

September 2007

As I See It! -- Tribalism is Alive and Well All Around Us

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Recommended Citation

Cox, John (2007) "As I See It! -- Tribalism is Alive and Well All Around Us," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 19: Iss. 4, Article 30.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.5120>

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incorporation were being prepared and filed, I had called the two libraries back to advise both that this new bookselling firm (**Reed College Bookstore, Inc.**) would be pleased to supply whatever books they wished and that I would travel to visit them so they could lay eyes upon me within the next couple of weeks. I hastily rearranged my schedule and undertook the first two sales trips that, in time, would lead to 45 years and 1.5 million airline miles of business travel. My first trip was to Vancouver, B.C. to meet with **Eleanor Mercer**, then and for many years to follow, Acquisitions Librarian at the University Library. She was a very pleasant person but fully laden with hard questions about the depth and extent of our stock, discount structure, billing procedures, shipping intervals, and such very business-like queries. I had arrived about 10:00 AM and the interview lasted to about 3:00 PM punctuated by the first business lunch I had ever hosted.

The Head Librarian, to whom I was introduced in the course of our meeting, was **Neal Harlow**, one of the alumni of the circle of first-rate bookman-librarians which **Lawrence Clark Powell** had assembled at **UCLA**. Not only were the constituents of this circle genuine bookmen but most were authors as well. **Harlow** had as head of technical processes **Samuel Rothstein**, who went on to found the **UBC Library School**.

I left Vancouver quite uncertain about the final outcome of the visit for I had had to come up with some fundamental policy practices about or with which I had no wide experience. So, I forged ahead making policy on the spot ignorant of common practice or what the competition might be doing in these connections. Most of the decisions I made there — out of whole cloth, one might say — proved to be enduring for some years. But as a neophyte in the larger world of library book acquisitions processes my answers were the best I could summon. Though I must add these policies seemed sensible to me. That interview with **Eleanor** did prepare me for what I conceived would be a much more sophisticated mode of internal **RCB** operation than the somewhat cobbled together retail systems employed here-to-fore in connection with the two libraries with which we were then dealing.

Within days of the trip to Vancouver I set off to Los Angeles to meet with the acquisitions staff at the **University of Los Angeles**. The Order Librarian was a quite warm, indeed charming, woman, **Charlotte Spence**. She answered to **Betty Rosenberg**, a bright, commanding figure, who was dedicated to **Larry Clark Powell** and one of his most trusted assistants. All were entirely pleasant but no nonsense acquisitions librarians, as well as obviously thoughtful and careful administrators. The two of them pretty well took me through my paces, but in its course I soon learned that the booksellers presently serving the market for scholarly books were clearly rent-seekers, fulfilling only the easy trade orders and returning or ignoring the hard and marginally profitable requests and had burned them like any number of other academic acquisitions librarians.

I was also introduced to **Larry Clark Powell**, one of the eminences of the world of books and libraries. **Larry** was clearly a learned bibliophile possessed by a passion for the accumulation of knowledge in libraries. He was a genial, but forceful advocate of his strong beliefs in books and libraries. 🍀

As I See It! — Tribalism is Alive and Well and All Around Us

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One thing that 37 years in managing publishing organisations and in working in and around universities has taught me is that we humans are not as smart, sophisticated and rational as we all think we are. Deep inside us are primitive behavior patterns that drive us in our jobs and in our communities.

Organisations like universities, learned societies and publishing companies all display collective behavior patterns that define us as social animals — in the best of ways — and also demonstrate how similar we are to our ancestors, and, indeed, to other animals.

In the 1970s I spent ten years working at **The Open University**, which at the time was a revolutionary concept in university education, using radio, television and correspondence education techniques to teach undergraduate courses — this was long before the Internet. **The OU** is still probably the most important innovation in higher education since the beginning of the twentieth century. It was, and is, an untypical university. There were no students on campus. Rather than lecture and hold classes, the faculty wrote course material that was published in book form and sent by mail to students working at home. Of course, they undertook research. But their teaching role was to author content as part of a large publishing operation. So it was part cloistered academy, and part factory. In spite of its revolutionary nature, it was similar to all the universities around the world that I have visited since, in that internal politics was ever present.

In most universities, faculties fight for resources as the annual budget cycle comes round. Individual disciplines stick together. The library has to fight for its share. Neither librarians nor academics feel that the administration understands their needs. The administration sees faculty groups as entirely self-centered and lacking the bigger picture. The finance department is always seen as bureaucratic and restrictive. Yet all of these people

work hard and do their best. What happens is that each group within the institution combines and acts collectively in the interests of their “tribe.”

