

The Fifth Element of Great Managing

There is a huge difference between being a member of the tribe and just another "full-time equivalent." Employees in the first category work much harder on the job.

by Rodd Wagner and James K. Harter

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In 2001, *Science* magazine published an intriguing experiment into the workings of the human mind. It posed the following two hypothetical scenarios:

1. "A runaway trolley is headed for five people who will be killed if it proceeds on its present course. The only way to save them is to hit a switch that will turn the trolley onto an alternate set of tracks where it will kill one person instead of five. Ought you to turn the trolley in order to save five people at the expense of one?"
2. "As before, a trolley threatens to kill five people. You are standing next to a large stranger on a footbridge that spans the tracks, in between the oncoming trolley and the five people. In this scenario, the only way to save the five people is to push this stranger off the bridge, onto the tracks below. He will die if you do this, but his body will stop the trolley from reaching the others. Ought you to save the five others by pushing this stranger to his death?"

Mathematically, the two situations are the same: sacrificing one person to save five. Yet most people answer *yes* to the first dilemma and *no* to the second. When we have presented these two situations to an audience, the options elicit groans as people struggle to rationalize their different answers. Essentially, the rational part of their brain argues against the emotional part of their brain.

"When the victims are just statistics somewhere down the track, as in the first situation, the areas of the brain associated with social intelligence and emotion stay quiet, and we seem to look at the problem rationally," wrote author Richard Conniff in his book *The Ape in the Corner Office*. "But our emotions kick in when the connection is personal."

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Employees understand the difference and want to work for a manager who cares and in a workgroup where they have a personal connection. Someone who believes she is just a number, just another "full-time equivalent" or "FTE," will not go out of her way to sacrifice for the company.

One of the crucial questions for a team leader trying to get the most from his people is whether they form a cohesive, cooperative, self-sacrificing, motivated crew -- in short, a tribe. Such attitudes are the essence of the Fifth Element of Great Managing. It is measured by an employee's reaction to the statement "My supervisor, or someone at work, seems to care about me as a person." All organizations inevitably depend on their employees' psychological commitment to their immediate manager and colleagues.

Personal connections

The fact that being a great manager requires a special ability to influence emotions makes many supervisors uncomfortable. American industrialist Henry Ford is reputed to have once remarked, "Why is it that I always get the whole person when what I really want is a pair of hands?"

It would be easier if workers could restrict their need for bonding to home, church, and neighborhood, but they can't turn off the reflex that easily. Those who see the "cares about me" statement as more worthy of a discussion on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* than in the vernacular of a results-driven manager need a deeper understanding of human motivation.

The trolley experiment is just one of many showing that people treat each other differently when they form a personal connection. Experiments conducted after the Holocaust found that subjects told to administer what they thought was a painful shock to a stranger were more willing to do so if a barrier separated them from the other person. And something as simple as knowing the name of the person with whom one is playing a strategic game of dividing a pie makes the players more generous.

A mere "pair of hands" will be reassigned, neglected, laid off, or considered interchangeable much more easily than will a "whole person." Perhaps the HR executive who complained layoffs weren't happening fast enough -- "I want to stand at the door and count crying faces go by," he said -- would have been more humane if he knew those workers personally. Employees recognize the difference and give more effort in a group when they feel they are more than just a number.

The results of a 2002 study conducted by four professors emphasize the importance of the Fifth Element. They wanted to know whether people staffing phones at a company would falsify their reports to boost their pay. Given the financial incentive to cheat, the business was faced with the issue of how closely to monitor employees in its 16 call centers. Should they spend more money to audit the work, or could they trust their workers to do the right thing? One of the best predictors of an employee's trustworthiness was his perception of whether the company "cares about my personal well-being."

"'Conscience' alone is not guiding the actions of the workers we observe in the experiment," the researchers concluded. Compared with those who feel their company is looking out for them, "a disproportionate number of the workers who view the employer as unfair and uncaring" will cheat when they think they can get away with it.

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For those workers who "feel like I'm just a number" but who can't imagine cheating, quitting their jobs provides an ethical alternative that is expensive to the company. The correlation between not feeling cared about and resigning has been observed repeatedly in studies of individual companies in the Gallup database and in analyses where data from many organizations are combined.

In high-turnover companies, workgroups in the bottom quartile based on their scores on the "someone at work cares about me" statement have turnover that is, on average, 22% higher than their counterparts in the top quartile. In organizations where resignations are less common, the difference rises to 37%. While an employee who is managed by someone of a different race is more inclined to consider resigning than an employee who is supervised by someone of his own race, a high degree of the Fifth Element corrects that racial gap.

The roots of cooperation

The question of why people have this need for someone to take a personal interest in them goes to the core of much larger issues about what it means to be human. Those inclined toward a religious explanation see "caring" as a divine imperative. St. Paul told the Corinthians, "The members should have the same care one for another, and whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it." The teachings of Buddha emphasize: "Thousands of people may live in a community, but it is not one of real fellowship until they know each other and have sympathy for one another." Every major religion has a similar principle.

Anthropologists see people today as the descendants of the most cooperative humans living across time. In the rugged past, people who failed to work together didn't just have a bad day at work -- they died.

"Society works not because we have consciously invented it, but because it is an ancient product of our evolved predispositions," wrote British science writer Matt Ridley. "It is literally in our nature. . . . We are, misanthropes notwithstanding, unable to live without each other. Even on a practical level, it is probably a million years since any human being was entirely and convincingly self-sufficient: able to live without trading his skills for those of his fellow humans. . . . One of the things that marks humanity out from other species, and accounts for our ecological success, is our collection of hyper-social instincts."

