

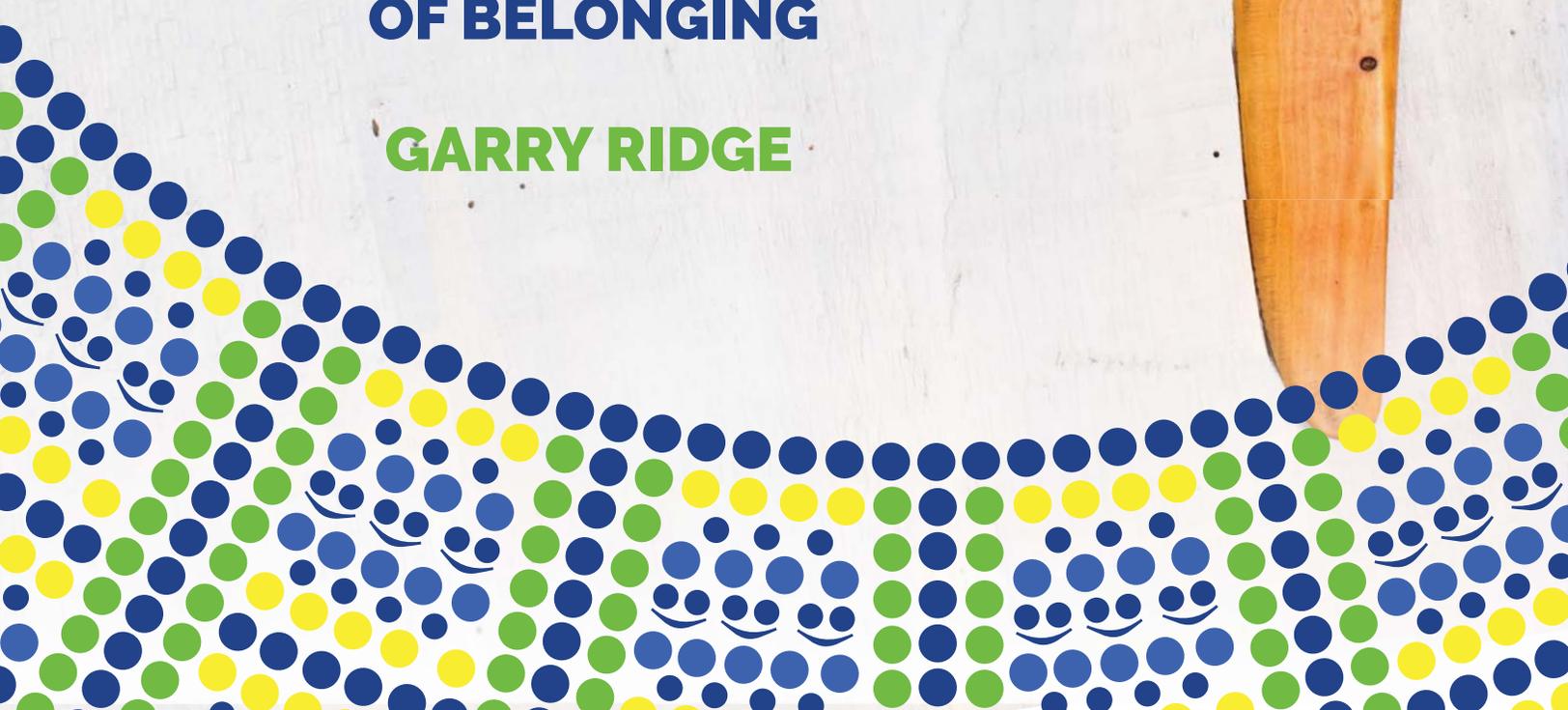
THE WD-40 COMPANY

TRIBE

..... **STORY**

**HOW WE TURNED
A GREAT COMPANY
INTO A COMMUNITY
OF BELONGING**

GARRY RIDGE



The WD-40 Company Tribes Story: How We Turned a Great Company into a Community of Belonging

By Garry Ridge

The natural human inclination is to come together, combine our talents, seize the opportunities and attack the danger. Leadership sets the tone and the conditions. – Simon Sinek

Consider for a moment your upcoming interviews with candidates for that opening you have in your department. What do you suppose is on their minds as they drive up to your building, greet the receptionist, sign in, wait to be escorted to your office, and then take their seat in front of you?

“Will I get the offer?” is probably the main question, followed quickly with, “Will the salary meet my needs?” Let’s assume the answer is *yes* on both counts. What’s top of mind for your candidates now? They are probably thinking about whether or not they will actually enjoy being in your organization: “Will I be happy here?”