In the past thirty years, little has happened to change behaviour patterns in universities, in spite of the impact of the Internet on both teaching and research. In my contacts with universities and colleges all over the world, it is still true that different groups within the institution behave in the interests of the group to which they belong. They believe in the mission of the institution as a whole, but focus on their piece of it. I see it every day in the way academic and library staff view their respective roles within the institution. What librarians see as their role in meeting faculty information needs is usually different from the perception of faculty members — and vice versa.

Commercial organisations are no different. Clearly, commercial companies need to make profits to survive. They need profits for reinvestment and to pay dividends to their shareholders. While company objectives may be commercial, the organisational components behave in just the same tribal way. Turf wars are by no means uncommon. The sales staff think that the accounts department prevents them from doing their job because it stops them selling to customers that are bad credit risks. But the accounts department sees the sales department as simply wanting to make their targets and earn their commissions, even if the customer cannot or will not pay the bill. The production department sees the sales department as irresponsible in selling products that it cannot produce on time — or at all! The IT department may treat its internal “clients” — the non-IT people who are not IT savvy — with disdain. Each department is focussing on its own role and responsibility.

As human beings, we have a remarkable record of solving the most intricate problems — in areas of life as diverse as medicine, technology and philosophy. We are coping with the challenges and opportunities the Internet has posed. But our behavior is still much the same as it was when primitive man was a hunter. It is part of our nature, not something that we merely assume when going to work. We still work in tribes, we still display the same competitive behaviour patterns that our ancestors did — the only difference is that they did so to survive, while we do it for status or money. The same emotions

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are evident. Such tribalism becomes a problem when staff in each department identify with their departmental colleagues so closely and exclusively that they begin to see other departments as threats or obstacles or in some way in competition.

What has all this to do with the scholarly information environment? How do organisations work at all if different departments appear to be fighting each other? The first thing to note is that most organisations exhibit similar behavior patterns, whether they are commercial publishing companies, non-profit societies or universities. It is a phenomenon that occurs wherever we look in the scholarly communications chain.

So how do we deal with it? The answer lies in good, visible, management. All of the tribes that I have described have to be managed. Managing tribalism within organisations is not about training or educating staff out of it, because it is too deep-rooted in our natures. Management is concerned with leadership, communication and organisation. It is about planning, influencing and directing behavior constructively, and ensuring that all that talent and tribal aggression is harnessed to the benefit of the organisation as a whole. It is concerned with balancing the need for processes in the organisation with the individual's need for a reasonable level of autonomy. It is also concerned with viewing problems as opportunities that can be solved by collective, creative, multi-disciplinary effort. In a sense it is about keeping chaos at bay!

Creative results are achieved by teams that have faith in each other. Such faith has to be nurtured if tribalism is to be mitigated. Creating and maintaining faith depends on communication, on creating mutual understanding between departments or teams, and on ensuring that each individual, and each team or department, is accountable — to customers (in the broadest sense of the word, including internal “customers”), to colleagues and to the organisation. Communication means that members of different tribes within the organisation discuss matters, solve problems and plan to exploit opportunities together. Consequently, understanding is increased, particularly across departmental boundaries. Communication and understanding leads to joint planning, with each unit agreeing specific targets that are interdependent; if they have been part of the planning process, they are accountable to each other for meeting their responsibilities.

So, how do we spot tribalism? It occurs where staff appear to be separated into competing groups as a result of organisational procedures, or even by perceptions that have not been challenged or corrected, that manifests itself as gossip and speculation. And, when we spot it, how do we combat the threat? Here are a few ideas:

- **Provide leadership.** Everyone needs objectives to meet and boundaries to operate within. We all need rules. So

against the grain people profile

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BORN & LIVED: Born in Cleethorpes, UK, and lived in Lincolnshire, on the east coast of England, until I went to university.

EARLY LIFE: Schoolboy! Nothing much happened. I collected stamps and ran my model railway, like most boys in the late 1940s and 1950s. I still remember rationing that had been introduced during World War II. It lasted until 1951.

FAMILY: Father ran the family business, **Ernest Cox**, a fish merchant and fish curer (i.e., manufacturer of smoked fish) in Grimsby, which was the UK's premier fishing port until the 1980s.

EDUCATION: Went to **Brigg Grammar School** in north Lincolnshire, and then to **Brasenose College**, Oxford, where I read law. I qualified as a Barrister in 1969, but I have never practiced.

