitual expectations, the group really is -- each and every time it assembles -- a newly invented construct. But the human brain is wired to compare the present to the past – to seek

⁴ Shotter, John, *Conversational Realities: Constructing Life Through Language*, Sage Publications, 1993, p. 8 -

whenever possible -- consistency and predictability. So once assigned a character role within a group, each member is expected, and applauded for acting consistent with that role. Discrete iterations of “now” are set to drift as though connected and related, not because they are, but because it’s too disconcerting to confront having to create each meeting or conversation as a new creation. What we never confront is that our expectations, regarding the behavior of groups over time, are illusory.

As leaders/managers/executives, the groups or teams we manage, or seek to manage, are illusions – rhetorically perfected naïve constructs against which we compare the obvious shortcomings of the groups/teams we all seem to be stuck with. What’s missing? Where’s the difficulty? Why can’t *our* groups/teams be the winning teams we’ve always wanted to be a part of – the ones that win, and love each other while they’re winning? Granted, we expect they will work at least to a minimum extent, but what separates *our* groups from the *really good* ones? What has one team win the NBA finals and the others fall short? How do you manage for that level of performance and productivity?

The Tribal Phenomenon

Historically, the habituated model for *the way humans think and go about relating and producing in groups* is *tribe*. Tribes have been around for over a hundred thousand years. Tribes provide the context for individual, the background groups against which we compare ourselves and others compare us. Tribes provide *otherness* - the equation [people and environment] that defines us by an ongoing process of comparison. Simply said, even though we may be of the same tribe, we are *not them*, and they are *not us*.

To the extent we share a language with others in our tribe(s) we can belong in a social entity with them, an entity with purposes. The *dialog* of these tribes provides opportunities for our co-existence and helps *name* a shared reality by agreement. If we can all reasonably agree on what “brown” looks like, and what “hard” feels like, for instance, then, possibly, we can all agree to name “those brown hard things found lying around” as “rocks”, and we can hope to construct other agreements upon which to invent a future to fulfill the highest good. What’s our “highest good”? Well that requires more conversations and more agreeing, doesn’t it?

That which organizes tribes to live and work together for the greater good is grounded in a hundred thousand years of rhetoric, practices, traditions, and habits. What may be surprising to some, is to discover that in some very fundamental ways we haven’t strayed far from our ancient roots. I often tell managers they can save a lot of consulting dollars by simply thinking of their organizations as 19th century tribes and act accordingly. Even in today’s complex multi-cultured global enterprises, *humans are*

compelled to belong in tribes - to serve and protect and so *be included and protected* by the tribal entity as a means to fulfilling one of our most fundamental needs: *being safe*, avoiding the abyss.

When viewed from the tribal model, we could say that what humans fundamentally *really* care about is more similar than different. Granted, there are rhetorical differences, but the fundamental motivations are shared: *assembling in language groups, in service of being useful to fulfill sets of concerns, the fulfillment of which, provides a future for the tribe – and so by derivation, for the individual – a safe haven in the face of an unknown future.*

Corporate organizations are simply special types of tribes, and the groups and sub-groups and sub-sub-groups are tribes within the larger tribe. You could think of a large multi-national corporation as a collection of tribes within a nation, such as the Iroquois⁵ nation.

Distinguishing Group Core Concerns

As an executive or leader of your tribe, one of your most important jobs is to be clear about the *Core Concerns* of your enterprise [tribe or nation] or that which causes your tribe to *think and act in the way it does*. *Core Concerns* are that which *compels the being and doing* of your tribe; or you might think of them as that which generates *the actions and commitments* of the tribe. What are the fundamental interests or motivations of the tribe? What makes it want to be about what it's about? Some think of these as purpose, but concerns are more fundamental to the being of the tribe. The concerns to be fulfilled reveal what lies beneath purpose.⁶

Core concerns complimented with core values are what give rise to your tribe's purpose and provide the context for the tribe's definition of its highest good. Another cut at what we mean by core concerns is distinguished by Martin Heidegger as *Besorgen*⁷. The German word *Besorgen* roughly translates to *Concerns* in English, but unlike the popular English meaning for concerns (worries), *Besorgen* distinguishes that which *pulls* an entity (person, group, or enterprise) forward – that which *compels*

⁵ A Native American confederacy inhabiting New York State and originally composed of the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, and Seneca peoples, known as the Five Nations. After 1722 the confederacy was joined by the Tuscarawas to form the Six Nations.