Will they believe in your products? Will they be able to stand for the mission and vision of your company’s long-term goals? Will they value working with and for your customers? Perhaps most importantly to their day-to-day experience with your company, will they find a community of safe, trusted colleagues with whom they can focus their full attention, contribute their best, and then go home at the end of the day to their families happy and fulfilled?

“Will I belong here?”

In other words: “Is this my new tribe?”

If you know the famous Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, you know that the first two levels address the most fundamental physical requirements: Food, water, warmth, rest, safety, security. In the context of a person's career, those are the essential fundamentals that we can gather into the basket marked: "Will the compensation meet my needs?" From the perspective of an ordinary company, that is translated into the equation: One unit of output = one unit of paycheck. Not very inspiring, is it?

It's the third level of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs where the true magic begins. Belonging, love, friends. This is where all the benefits of employee engagement begin. Simply put, when individuals feel supported, accepted, proud of their colleagues, safe to be themselves so they can focus on their work, rather than squander their energies on internal politics, they can invest who they are in the mission of delivering their best work.

But, historically, companies haven't given themselves the chance to intentionally create a culture that promotes those feelings of belonging. The trend toward developing emotionally healthy company cultures is slowly emerging now. And those of us who have gone ahead on this journey owe it to the workplace world to help show the way.

At WD-40 Company, we call our culture of belonging *a tribe*. I'd like to show you how we've done it.

The Origin Story

Every tribe has the story of how it began. "In the beginning..." The origin story always involves the search for finding a place in the cosmos. The gods tell the seas where to sit, the mountains where to rise, and the sun when to set. And children learn, as they broaden their wanderings beyond their homes – which reliably supply those first two Maslow levels of needs – that, "Yes, you are welcome, you are needed, you are wanted in this new world of yours." As such, it's fitting to start WD-40 Company's tribe story with the tale of a small boy in the Sydney suburb of Five Dock in the 1960s.

That would be me, of course. Eventually I would become CEO of WD-40 Company. But in the beginning, the origin story is about a weekly bag of candy from Mrs. Peel, a lonely, elderly shut-in who looked forward to her daily chats with the neighborhood newspaper boy. It was my first real job, and my only official duties were to deliver the newspapers and collect the subscription money. But I knew instinctively that she looked forward to our friendly, daily exchange. And there, I suppose, was my first experience of discretionary effort that is inspired by emotional connection at work. Every Friday she would greet me with a bag of candy – or *lollies*, as we say in Australia. I learned from our daily and weekly routine how powerful it can be to sincerely care about someone and make an authentic connection beyond the scope of the job description. And in return, she made me feel cared about as well.

Our relationship took a mundane newspaper subscription to a new level of authentic, human connection. And for the first time that I can remember, there was someone out in the world beyond my own family who was happy to see me.

A few years later, I learned how it felt to be critically needed and trusted. Mr. Knox had the local hardware store, where I had been doing odd jobs that were suitable for a teenager. I wasn't there for more than a couple of months when Mr. Knox threw the store keys to me and said, "Here. Take care of the store. I have to be gone for a while, and I don't know when I'll be back." His father had died unexpectedly. In his grief and upset, Mr. Knox turned to the one person he could trust and handed over his entire business for safekeeping. Because he trusted me, without a second thought, he gave me the gift of boosted self-esteem and pride in my connection to Mr. Knox and his store. That translated into an intensified dedication on my part. I made sure that the store was in even better condition by the time he got back. Again, modern employee engagement experts would call that discretionary effort. My teenager's mind simply called it the right thing to do.

I learned through these two friendships that our work life is one critical area of our short journey in this world where we find meaning, belonging, purpose, and identity. I learned how it felt to be on the receiving end of caring, appreciation, and trust. And I could see for myself how those feelings inspired me to do even more for the people who looked forward to seeing me each day. They taught me one of my life's most valuable early lessons: That I belonged...because I was valued...because I cared about the people I did business with. And that because of all that, I had a place in the world.

I discovered how good it felt to be needed, in a context outside my immediate family. It inspired me to be even more valuable to the people who needed me. And those positive experiences set me on a path where each successive career choice would one day lead me to the role of being CEO of the WD-40 Company.

It's one thing to know how good it feels to be welcomed and needed. But it's quite a different matter to consider how those feelings contribute to the health of a workplace culture, and ultimately the financial success of the company. It wasn't until I moved to California in 1994 and earned my MS in Executive Leadership at the University of San Diego in 2001 that I began to form a conscious philosophy.

It was at the university that I met Ken Blanchard, who had long been synthesizing these principles into an organized study called the *Leadership Point of View*, which introduced to the world a new way of looking at leadership as an elevating influence on our people. During that class with Ken, we began an enduring relationship in which he has served as a consistent leadership mentor to me. And I, in turn, had the privilege of serving on his Board of Directors for 10 years.

