

What Kind of Tribal Leader Are You?

By Doug Talley, Indiana State Minister

I've recently finished reading a book that is challenging my thinking about the church. The book is "Tribal Leadership" by David Logan, John King, and Halee Fischer-Wright. It is not written about the church per se, but since churches are tribes (or collections of tribes) I am gaining a lot of insight into the church and the culture it needs to develop if it is going to change the world for Christ.

A tribe is a group of 20-150 people. Each tribe has its own culture (way of thinking, feeling and acting). When we are primarily part of a single tribe, like a specific congregation, we tend to overlook its culture because we are so accustomed to it. However, if you were to frequently spend time in multiple congregations (like I do), you would see more clearly how each congregation has its own way of thinking, feeling and acting. I find that often times there are even various cultural pockets with a single church (especially larger churches), yet there is an overall culture that tends to emerge.

Logan, King and Fischer-Wright have identified five stages of cultures within tribes. The following list is primarily taken from their website (www.triballeadership.net) but has been adapted by me to the church. I've made the stage identification more church friendly by replacing a popular slang word used in the book with "stinks."

- Stage One – "Life Stinks." These are tribes whose members are despairingly hostile. They may create scandals, steal from the company, or even threaten violence. I'm not sure that if a church was at this tribal level that it could survive - at least it couldn't for very long.
- Stage Two – "My Life Stinks." This is the dominant culture for 25% of workplace tribes. It includes members who are passively antagonistic, sarcastic, and resistant to new management initiatives and change. There are some church tribes that exist at this stage, but they are extremely unhealthy, negative, rigid entities. Churches at this stage tend to have business meetings that are often tense and seasoned heavily with conflict. Frankly, the tribal members have trouble getting along.
- Stage Three – "I'm Great." Forty-nine percent of tribes are in this stage that is marked by knowledge hoarders who want to outwork and outthink their competitors on an individual basis. They are lone warriors who not only want to win, but need to be the best and brightest in order to feel good about themselves. A lot of church tribes are at this stage as evidenced by a focus on being the best congregation they can be but not having a very broad Kingdom mindset. The question often posed at this stage is, "What's in it for our church and for us?" These churches see themselves in competition with other churches.

- Stage Four – “We’re Great.” In this stage members are excited to work together for the benefit of the greater mission. This rare church tribe sees the Kingdom as being much bigger and broader than just their congregation and is willing to work with other tribes outside their church to accomplish the mission. Tribal leaders and members don’t ask “What’s in it for me or my church?” Instead, they are preoccupied with sacrificing and selflessly giving away so that Kingdom impact is maximized. I suspect a lot of churches imagine they are in this stage, but it is wishful thinking.
- Stage Five – “Life Is Great.” Less than 2% of tribal cultures reach this state where members have made substantial innovations to use their potential to make a global impact. I tend to wonder if any church stays at this stage very long.

As I read the book, God convicted me that I’ve tended to be most at home in Stage 3 – “My Life Is Great.” It was painful for me to realize that I’ve been more focused on building my kingdom than I have growing God’s Kingdom. Before you brand me a godless heretic and call for the gallows, let me clarify that. Sometimes as state pastor and more frequently when I was a pastor, I saw the mission in terms of the church or ministry that I was leading. My question was, “What is in it for us? How do we benefit from this ministry possibility? What do we get out of it?”

As a pastor my goal was to grow the best church (with God’s help, of course). Then as state pastor it was to grow the best state ministry (again, with God’s help). God has been convicting me that neither goal is what He has in mind. He is far more interested in expanding His kingdom, not expanding my kingdom. He is far more interested in world impact than just impacting my world.

As I read about what ministry would be like at Stages 4 & 5, I realized they are what Jesus had in mind when He talked about the Kingdom of God. I had been duped by our culture into believing that my church or my state ministry was the center of the universe, and everything we did or spent money on should benefit us in some way as if we were in competition with other churches.

When I stepped into the role as state pastor of Indiana Ministries, God began challenging me to think at Stages 4 & 5 even before I read the book. For example, I was drawn (I believe by the Holy Spirit) to Indiana Ministries partnering with Journey Church in Australia in their effort to restart the Church of God in Australia with the ultimate goal being that this single congregation would become a launching pad to reach Australia and Southeast Asia. This partnership does not directly benefit Indiana Ministries – but it does benefit the Kingdom! And we have leadership and financial resources we can share to make this happen.

As Healthy Growing Churches (a tribal movement primarily in the Church of God to accomplish the Great Commission) was forming, one of my mentors talked about the Five stages of culture. That's when the Holy Spirit caused the light bulb in my head to go on. It dawned on me that partnering with God to expand His Kingdom is not about what I or an organization I am leading gets out of it. It is about sacrificing and working together on a mission that is bigger than any person or group. It is about being willing to do whatever it takes to accomplish this mission without thought of personal or organizational gain.

I want the rest of my life and ministry to be lived at least at Stage 4, if not 5. I want to be sold out to the mission and working with others to accomplish it. I want to be willing to do whatever it takes in order to change the world for Christ and expand God's Kingdom. I want to be part of tribal relationships that share that same aspiration. Christ is the hope of the world. The world desperately needs Him.

You might be interested in watching a short video by one of the authors, David Logan, that talks about the five stages of culture. <http://www.triballeadership.net/bnet-video>

My sights are set on stage five. Wanna join me?

Blessings,
Doug