Generations ago, the object of these "hyper-social instincts" was easy to find. In agrarian cultures, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, and cousins were only a few farms away. Nomadic clans dragged everyone along to follow the caribou, the seals, or whatever food source kept them on the move. Because they were closely related, members of the group looked alike.

To further set themselves apart, groups often used tribal symbols, such as the Scottish tartans one can find today worked into the tie or scarf of a Gordon, Stewart, or McDonnell descendant. The clans of the past had a wealth of shared experiences. They trusted each other because they had proven themselves, because betraying the tribe was unthinkable and dangerous, and because instincts that served their ancestors well biased them toward cooperation with each other. That they cared about one another was taken for granted.

Today's world-traveling corporate warrior with a two-page résumé needs to go back only several generations to find ancestors who may not have moved far from their birthplace, never changed jobs, worked for decades with the same people, and for whom working well together was a deadly serious business.

In his book *The Children's Blizzard*, David Laskin tells the story of South Dakota pioneer farmers snowed in and at risk of starving because none of the wheat in their primitive homes had been milled into flour. Ukrainian immigrant Anna Kaufman "heard that some families were boiling their unmilled wheat kernels into a kind of mush, but she knew she could not keep her children alive on that diet. Without flour, they would never survive the winter," Laskin wrote. "Finally, when it was clear that the weather would not break, six Schweizer farmers decided to make the twenty-mile trip to the nearest mill together: Each farmer took a wagon loaded with grain sacks and a team of horses, and each team broke trail for half a mile or so until the animals were exhausted; then that team would drop to the rear and the next in line would break through the drifts for the next half mile. It was a long grueling trip, but the men returned with flour, and Anna was able to make bread for her family."

Planes, trains, and automobiles; instantaneous communication; and the nature of employment itself have broken up the traditional tribe, but not tribal motivations. The encyclopedia definition of a tribe -- a "group of people sharing customs, language, and territory" with "a leader (and) a religion teaching that all its people are descended from a common ancestor" -- is eerily close to what outsiders notice in a large corporate headquarters. Reverence for company founders substitutes for that toward a common ancestor. While it does not have a religion, every business develops its orthodoxies and powerful legends. Every close-knit organization develops its own exclusive vocabulary, inside jokes, chants, symbols, and wardrobe that reign inside its security-badged-protected territories.

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The differences between an ancient clan and Thomas Watson's army of white-shirted IBM employees in the 1950s were more stylistic than organic. Because workers are not computers, they may be more motivated by an emotional need to support their comrades than by the cognitive appeal of an employee stock ownership plan. Yet it's not unusual for companies to invest as much or more in the latter than in the former.

Tribes are more fluid today. A boy born two decades ago, for instance, might not have had an extended family around him during his formative years; he might not even have had a father in the home. His "tribe" may have changed every few years as he migrated from a day care center to elementary school, to his new school (if his mother moved), to his baseball team during the summer, and to his high school, college, and fraternity.

One day, he finds himself in a new workgroup -- be it at a store, bank branch, loading dock, newsroom, construction crew, or law firm. Although his group memberships may have been transient throughout his life, certainly shakier than those of his ancestors, his nature still drives him to belong. He may display his membership through pride in his ethnic heritage, by wearing the logo of his favorite sports team, or by calling himself whatever the mascot was of his university. But chances are high that part of his self-image is wrapped up in being a member of a group. As *The Wall Street Journal* described one businessman's dilemma: "The continuing tug of school and fraternity ties in the

business world (is) bizarre but difficult to escape."

Yet under the right conditions, productive new tribes form inside a company. People from disparate backgrounds, of different races, who attended various colleges, and grew up with assorted customs nonetheless become one unified troop. They enjoy the social benefits of belonging and feeling supported, and the business reaps the rewards of greater teamwork.

"Social capital"

For a manager, this inclination means that his team's performance can vary depending on the degree to which they feel a real part of the group. This cohesiveness is sometimes called "social capital."

"Social capital makes an organization, or any cooperative group, more than a collection of individuals intent on achieving their own private purposes," wrote authors Don Cohen and Laurence Prusak. "Social capital bridges the space between people. Its characteristic elements and indicators include high levels of trust, robust personal networks and vibrant communities, shared understandings, and a sense of equitable participation in a joint enterprise -- all things that draw individuals together into a group. This kind of connection supports collaboration, commitment, ready access to knowledge and talents, and coherent organizational behavior."

Businesses don't accrue these benefits unless the members of each workgroup feel like someone takes a personal interest in them -- a fact that can come as a rude awakening to some managers. "When I first became a manager, I was twenty-two years old. I was very focused, and I was very results-oriented," one manager said in an interview. "I used to give people tasks, and I guess I was very rude about them. I'd say, 'See, I need you to do X-Y-Z,' and I would walk off."

"I had an older lady on my team in so many words tell me that I was a jerk," he continued. "We had a decent rapport, so I sat down and said, 'I want to listen. Why do you think I am a jerk?' And she told me, 'Haven't you ever heard of "Good morning," "How's your family?" or "How did your weekend go?"' That left a lasting impression on me and will for the rest of my life."

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James K. Harter, Ph.D., is Chief Scientist Workplace Management and Well-Being for The Gallup Organization. He is coauthor of the *New York Times* bestseller [12: The Elements of Great Managing](#) (Gallup Press, December 2006).

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Rodd Wagner is a Principal for The Gallup Organization. He is coauthor of the *New York Times* bestseller [12: The Elements of Great Managing](#) (Gallup Press, December 2006).

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