The workplace gift to individuals as they seek the personally restorative, healing, growing benefits of showing up every day to rejoin their workplace community in the mission of achieving common goals is the gift of belonging. It's also the gift of elevating the entire corporate story to new heights of achievement as it serves all its stakeholders. And when I began to systematically apply what I experienced growing up, combined with what I was learning about workplace culture at the university, it all came together in new company accomplishments.

In very short order, I began to synthesize these new ideas that I was learning with Ken Blanchard with a growing fascination for the nature of aboriginal tribes – communities of humans gathering together with the purpose of survival for today and growth into the future. In those early days of my studies, it was more fashionable to refer to groups of coworkers as *teams*. But that wasn't quite right for what I was trying to create inside WD-40 Company. *Teams* carries a connotation that is too temporary, of the moment, focused on the single task of winning at one particular thing. I was reaching for a more deeply embedded cultural reference where win, lose, or draw, we were still together and would be well into the future.

Tribe ticked all the boxes. *Tribes* is about *contributing* to the whole – not individually winning and losing at all costs. Any role you can think of within an indigenous tribe has a counterpart in the corporate community. Warriors. Teachers. Nurturers. Learners. Scouts. Hunters. They can all be found inside a company structure.

Equally importantly, *tribes* also spoke to me of belonging. Naturally, in a corporate setting, the possibility of termination is always an option. But in a culture that is built on a tribal philosophy, dismissing employees (we call it “sharing them with our competitors”) is a last resort of such extreme circumstance, it would be as solemn a decision as it would be if a tribe were to banish one of its members.

Once employees are psychologically safe in the knowledge that they truly belong to the group, they can invest their emotional energies to the mission of their roles inside the tribe.

What If All Your Employees Loved Coming to Work Every Day?

To explore our tribal culture as the “secret sauce” of our successes, the first thing to do is define what we at WD-40 Company mean by the word *tribe*. Simon Sinek talks about a “circle of safety,” in which all the participants are collected and protected by a defining mutual agreement of values, practices, mission, purpose, and ways of doing things. There is an ongoing sense of belonging that is as consistent and dependable in the environment as the air we breathe. Once we are accepted into the group, we trust each other. We share knowledge freely and openly. We assume the best of each others' intentions at all times. We sacrifice for each other. We celebrate with each other. We honor our contributions as individuals without losing sight of the valuable, positive impact on the entire community.

In his book, *Tribe: On Homecoming and Belonging*, Sebastian Junger puts it this way: “The earliest and most basic definition of community – of tribe – would be the group of people that you both help feed and help defend.”

Taking the effort to define and create a tribe in your company has obvious significant and unmistakable rewards. Dave Logan, John King, and Halee Fischer-Wright specify them beautifully in their book, *Tribal Leadership: Leveraging Natural Groups to Build a Thriving Organization*:

- People collaborate and work toward a noble cause, propelled from their values.
- Fear and stress go down as the “interpersonal friction” of working together decreases.
- The entire tribe shifts from resisting leadership to seeking it out.
- People seek employment in the company and stay, taking the company a long way toward winning the war for talent.
- People’s engagement in work increases, and they go from “quit on the job but still on the payroll” to fully participating.
- Organizational learning becomes effortless, with the tribe actively teaching its members the latest thinking and practices.
- People’s overall health statistics improve. Injury rates and sick days go down.
- Setting and implementing a successful competitive strategy becomes stunningly easy as people’s aspirations, knowledge of the market, and creativity are unlocked and shared.
- People report feeling more alive and having more fun.

How has our commitment to a tribal culture manifested itself in the experience of working at WD-40 Company and our market performance? That story is best told by the results of our 2018 Employee Engagement Index. Below are just some of the 26 queries that we have identified as key to our performance both in the marketplace globally and our own noble cause of making sure we are providing a workplace culture where our employees feel safe, supported, appreciated, inspired, innovative, curious, and optimistic.

“I am clear on the company’s goals.”	97.2%
“I am excited about WD-40 Company’s future direction.”	93.4%
“WD-40 Company encourages employees to continually improve in their job, to make it “better than it is today.”	92.9%
“I understand how my job contributes to achieving WD-40 Company’s goals.”	97.9%
“I know what results are expected of me.”	97.4%
“I feel my opinions and values are a good fit with the WD-40 Company culture.”	98.1%

And, my personal favorite:

“I love to tell people that I work for WD-40 Company.” 99.0%

All these answers are experience-based. The way our tribe members experience their time at WD-40 Company shapes their perceptions of the company, and whether they feel it is a good place for them to invest their time, talents, and passion. Providing those experiences is, to all of us at WD-40 Company, a sacred responsibility for multiple reasons. We recognize that people spend the majority of their waking hours at work. So why shouldn’t they feel fully fulfilled and supported by people they know, like, trust and respect? Don’t we all deserve that daily expectation as part of our natural inheritance as humans in this world? And they bring those positive feelings home to their families at the end of the day. So we know that our tribe members’ positive feelings about the work they do contribute to the optimism that their family members carry with them into their own futures.