⁶ Walden, David, *Using the Methods of Fernando Flores*, *Center For Quality of Management Journal*, Spring 1997, Vol. 6, No.1, p18, - "It is very important to be aware of the concerns one has because this drives how one reacts. We need to understand this for effective teamwork; we need to understand the individual concerns of people on the team."

⁷ Macquarrie, John and Robinson, Edward, *A translation of Heidegger, Martin, Being and Time*, p83, Harper & Row Publishers Incorporated, 1962 – [as in the the German word *Besorgen*] - "Heidegger points out, he will use this term in a special sense which is to be distinguished from customary use. We shall, as a rule, translate it by 'concern'. Though this is by no means an exact equivalent."

actions. The way to think of it is to ask what is the tribe constituted *for*, which differs from what it's *about*.

Core concerns are not goals, or plans, or missions, or visions, or outcomes. And while not measurable in and of themselves, they are very real. When we talk about core concerns we say they *give* us a certain kind of future. For instance, a core concern for creativity, will give a group all sorts of measurable outcomes designed to distinguish and demonstrate being creative. Team A, valuing *creativity*, will produce all manner of creative results, whereas by comparison, team B valuing *excellence*, has it's attention elsewhere. Team B's results may or may not be construed as creative, but it makes less difference to the members of the team because they are *given by* their concern for excellence.

While a team leader has a lot to say about the core concerns of their team, it's never a one-person call. Ultimately, each group/team/tribe is given by a *set* of core concerns constituted by the *entire* entity. One of the pitfalls for teams/groups is failing to recognize that each member brings their own set of core values and core concerns to the equation. However, some of those personal core values are so intrinsic to the functioning of a given team member that the values become [undistinguished] *standards* for the entire team/group – standards that the other members of the team do not necessarily know they are accountable for.

If team A's pursuit of creative outcomes violates the integrity standard of one or more of its members, he/she/they become disenchanted or even hostile to the team's relationships and functioning. It's not that the member whose integrity standards have been violated, intentionally wants to be a nasty teammate; it's just what naturally happens when the team's formative rhetorical deliberations/negotiations have not revealed and distinguished those unconsciously held values.⁸

Sometimes the assigned leader of the group/team has less to say about what actually constitutes the tribe than other leaders within the tribe. In some tribes the chief is clearly the appointed leader; in others, the medicine man or woman fills that role. In a few, it's a consensus that determines the concerns, values, and that which drives the actions and commitments of the tribe.

Tribal Core Concerns and Values, when clearly distinguished, will *naturally* occur as senior to the concerns/values of the individual members of the tribe. When clearly distinguished and agreed upon, everyone in the tribe is given by, and accountable to, the fulfillment of the tribe's core concerns and

⁸ You could think of core values as the conditions of satisfaction a teammate has for the way the concerns of the team and the team's customers are being fulfilled. Therefore, if our sample team organized around the concern for being creative took certain actions that perhaps violated a value of say, "doing complete work" of one of its team members, there could be a clash of undistinguished values and concerns.

values. Executives or team leaders (chiefs) are as accountable to the fulfillment of those values/concerns as *any other member of the tribe*, or employee of the enterprise. It is the very essence of what everyone is paid to satisfy. It is *that which creates and gives reason to the existence* of the tribe. As a leader, if you are unable to distinguish those values/concerns, you are blind to the most fundamental motivations of your enterprise/tribe.

Many would say the most fundamental core concern of an enterprise is simply to make money. Not so. Money is the by-product, and a way to measure progress in satisfying that which gives your enterprise its reason to exist and do the things it does. There are millions of ways to make money, and some of them are easier than the way you are going about it. The more useful question is what draws the tribe forward? What concern or set of concerns is *group* looking to satisfy, the satisfaction of which, is giving it energy, meaning, usefulness, purpose, and reward?

To help distinguish your tribe's core concerns you may want to ask some of the following:

- What are the most senior *interests* of the tribe?
- What *matters* most to the future good of the tribe?
- What *generates and organizes* tribal actions?
- What is most *important* to the highest good of the tribe?
- What constitutes *why* the tribe *cares*?
- What most fundamentally *motivates* the tribe?
- What best *satisfies* the wants of the tribe's customer(s)?

These are all sorts of ways to access core concerns and core values of your tribes. They apply at every level of your entity (i.e. - enterprise, division, group, department, team, etc.). Each entity at each level is fulfilling some subset of a larger or senior set of core concerns of the larger entity up through the hierarchy. The enterprise itself is, in turn, about fulfilling another set of values/concerns: those of its customer(s). The fulfillment of your customer's concerns naturally leads to satisfying the core concerns of your enterprise, and so, that which *gives reason* to your tribe and its members.