FIRST JOB: Apart from working for the family business filleting and packing fish during vacations, my first job was academic mailing lists to academic publishers

PROFESSIONAL CAREER AND ACTIVITIES: I have been in publishing for thirty eight years mostly academic and scholarly books and journals, but with a spell as a childrens publisher in the 1980s. After working at **The Open University**, **Butterworths** and **Scholastic**, I joined **Blackwell** in 1990 as head of the subscription agency and then as Managing Director. I was Managing Director of **Carfax**, a UK journal publisher, from 1994. When **Carfax** became part of **Taylor & Francis** in 1998 I set up my own consultancy, which specializes in scholarly and research publishing.

IN MY SPARE TIME I LIKE TO: Read widely, from crime novels to biographies and history. I have spent twenty five years in consumer affairs in aviation, and was Chair of the UK's **Air Transport Users Council**, which advises government and represents consumer interests to airlines and airports. For that work I was honoured in 1993 with an OBE.

FAVORITE BOOKS: *Michael Collins*, by **Tim Pat Coogan**, and anything by **Pat Barker**, whose novels on World War I the Great War, are breathtaking.

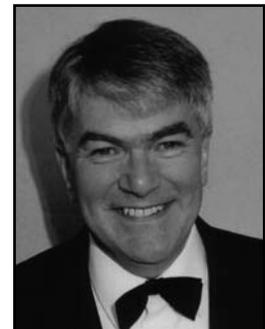
PET PEEVES/WHAT MAKES ME MAD: Ignorance and stupidity! I am constantly amazed by how ignorant people are. They still sound off with their opinions. There are plenty of them in publishing, libraries and the academy and on the listservs. And I don't see why I should suffer fools gladly!

PHILOSOPHY: There is still much to do.

MOST MEANINGFUL CAREER ACHIEVEMENT: Developing **Carfax** as a publisher in the social sciences, and then placing it in the hands of **Taylor & Francis**.

GOAL I HOPE TO ACHIEVE FIVE YEARS FROM NOW: By then I shall be in my mid-60s, but I still hope to be busy.

HOW/WHERE DO I SEE THE INDUSTRY IN FIVE YEARS: Publishers and libraries will still be grappling with the challenges of the Internet. Little by little things will change, but the ecology of scholarly publishing will still be familiar to us, with a gradual shift to online information delivery. Print will still be important, even in the hard sciences, as it still is now. 🐿



clarify and articulate the objectives and be receptive to any input from colleagues that will improve or clarify them. Ensure that there is clear leadership of any

changes that are necessary. Staff behavior echoes the culture and actions of their managers. If you don't put their day-to-

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Case Study Six: Run with the Meeting

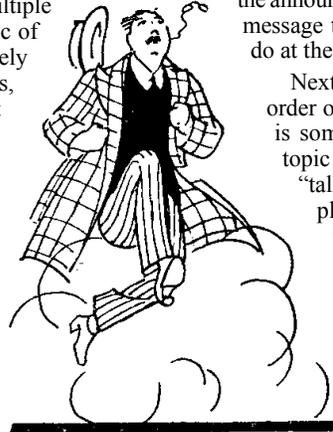
Column Editor: **Anne Langley** (Coordinator for Public Services Assessment and Chemistry Librarian, Duke University; Phone: 919-660-1578) <anne.langley@duke.edu>

Finally, **Meghan** was going to be in charge of a meeting. She had been waiting for this opportunity for months, and **Lila**, her boss, was going out of town and had assigned **Meghan** the duty of running the weekly technical services department meeting. **Meghan** was excited, but also nervous. There was a lot riding on her doing a good job; performance evaluations were not that far off in the future, and as well, she knew that if she handled this meeting correctly, the possibility that she would be assigned to be the chair of a committee would be much higher. So now, she needs to know how to make sure it all goes well.

Meghan is concerned because she knows that there are some curmudgeons in the department who might give her a hard time and could possibly obstruct her efforts at doing a good job. She has not been at the library as long as some of these possibly difficult people, and as well, a few of them are much older than she is. She realizes that she will have to be especially careful to include and appreciate the input from these colleagues. However, she is uncertain how to ensure their positive input.