How does this tribal engagement manifest in company performance? There is abundant literature showing the linkage between high engagement scores and company performance across companies and industries. So I’ll just focus on what we’re experiencing at WD-40 Company:

Over the past 20 years our sales have quadrupled. Our market cap has increased from \$250 million to a bit over \$2.5 billion. And our annual compounded growth rate of total shareholder return is 15%.

The proof of the pudding, as they say, is in the eating. Those numbers represent a whole lot of cans. But our second most important value is, “We create positive lasting memories in all of our relationships.” Engagement, and thus personal investment in the organization, stems from positive experiences within the tribe, which yields the applause of financial performance.

Can You Do This?

And so it made a lot of sense to me to study the nature of tribes around the world. I applied two questions that are commonly asked in many business strategy sessions: “What commonalities can we see here that we can ascribe to the success of our goal scenario?” And, “What is duplicable as we move forward into the future?”

In my studies I discovered seven attributes that can be found among all tribes all over the world. No matter what specific cultural details might differentiate one group from another, these seven characteristics show up in any tribal group you can name:

- Learning and Teaching
- Values
- Belonging
- Future Focus
- Specialized Skills
- Warriors
- Celebration

To answer your question, “Can you do this?” Yes, you can. Use these seven attributes as your cultural superstructure, and you will have the organized focus you need to build up from there and fill in the details with your own cultural specifics.

Learning and Teaching

When I give speeches around the world, I routinely ask my audiences if they have ever thrown a boomerang – the essential survival tool of Australian tribes from the beginning of time. No matter where I am, hands will go up. “Ah,” I then say, “have you ever thrown one so that it comes back?” All hands go down, which is to be expected.

In our modernized, global society where, for most people, sustenance can be had simply by taking a quick trip to the grocery store, boomerangs are a toy, a novelty, from a far-away land. But for the original people in the land where I come from, they were the tool that guaranteed that communities would be fed.

But first, young tribe members had to learn how to use it. They had to learn to throw it accurately so that it stunned its meaty target. Or, if it failed to hit its mark, it would at least return reliably to the hunter’s hand – a difficult, but indispensable, skill that the hunter had to master. This meant that someone very patient had to teach the novice hunter. And then the next one. And the next one. As one generation of hunters learned how to feed their tribes by the effective throwing of the boomerang, the teacher then had to teach those hunters how to pass that knowledge on to the next generation. And on and on, reaching far into the future, long after the original teacher had departed the tribe.

That is the tribal leader's role. We are the elders who, as teacher and astronaut Christa McAuliffe said, touch the future.

Nelson Mandela once said, “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.” Most of us in developed countries take our education for granted. But when you consider how in some cultures people are willing to die for the right to learn how to read, and how others will control their people by forbidding them education, it’s hard to ignore how crucial learning is. (The mere fact that you are reading this report is a testament to many generations of your ancestors – likely long before your own parents – who committed themselves to the principle that their children must be educated.)

And so the leader must be committed to teaching. All the time. Likewise, however, that same leader must also be dedicated to learning. Just as young tribe members had to trust that their chief knew his way around a boomerang, as a tribal leader your credibility is built up by your obvious commitment to improving your own skill sets.

Jim Kouzes, co-author of *The Leadership Challenge*, says that there are four foundational characteristics of exemplary leadership: honesty/trustworthiness; competence/expertise; inspiring/forward-thinking; vision for the future. The second one – competence/expertise – depends utterly on the leaders’ willingness to continue their own learning path. Competence and expertise can quickly expire in today’s rapid changes in technology from new discoveries. The tribe needs to see leaders constantly building their own skill sets.

Openness to learning requires a willingness – indeed a commitment – for a leader to say, “I don’t know.” Especially within the hearing of other tribe members. A leader can’t gain competence and expertise if they shut themselves down to learning new skills, insights, and methods. This stance might create a feeling of vulnerability at first. But there is great strength in vulnerability. It sets up the opportunity for a leader to learn something new, but it also gives fellow tribe members the opportunity to teach the leader – which perpetuates the culture of learning and teaching throughout all levels of the tribe.

This is especially relevant today when the tribal elders stand to gain as much — if not more — from the knowledge of their younger tribe members as the younger stand to gain from their elders. Any leader of Millennials will say this.