Like a house of cards, an enterprise that is *not* ultimately satisfying the concerns of its customers, has no worthwhile service or product to trade for the profits and resources it, in turn, needs to satisfy its own core concerns. For the purposes of this discussion, stock holders and other investor concerns are considered to be a *one* of some *set* of core concerns of the Enterprise. When an enterprise is no longer satisfying the concerns of its customers, it has no real future. As its customer base erodes, its future

disappears, and unless the enterprise revokes *obsolete* concerns and/or *invents new concerns*, the tribe is doomed to extinction.

What people are paid to provide

In any group entity *people are paid to satisfy certain concerns of that entity*. The pay may or may not be money, but there's always an exchange. The exchange may be as simple as a contribution to the discourse, or a volunteered service, or maybe just making yourself available – something. The pay may be in the form of what you get out of participating – recognition, friendships, access to networks, etc.

In a corporation, at every level, each employee takes on the satisfaction of particular concerns, or perhaps a set of values. The activities are typically formalized as accountabilities designed to fulfill certain accountabilities and produce measurable outcomes. That could also include actions and results designed to satisfy concerns at various levels of the enterprise. Accordingly, employment and accountability are not personal phenomenon. Instead, they are sets of agreements between entities - organizations and individuals - each agreeing to provide something in exchange for satisfying the respective concerns of the parties involved.

Human beings⁹ wake up every morning needing to belong⁹. Even outcasts, in what might appear as twisted logic, identify themselves by *not* belonging – which is a particular version of *belonging*. An outcast from one group is accepted in another. History is full of examples; and everyone knows *themselves* as an outcast in one or more tribes. So belonging has many strategies, many fits.

When formulating your next group or team, begin by watching the dynamics of how people go about belonging. Some lead, some follow, some argue and resist. Some become mavericks and are tolerated as such; others are victims and complain and whine. Some want to please, others entertain, some want to be good group citizens. Some resent having to downgrade their values to the values of the group while others are inspired to a higher purpose. It's all going on, all the time – in every group. *It never stops*. It's what we call *being human*.

⁹ Logan, David & Fischer-Wright, Halee - *Rhetoric and the Rise of Tribes: Using Organizational Alchemy* – 2006, p7 - “Tribes are as central to human life as food - we appear genetically inclined to form them, and language absolutely requires them.”

What's useful in this tribal churn is to distinguish, 1) what are the core concerns of *this* group which the members of this group will each agree they are about fulfilling, and 2) what are the concerns the members of *this* group *are paid to fulfill*? Are there conditions of satisfaction or values in play along the way? What are intended outcomes? What are the results the team is paid to produce? Without clarity and agreement around those questions you are, at best, herding cats.

As the leader of a group you may have an idea of 1) the concerns *you* want satisfied, 2) *your* purpose and values for the group, and 3) the outcomes *you* want the group to provide. But without a dialog to distinguish what *constitutes this particular group*, your teammates are *naturally* operating from *their* default set of personal - and automatically senior - core concerns, values, and strategies for belonging and fitting in, and what *they want to be paid to provide*. It's likely, though not absolute, that *what they want*, will be very different, from what you believe you are paying them to provide.

Before we get to the list of recommended actions we coach team leaders and executives to employ when formulating work groups or teams, let's re-visit one point regarding those hidden concerns and values that each team member brings to their membership in groups. Just as groups have core concerns and values, so too, do individuals. And while a concern for belonging will allow most people to temporarily subjugate their core concerns to those of a given group, it's not guaranteed. In fact, it's best to assume there are some lurking potential issues or disconnects at the unconscious/undistinguished level, and that if left to remaining so, they will eventually become a source for disillusionment, lack of alignment, and/or a clash of teammates.

Further, the deepest of those undistinguished personal core concerns or values *can* occur as undeclared *expectations* (standards) for the tribe. Each member of the tribe will be naturally and constantly measuring others in the group through their unconscious concerns and values. If all goes as it usually does with humans, members of the tribe will naturally, just in the course of life itself, be found wanting.

Remember we're dealing with humans. Every member of the tribe is comparing every other member of the tribe to some standard for trust and usefulness. Of course, in very large corporate groups, the observation of others through direct participation in dialogs is limited by proximity, business functions, and operational silos, etc., and so the comparing and evaluating are limited to a localized set of tribal members. Still, make no mistake about it, those unspoken standards exist and become part of the rhetoric that defines the future of that tribal entity. They show up as complaints, poor moral, disenchantment, lack

of alignment, poor performance, victimization, and/or blame, or any number of the ailments we all associate with unworkable teams.