
Kluwer Mediation Blog

When two tribes...

Charlie Woods (Core Solutions Group / Scottish Universities Insight Institute) · Thursday, February 8th, 2024

Tribalism is often referenced as a significant factor in much of the conflict we see around us at the moment. Perhaps this isn't so surprising when we look back at the story of human evolution as described by biological anthropologist David Samsom in a recent [book](#) "Our Tribal Future: How to channel our human instinct into a force for good".

Sansom contends that the ultimate question for all life forms is how do we survive, which breaks down into three component parts:

- How do we get food and shelter?
- How do we avoid incest?
- How do we mitigate bad luck and know who to cooperate with?

He argues the uniquely human, and extremely successful in terms of evolution, answer to these questions is: Tribe.

A tribe is a group large enough to insure against for bad luck (considered to be at least 500 people) and provide short cuts on who to trust – visual, linguistic, behavioural and ritual symbols. The tribe is made up of a collection of bands of people – large enough to overcome the problems of incest (more than 50) but not so big as to overwhelm social network processing capacity (no more than around 150). These bands comprise of a collection of camps of 20-30 related people providing each other food and shelter and sharing child rearing. A tribe is therefore "*a group, nested in groups, bound by symbols*".

The symbols that bound a tribe are one of the key elements of widening and deepening the spread of cooperation between people, providing a heuristic which allows us to know quickly who we can trust not to cheat us. Equally they also provide a quick way of assessing who we might not to trust so willingly and when pushed to extremes who might be an enemy.

In my mediation experience I have had one very clear example of the power of symbols, when two implacable opponents found they couldn't see each other in the same light once they discovered by accident that they both loved the same breed of dog! This realisation provided the foundation for an eventual agreement.

As human society has expanded we have found ways of coalescing tribes into larger tribal groupings like nation states to rise to new challenges, usually through a combination of shared

interests and coercion. Although within some of today's nations tribal fractures appear to be widening. The role of tribal symbols are all around us as we wrestle with identity politics and culture wars.

Like cognitive bias, which we now pay much more attention to in mediation, these tribal evolutionary traits have been hard wired into us over thousands of years. They are both psychological and physiological, with stimuli triggering hormonal responses, which are hard to resist.

In a world of increasingly constrained resources, where climate change is beginning to limit living space, we face the choice of broadening tribal instincts to foster wider cooperation or doubling down on tribal drives to intensify competition. There is a real danger of becoming stuck in a number of zero or negative sum games, which involve a race to the bottom in which all tribes will ultimately be losers. To paraphrase the song we need to find a way of scoring more than one point.

The recent United Nations [report](#) on progress towards their Global Goals for 2030 makes for sobering reading in this regard, as the UN Secretary General puts it in the foreword: *“Despite impressive engagement around the Sustainable Development Goals, the world is far off track. Much more effort, investment and systemic change are required.”* Put another way we have begun to embrace what needs to be done in theory, but are having real difficulty in putting it into practice.

The report makes a number of calls to action to transform progress, including investing in conflict prevention and resolution. Having any chance of achieving all or some of the Global Goals in the required timescale will require a more effective coalition of tribes, ultimately at the level of humanity – in what Samson terms a ‘Metatribe’.

As with overcoming cognitive bias any attempt to counter the shortcomings of tribalism in modern society will require conscious effort and energy. Samson suggests that this involves an ability to recognise and understand tribal behaviour and a willingness to question tribal beliefs in the light of evidence. He argues this willingness should be the creed of the ‘Metatribe’.

He likens this creed to a ‘vaccine’ that could immunise humanity from the dangerous side effects of tribalism. Given the role vaccines have played in recent tribal developments, this may not be the most helpful analogy! When we consider that where one stands on the theory of evolution itself has also become a powerful tribal symbol, we would certainly seem to face an uphill struggle in channelling our tribal instincts in a positive way.

More effective communication will be central to building a tribal coalition. Interest based mediation and negotiation have a vital role to play in stimulating and supporting the conversations and exchanges needed to build a more positive sum culture between tribes. As Samson puts it in his conclusion: *“Sometimes it only takes one person who approaches another tribe and honestly begins a dialogue – a community of enquiry – for a false belief to be changed.”*


To make sure you do not miss out on regular updates from the Kluwer Mediation Blog, please

subscribe here.

Profile Navigator and Relationship Indicator


Access 17,000+ data-driven profiles of arbitrators, expert witnesses, and counsels, derived from Kluwer Arbitration's comprehensive collection of international cases and awards and appointment data of leading arbitral institutions, to uncover potential conflicts of interest.

Learn how **Kluwer Arbitration** can support you.



Newly updated

Profile Navigator and Relationship Indicator Tools

 Wolters Kluwer

Request your free trial now →

This entry was posted on Thursday, February 8th, 2024 at 8:00 am and is filed under [Bias](#), [Causes of Conflict](#), [Cognitive Bias](#), [Communication](#), [Cooperation](#), [Cross-cultural](#), [Dialogue](#), [Game Theory](#), [Mediation and Society](#), [Trust](#)

You can follow any responses to this entry through the [Comments \(RSS\)](#) feed. You can leave a response, or [trackback](#) from your own site.