One of the turning points in my own life and career was the day I got comfortable with the three most powerful words I ever learned: “I don’t know.” As a new CEO, I believed that I had to know everything, to be the smartest person in the room. Which is a tremendous burden for anyone to carry. But the instant the revelation finally sank in that I was actually better off *not* being the smartest one in the room, I felt set free. Free to relax in the moment, free to listen, free to absorb new information. Free, in fact, to make my own mistakes.

Which leads me to the third and final point in the Teaching and Learning attribute of the tribe: The willingness to learn, try, and make mistakes along the way. But at WD-40 Company we don’t make “mistakes.” We have *Learning Moments*, which we define as “positive or negative outcomes from any situation that needs to be openly and freely shared to benefit all.” This concept is the bedrock of our third most important value, “Make it better than it is today.”

Our tribe members are safe to have Learning Moments. They are encouraged to experiment, try new things, grow from the resulting experiences, and then report back to the rest of the tribe without fear. This attitude is what helps us grow and sustain our position as an industry leader in a very competitive marketplace – not only in our industry but also in the challenge to attract and retain the very best talent the world has to offer. As a tribe we are in search of ways to expand our capabilities, and in service of that effort we acknowledge and celebrate each new discovery. Because each new discovery leads us to the future.

Even the very name of our flagship multi-use product, WD-40, speaks to our tribal commitment to embracing each new journey into the unknown. Our final, immensely successful, product finally performed the way we wanted it to after 40 attempts at the formula. While, in retrospect, the success of WD-40 has a meant-to-be feel to it, I imagine that at formula attempts 18, 29 and 34 onward, things were looking pretty bleak for our corporate ancestors.

Jules Verne once wrote: “Science is made up of mistakes, but they are mistakes which it is useful to make, because they lead little by little to the truth.” While the formulation of WD-40 was inarguably science, as a tribal principle, our commitment to Learning Moments is the formula that brings us closer and closer to performance excellence and tribal wisdom. Little by little.

Values

Our values are what unite us, they bring us together in a protective ecosystem of our day-to-day work and decisions. Values also set us free. They are the guidelines which, once learned and embraced, release us to focus on the activities that make us successful – both as a tribe and as individuals. When clearly written, they tell us what our tribe cherishes above everything else. And in what order of importance.

A values-driven culture offers its tribe members more than just simple one-liners stating each value. Tribe members also need context so that they can see what that value looks like in action.

For instance, at WD-40 our number one value is “We value doing the right thing.” Because people will inevitably interpret “we value doing the right thing” differently, particularly if they are in multiple national cultures, we need to define it more fully. And so, the following paragraph expands on the core principle:

“We do the right thing in serving our tribe, our stockholders, our customers, our products, our end-users, our suppliers and even our competitors. This means looking for the right action in every context, and asking critical questions that bring out the best course or decisions relevant to the situation and the circumstances. It also means being honest in both word and deed. Being reliable, dependable and competent. And doing what’s right according to the situation and the context. If we are honest and we speak and act congruently, we will be doing what is right.”

It is only after this first value is fully articulated that we further develop the values list, each one with its accompanying description:

- We value creating positive, lasting memories in all our relationships.
- We value making it better than it is today.
- We value succeeding as a tribe while excelling as individuals.
- We value owning it and passionately acting on it.
- We value sustaining the WD-40 Company economy.

All values are critical in governing the way we make our choices and decisions for the business. But each one follows the preceding for a reason – because the preceding value informs the way we live out the successive values. Even so, I have my favorites in the way they show up in our tribe members’ attitude in their work. For instance, the first line of the explanation for, “We value owning it and passionately acting on it,” and how it shows up every day in the way our culture is expressed this way:

“We get our shoes dirty. We are relentless about understanding our business and our role in impacting it. We are passionate about our end users, customers and markets, and how we can positively impact them. We act in ways that maintain our traditions while positioning us powerfully for the future. We consider carefully, act boldly, and course correct as needed.”

As you can see, our values make our tribal culture come alive in the clear, unambiguous way they tell us all how we are expected to behave and establish our priorities. A strong values set also diminishes what we call “churn,” that waste of precious resources by repeatedly asking and answering the same set of questions, starting with “What am I supposed to do now?” In an aboriginal society, values are more than a nice-to-have. They save calories, which are crucial to survival. Living in a subsistence condition, there is nothing to be wasted on unnecessary actions or “noise” of life, such as these kinds of questions, “What am I going to do about this? What should I do about that? What will happen to me in this gray area?”

Just as these kinds of questions take up critical calories in an aboriginal society, they also spend time and money in the corporate setting. Well-articulated values eliminate fear-based second-guessing. They focus the tribe members’ attention on what is the most crucial. Whatever Learning Moment might result from the choices our tribe members make at any given point, if they make their choices based on our values, they’re safe.