The Experts Speak:

Running meetings well takes planning, initiative, facilitation skills, time management skills, people skills, and follow-through. There are tons of resources **Meghan** can use to help her make this meeting a success, there are many books, especially business or management books, as well as multiple Websites devoted to the topic of meetings. While she will surely avail herself of these resources, below we impart a quick list of practical planning tips to get her through the process, but we suggest that a more in-depth study on the topic will serve her well in the long run. And finally, during the process we will provide a few ideas on how to gain the willing involvement of the possible stick-in-the mud colleagues.



First, **Meghan** needs to find out from **Lila** exactly what she would like to be covered at the meeting, and what possible outcomes, if any, need to come from the meeting. At this point, in a face-to-face, phone, or email encounter, **Meghan** can also ask if **Lila** has any special advice in how to make sure the meeting goes well. **Lila** will appreciate **Meghan's** quick follow-through, and will enjoy being asked for advice. Many bosses like having the opportunity to share their expertise, and by asking, **Meghan** will have initiated an opportunity to learn something that will most likely be quite useful.

Once **Meghan** has picked **Lila's** brain, she will need to make sure that the space for the meeting is reserved, and that it has the necessary set-up for the meeting.

Next, she will need to send an email to the rest of the department asking for agenda topics, announcements, etc. In this email she will want to remind everyone about the time and place of the meeting, and perhaps give them a head's up about the items that are already on the agenda. As well, she will need to give them a deadline for getting back to her. This may not alleviate late responders, but it will give her the opportunity to say no to people who respond too late, especially if the agenda would be too long with the addition of the late submissions. If people do respond too late, **Meghan** can just assure them that she will pass the items on to **Lila** when she returns. By sending this email she is also telling the department that she is on top of her duty as chair, and that she has crossed her t's and dotted her i's.

Third, **Meghan** will need to plan out the agenda. It is always good to put announcements

at the beginning, but to make sure that these don't take over the whole meeting, she may want to call them "Brief Announcements" on the agenda. Because the boss is away, some may want to turn this into a gripe session, and that is the last thing **Meghan** wants to have happen. By having a clear agenda, and keeping the announcements brief, this will send the message that they have a lot of work to do at the meeting.

Next she needs to plan carefully the order of items on the agenda. If there is someone who wants to present a topic at the meeting who is a known "talker", it may be a good idea to place that person's item last on the agenda, so that the entire meeting does not linger on this topic. Finally, once the agenda is set, **Meghan** needs to send it out to all, and cc: **Lila** (who may have last minute thoughts and can send them to **Meghan** after reading the agenda in her

email), in plenty of time before the meeting we suggest that best case is at least a week in advance. Make sure that any documents that may be talked about at the meeting are attached to the agenda email, and again, that the time, date and place of the meeting are included at the top. As well, **Meghan** will want to send out a meeting reminder at least 24 hours before the time and day of the meeting, and if it is on a Monday morning, a brief reminder email that morning with the place and time. Subject lines are a good place for dates, places and times.

Before the meeting begins, **Meghan** needs to make paper copies of the agenda and any documents or handouts for all meeting attendants. She needs to be a few minutes early to make sure the room is unlocked, available and set up in the way she wants it. She also needs to probably not sit at the head of the table (if there is one), but near the head, or, at least make sure that she is not sitting with her back facing the room entrance.

At the beginning of the meeting she will want to make sure she starts on time, no matter if everyone is there or not, as this will show respect to those who showed up on time. She will want to welcome everyone, and ask for their help in making this a productive meeting as this is her first time running one. This will get the participants on her side, and perhaps give them incentive to make it go well. And she will want, at this point, to pass out agendas, documents and handouts if people need them. At this point, if there is not already a designated minute taker, **Meghan** needs to ask for a volunteer or designate a minute taker, so that she can focus on running the meeting.

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day responsibilities in the context of the organisation as a whole, and emphasise the interdependence of all departments, then individual departments will never understand the wider context in which they work.

- **Create communication.** Get different groups and functions together. Get their input on what works well, and what creates problems. A problem shared is a problem on the way to being solved.
- **Convene and chair regular meetings** to promote shared goals and ownership of agreed solutions. It is always better to confront issues with an open debate than to let issues fester. No successful leader is ever the expert on everything, so involve the team, and get them to take ownership of decisions. They will appreciate the opportunity.
- **Use customer feedback.** Customers, whether they are library patrons or publishers' customers, are very sensitive to the impact of tribal problems within the organisation. Their point of view represents an important measure of the efficiency of the organisation.

Understanding our tribal nature, and evolving strategies and processes to shape and direct the energy that it releases, is the key to a smooth and efficient organisation. 🌱