



Jitske Kramer:
**How Leaders
Build Tribes**

‘By its simplest definition, a tribe is a group of people who share the same interest and have a recognized leader. Sound familiar? If you manage people in an organization, it probably should.’

In any business, as in any society, a tribe works together toward a common goal. They have a purpose and establish a path. On their journey, they form beliefs, values, behaviors, and norms. They create a culture, and that culture shapes everything they do.

As an accomplished business consultant and anthropologist, Jitske Kramer draws connections between her types of work by viewing organizations—and the teams within them—in much the same way that she views tribes. Jitske believes there are lessons we can learn about building strong tribes in our organizations by examining their interactions, decision-making, and leadership.

How do we begin? Jitske says we can learn from what we already know, building our future tribes from century-old lessons.

Shaping Culture by Creating Meaning

If you look around the room today, it is unlikely that any two people share the exact same thought. We each bring a unique and valuable perspective. Jitske has learned from examining tribes that those unique perspectives collectively help shape who we are and how we behave.

Jitske explains that nothing has meaning in and of itself. Rather, it is up to people to assign meaning to things. Each tribe has unique answers to universal questions. Our answers to those questions determine what we perceive to be good or bad, right or wrong, normal or abnormal. Our answers create frameworks that provide us guidance and establish our values, beliefs, behaviors, and norms. In short, they shape our culture.

The same occurs in our organizations. Our teams and the individuals who compose them develop unique ways of looking at and doing things. As a leader, you likely desire to create the strongest tribe—and the strongest culture—possible. Jitske believes there are effective mechanisms you can use to do so, and they are mechanisms we see at work in the strongest tribes.

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Tribal Interactions

In any organization, like in any tribe, there is strong potential. Leveraging that potential can help us solve problems, overcome challenges, and transform for the future. But to use our potential, we must be able to speak our minds.

Jitske explains that culture only takes shape when we interact, and in our organizations, there are typically two types of interactions: bullet point meetings and campfire conversations.

Bullet point meetings are where many of us spend the majority of our time. These meetings are transactional, and we use them to discuss day-to-day topics, organize, reorganize, and plan. These interactions are necessary but are largely ordinary.

Campfire conversations are very different. These conversations are a metaphor for the interactions in which real change occurs. As Jitske says, “Around a campfire, we share stories, shape cultures, and experience transformational moments.”

In these interactions, a tribe begins shaping and reshaping what they believe and how they behave. Around a campfire, we are human. We embrace an atmosphere in which people are genuinely interested in our thoughts and perspectives and willing to look at things in a different light. And in doing so, we increase our tribe's potential.

Tribal Decision-Making

One of the most common “campfire conversations” we have in our organizations may be the strategy session. These conversations are often where we collectively shape our culture and our future.

Jitske explains that to use the true potential of the tribe, we need to create an atmosphere of inclusion. Creating this atmosphere requires that we bring the right perspectives to the table. As leaders, we need to ensure the members of our tribe join in the decision-making, build the plan, and shape the approach. When we fail to include members of the tribe in this decision-making, we make decisions for people without connecting with them ... and that can be damaging to the tribe's culture.

Our job as leaders is to ensure we're having enough campfire conversations and foster an environment that supports inclusion. We must learn to build a sense of psychological safety in which everyone can share their wisdom and say what needs to be said.

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Tribal Leadership

Creating an environment that supports a strong tribe and culture requires leadership. But as Jitske has discovered, there is a delicate balance between two leadership forces: the force of power and the force of love.

The force of power is perhaps the more common force in many organizations. This leadership force is the one that sets a target, creates a checklist, establishes guidelines, and breaks down barriers. This is an important force because it keeps the tribe moving in a forward direction.

The force of love is sometimes more difficult to find in an organization. This leadership force engages individuals, embraces vulnerability, and establishes trust. This is an important force because it fosters the environment in which positive change and transformation can occur.

The forces of power and love each bring a different energy and establish the rhythm for our tribes. And depending on their purpose, different types of tribes, different types of organizations will require different rhythms. As leaders, we must ask ourselves which force we bring and then challenge ourselves to create the right balance between the forces of power and love to ensure our teams are strong.