Belonging

Naturally, this entire conversation around the tribal culture is about belonging. Belonging, as it shows up in the third level of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, and how it appears in the day-to-day life of a healthy tribe, is about creating an experience where employees can focus on building a future for their company because they aren't obsessing about their security and survival. They feel protected, supported, and safe to be authentic in both their personalities and the way they perform their work.

The workplace experience of belonging – even in an intentional commitment to a tribal culture – is vastly different from the indigenous tribes, of course. To begin with, tribe members in the indigenous context didn't have a choice. Aside from birth, newcomers generally arrived only against their will through kidnappings and intertribal violence. Leaving the tribe was equally difficult. If they were born into the tribe, there was no getting out. Even if they were abducted into the tribe, getting out was also unlikely. According to Junger, these outsiders commonly chose to stay once they got the hang of things. Even when they were given the option to return to their original culture. The tribal culture was that compelling. But otherwise, in most circumstances, should they have tried to join a different tribe, they would have discovered very quickly – and unambiguously – how it felt to be unwelcome.

As a corporate tribe leader, it's imperative to remember that your tribe members are there by choice. They can leave any time. You may have chosen them, but every day they choose to remain tribe members. This is where corporate leaders make the big mistake. The assumption is that once you have put the tribal culture in place, you can turn your attention away from your tribe and focus your energies, values, and priorities elsewhere. And soon you might find yourself to be the leader of a tribe of one – yourself.

As employers, we typically continue to focus on the first two of Maslow's list of needs as organizations, which are, of course, critical. But we often stop paying attention at “belonging,” once we think each new employee is properly on board. How do we create an environment where people consistently feel that they belong? Are we dedicated to the future of their development? Do we create an atmosphere where they can go to work every day and feel safe enough to focus on their work and maybe even learn something new?

A workplace culture dedicated to the ongoing commitment of belonging is not a “set-it-and-forget-it” proposition. This is where many ego-driven (instead of empathy-driven) leaders get into trouble. If they think of belonging as a cultural value at all, they look for ways to make the attribute a self-perpetuating machine. So they can go back to thinking about what they believe is really important – mainly themselves. They worry that if they make people feel like they belong too much, maybe those tribe members will take advantage of them. Or they might slack off. It's quite the opposite. If leaders actually show their people that they care about them and that they belong, those tribe members will walk over hot coals for their leaders.

Fellow tribe members – and the way they treat each other – also play a significant role in creating a sense of belonging among each other. As powerful and as empathic as the leader might be in setting the tone and expectations for a cultural environment of accountability, trust, mutual support, and openness to learning, it all goes down the drain if peers treat each other poorly.

Belonging may start with you, the tribal leader. But it can come to a screeching halt anywhere inside the organization when tribe members betray each other. Even just once.

Future Focus

One of the key responsibilities of all tribal leaders is to create an enduring organization or group that can survive over time. Leaders need a future focus or they run out of options quickly. For instance, if you were a tribal leader in an aboriginal society that lived by a lake, it would be your responsibility to foresee a future where that lake might be dried up. So even in those early years of plenty, you would still have on your mind the question, “How do we transport our tribe to a new lake so that there would always be water for us to live on?” It's that simple. Great tribes do this.

As tribal leaders we are responsible for making sure that our tribe has access to the necessary abundance on which to thrive and prepare a place for future generations. In a business setting, we are always looking at trends pointing to a variety of versions of the future. We must pay attention to the changing landscapes and architectures of the businesses around us. We must always be open to new ideas, because that's where we will find the insights and innovations that will position us to thrive in an as-yet unpredicted environment.

We understand that where we are today is indeed a great place. And we're comfortable being here. But we may not be here tomorrow. We may have to move to a new place to ensure that there is an abundance of what we need to be able to take us to the next new place in the future.

In WD-40 Company, we could have been content with our iconic "blue and yellow can with the little red top, with the sticky tape on the side," and with stores stocking our products exclusively. But we continue to innovate. We continue to create new delivery systems. We continue to look at new business opportunities and trends in usage into the future. Our future focus is to ensure that we don't run out of water to sustain our growing tribe. It's that simple.

Future focus is also bearing in mind that no matter how detailed your visioning might be, many adjustments will have to be made as the reality of the future sets in. You can't do this alone. You must draw in talent – even unexpected talent with specialized skills – to help position your company to anticipate a variety of futures and be prepared to meet a new set of opportunities.

Leaders must look as far ahead as their imagination can muster. Ten years. Twenty. Why not fifty? Look ahead as far as you want your tribe to exist.

Specialized Skills

You can't do any of this alone. You must involve other people. People who are better than you in doing what they do. In any tribe there are better hunters, better fishermen, better builders, better spear makers, better fighters, better farmers. The job of the tribal leader is to know who is who, so they can be deployed exactly as they are needed, when their services are required. It's not enough to know what is needed today; it is likely too late to get that talent identified and in place in a just-in-time scenario. Great leaders know what skills are likely to be needed around future corners, and who is most likely to be able to meet those demands. And then the planning and nurturing begin.

If, as a tribal leader, you don't have your radar tuned to discover what competencies might be needed, and how those competencies will help strengthen the tribe and the business, the tribe will start to weaken because other tribes now have the advantage. If you ignore the earliest signs of potential trends, you will be vanquished by your competitors.

As corporate leaders, we have advantages that indigenous tribes did not in that we have systems that allow us to identify the specialized talents and strengths of our current employees – whom we can then tap for further skills development. When you know where the natural strengths lie in each of your people, you can then assign further training that will enhance those strengths by layering on skills that will differentiate your tribe from your competitors.

Warriors

Business can be as fun as you want to make it. (Personally, I prefer a workplace culture where my tribe members are joyful in the work they do and who they do it with.) But let's not lose sight of the fact that it's also competition, with serious stakes involved. To be a market leader, we must have a warrior spirit. We can be happy warriors, true. But we have to be warriors all the same. We have to be warriors for the cause of the company. But also for the sake of our fellow tribe members.

As I mentioned before, author Sebastian Junger succinctly defines the nature of tribes as the "group of people you both help feed and help defend." Up until this point we have focused on the "feed" aspect of the tribal experience – nurturing our people in all the elements that provide them with a sense of psychological and physical safety. And now, in the service of defending them, we need warriors – a critical category of the tribal environment.

We need a sense of *esprit de corps*, a collective understanding that all-out group effort in the service of a single mission is required. But it doesn't have to be grim and gritty. The spirit of tribal warriors can be uplifting and engaging. For instance, think of the team effort of any Southwest Airlines crew that will do what it takes to turn a plane around in record time and get it back in the air, filled with passengers who were just entertained by an utterly original safety orientation presentation.

Or that spirit can raise goose bumps, calling up the spirit of true warriors from the past. Think of the Haka tradition, now brought to the world by the inimitable All Blacks rugby team from New Zealand, at the beginning of every game. There is no ignoring the ancient Maori influence in its ferociousness. Only now, the rugby players – as well as the spectators – can best be described as happy warriors.

In the corporate setting, the culture of happy warrior infuses the workplace experience with that unmistakable sense of “whatever it takes” commitment to the mission, even head-to-head competition with another company. There's a fighting spirit, to be sure, but there is also a sense of joyfulness, of play, of loving the game.

This isn't gladiator-level competition at the Roman coliseum. There were many people in that era who had very bad days as a consequence of their engagement on the field – the winners and losers alike. The losers, naturally, had it worse. But the winners limped back to their prisons at the end of the day pretty beaten up as well. Unlike those ancient days, everyone involved in our modern business competition is likely to go home whole, with nothing bleeding, and with career still intact.

In modern day tribes, the playing field could involve another business competitor. Or maybe it was last year's metrics we're trying to beat. Or maybe how well we create positive, lasting memories for our customers. Our field is our values, and we play to the expectations our tribal culture sets for us, as individuals and as teams.

Celebration

In tribal cultures, members set time aside to mark important occasions and/or recognize star players. There is ritual of some sort, designed to call attention to the truly momentous moment. Warriors coming home victorious from a battle. Rites of passage for the youngest tribe members. Naming ceremonies. Noting the passing of a significant season. Appreciating a critical gift of time or even nature – like the rain or a harvest.

In the corporate world, celebration is an appreciation of the people. And it requires intention. As Ken Blanchard has said, “It's a shame that most people only know that they have done a good job because no one yelled at them that day.” That translates into some real numbers, which are impactful to data-driven leaders. According to a report from O.C. Tanner:

- 79% of employees who quit their jobs cite a lack of appreciation as a key reason for leaving.
- 65% of North Americans report that they weren't recognized even once in the previous year.
- The U.S. Department of Labor statistics report that the main reason people leave their employers is because they “don't feel appreciated.”

According to O.C. Tanner's research, companies that have embedded recognition in their culture receive three times the return on equity than those that don't; and, likewise, three times the return on assets than those companies that don't.

Celebration is more than just a party. There might not even be a party at all. Above everything, it is the tribal leader's officially sponsored moment of appreciation – authentic, relevant, joyful, memorable, and reflecting all the tribe values in a single experience. Above all, tribal celebrations must be culture-specific, aligned with the qualities you want to encourage, and memorable.