Cultural Change

At times, a tribe will discover that it's necessary to change its culture, to evolve in a certain direction that will make it stronger for the future. As leaders, we'll recognize this need in our organizations, particularly in today's ever-changing environment.

When faced with the need to create change, the tendency of many leaders is to develop a system. We design a communication strategy, establish benchmarks, mandate training. We believe we can transition from today to tomorrow with the flip of a switch. But often, in these situations, instead of creating change, we encounter chaos.

When we approach change systematically, we organize and reorganize the ordinary without recognizing the need to address the extraordinary. Instead of building plans and processes, we should build a campfire.

What's interesting about cultural change is that it's not something we need to start—often, it's already happening. Likewise, it's not something that stops—it is continual and always evolving.

Leaders must recognize that when something is not working, a tribe begins to shift its behavior. Jitske reminds us that a tribe's culture is being shaped and reshaped in every micro decision and every small action. True or false, right or wrong, everyone in the tribe is evolving the culture all the time. Rather than enacting change—attempting to create a linear path between Point A and Point B—we should embrace this natural and gradual transition. If we have built a strong tribe, the transition will be successful.

Take Risks and Challenge the Truth

Building a strong tribe requires authentic interactions, inclusive decision-making, and a balance between the forces of power and love. Jitske reminds leaders that strong tribal relations also require a willingness to take risks.

Over time, a tribe's purpose is likely to change and evolve. As leaders, we bear the responsibility for challenging our tribes to embrace this evolution. To do this, we ourselves must be willing to challenge the truth. In both power and love, leaders must ask questions, appreciate differences, explore, and create. It requires courage, and as Jitske says, "I dare you."



Key Points

- Each tribe has unique answers to universal questions that guide our values, beliefs, behaviors, and norms. These frameworks shape our culture.
- Culture takes shape when we interact, and in our organizations, there are typically two types of interactions: bullet point meetings and campfire conversations.
- Bullet point meetings deal with the day-to-day and the ordinary.
- Campfire conversations are where we share stories, shape our culture, and experience transformation.
- To use the true potential of our tribes, we must create an atmosphere of inclusion.
- In any tribe, there are two forces at work: the force of power and the force of love. Leading a tribe requires a balance of both.
- The force of power sets targets, creates plans, and keeps the tribe moving in a forward direction.
- The force of love establishes trust, inclusion, and an environment in which positive change can occur.
- Building a strong tribe requires leaders to take risks and challenge the truth.

Questions to Consider

- What steps have you taken to build strong tribes in your organization?
- Do you foster an environment in which “campfire conversations” can occur?
- How much inclusion—or shared decision-making—is present in your tribe?
- Is your leadership force one of power or one of love?
- Do you approach change systematically, or do you embrace transition and evolution?
- How willing are you to take risks and challenge the truth to create change?

Leaders Eat First to be able to eat last

In her work as an anthropologist, Jitske has learned invaluable lessons from tribal leaders. One is that the leader must eat first to be able to eat last in times of crisis. We must remember that it's essential for leaders to be strong and healthy in order to make decisions that benefit their tribe. Strong leaders take decisions that go beyond personal interests and careers. They take care of the whole tribe, also in times of trouble. To this end, Jitske encourages us to get our "leadership diets" right.

Jitske believes that anthropology has the power to make the familiar strange and the strange familiar.



About Jitske Kramer

Jitske Kramer is a corporate anthropologist, speaker, and entrepreneur who began her career as a trainer and consultant in the fields of communication and leadership development. She has coached thousands of people in various roles and sectors, focusing on international cooperation, intercultural skills, and global leadership. Today, her company Human Dimensions helps international clients more deeply understand issues and create solutions by challenging the obvious and building essential knowledge for effective cooperation, decision-making, and collective change.

Jitske has worked with a number of organizations in the Netherlands and abroad, including ministries, universities, hospitals, municipalities, and others. She is the author of several books, including "jam Cultures" and "The Corporate Tribe," a book which she co-authored and was named 2016 Management Book of the Year.