The Tribe Feeds the CEO

The spiritual leader, Harvard professor and clinical psychologist Ram Das is beloved for reminding us, “We’re all just walking each other home.”

When I think of my role leading the WD-40 Company, I remind myself that I may have introduced the tribe concept to my community there. But it is they – all those WD-40 Company members all over the world – who every day breathe life into the tribal vision and create a sustainable tradition that will long outlast any personal tenure I may have in this wonderful company that creates positive, lasting memories for millions.

I may be the CEO on paper, in press releases, in appearances on CNBC, before live audiences around the world, personally answerable to my Board of Directors and my stockholders. But I don’t forget for a second that I work for my tribe members. Do I continue to teach them the basics of thriving in our changing environments – just as tribal elders in my home country of Australia have taught youngsters how to throw the boomerang for perhaps thousands of years? Do I lead the search for fresh opportunities and new horizons where we can grow and thrive just as tribal elders recognized the need to seek out new opportunities? Every day.

Do I learn from all my tribe members – young and tenured alike – who bring fresh thinking and innovative approaches to scenarios that they have been able to anticipate from their unique vantage point? Faithfully.

At the same time, my tribe members and I have so many leadership and development advantages that our indigenous tribal counterparts didn’t have. I and WD-40 Company tribe members alike have choice. We can *choose* to be a part of this great mission and culture. Or not. As hiring managers and colleagues, we can carefully select the people we choose to invite into our tribes – an invitation that no one takes casually. And our potential new tribe members can choose to accept our offer or seek a tribe that more closely suits their values and vision for their own futures.

As the CEO I choose to select the very best talent, intelligence, and passion for WD-40 Company tribe – sources from around the world. I owe this obligation to more than the brand reputation, the customers, and our stockholders. I owe it to the current tribe members – and I owe it to myself, for that matter – to invite only first-rate candidates to join us. Each hiring decision is a multi-decade opportunity to improve the tribe. We all stand to benefit from the hiring decisions we make.

Especially me. While I’m teaching my tribe, I’m likewise depending on them to teach me from their wealth of knowledge, innovation, and passion for our shared mission.

So when new candidates become new tribe members as they join our company, they will surely be asking themselves, “Will I be happy here?” “Will I fit in here?” “Is the WD-40 Company tribe authentic and sincere?”

As a tribe, we are dedicated to the answer, “Yes.” I know this for a personal fact, because every day I am happy here. I fit in here. And I both experience and deliver the sincere and authentic WD-40 Company tribe promise.

I, too, am a tribe member.

Walk with the dreamers, the believers, the courageous, the cheerful, the planners, the doers, the successful people, with their heads in the clouds and their feet on the ground. Let their spirit ignite a fire within you to leave this world better than when you found it. – Wilfred Peterson

ABOUT GARRY RIDGE

As CEO of WD-40 Company since 1997, Garry Ridge has helped re-ignite excitement and create cultures that foster break-through innovation in companies and workplaces in over 62 countries. In addition to his full-time role at WD-40 Company, Garry shares his experience and insights externally through **executive coaching; consulting; and speaking.**

Named by Inc. magazine as one of the Top 10 Global CEOs, his first-hand experiences in transforming a global brand with a market cap of \$2.5 billion, as well as his deep, profound commitment to creating workplace cultures that support the individual passions of all who work there, have attracted the recognition of today's most influential thought leaders. In 2016, he was named Igniter of the Year by Simon Sinek, author of *Start With Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Others to Take Action* and *Leaders Eat Last: Why Some Teams Pull Together and Others Don't*.

Most recently, he is a contributor in the Marshall Goldsmith/Frances Hesselbein book, *Work is Love Made Visible: A Collection of Essays About the Power of Finding Your Purpose From the World's Greatest Thought Leaders*. He also collaborated with Ken Blanchard (One Minute Manager series) on the landmark book, *Helping People Win at Work*.

While Garry continues to develop his own book projects, other authors write about his work at WD-40 Company. The WD-40 Company is featured in the 2018 book by Whitney Johnson, *Build an A-Team: Play to Their Strengths and Lead Them Up the Learning Curve*. Additionally, *Fast Company* magazine co-founder, William Taylor, also featured Garry's work in revitalizing innovation at WD-40 Company in his newest book, *Simply Brilliant: How Great Organizations Do Ordinary Things in Extraordinary Ways!* Additionally, Anthony Tjan wrote about the WD-40 Company story in *Good People: The Only Leadership Decision That Really Matters*.



THE LEARNING MOMENT

As part of his lifelong commitment to helping others learn and develop, Garry is an Adjunct Professor at The University of San Diego (Talent Management & Succession Planning). He is also certified as a coach using the Marshall Goldsmith Stakeholder-Centered Coaching model.

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