



Tribal Behavior & How To Survive It



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What would BigCorp's culture look like if you imagined it to be something physical? How tall would it be? How much would it weigh? Certainly, it would be bigger than you, given you're a small part of a much bigger entity. No-one wants to work at a BigCorp whose culture is so tiny you could hold it in the palm of your hand, right?

You might imagine your BigCorp's culture represented by that giant Art Deco statue of the corporate god we described earlier in this guide. But statues are made of stone. They're static and rigid. Culture is a living thing; a dynamic, organic entity. It breathes. It pulses with the blood-energy of everyone who makes it up. It grows and ages like people. From time to time, it might even shed its skin to reveal a new one. You would need more than just your sense of sight to imagine its many facets. Unlike a gallon of milk, culture isn't all one color or tastes the same from top to bottom. How it smelled might be important too. If you enjoy working in your BigCorp, its culture might remind you of a floral perfume. If you detest your workplace, it takes on the air of decomposition; a rancid, pungent assault on the nasal cavities.

So after pondering this for a while, if I asked you to *draw* your BigCorp's culture as a cartoon character, how would you draw it? What would it look like?

A young idealist might think their BigCorp's culture resembles that god-statue—rock-hard muscles rippling with strength; one hand balancing the scales of justice and in the other, a scythe ready to reap the harvest of collective effort. An idealist would draw a face of chiseled integrity with virtue as blemish-free as a virgin, whose scent would be the healthy musk of honest work.

But you're not this young idealist, are you? Far from it. Even if you've only been with your BigCorp for a few years, when you saw common sense leave the building in a hurry, your idealism quickly followed behind. That's why you're reading this guide.

Okay, so you have my permission to go wild with your thoughts. If I was a betting man, I'd bet your drawing would be pretty ugly and smelly, maybe even monster-like. Would your franken-creature be fat and bloated, slow and ponderous? Or would it be swift and dangerous? How many eyes would it have? Does it have fangs? How many hands? Or perhaps its limbs are more like an octopus's tentacles? Remember Globby?

I've been unfair. I've been leading the witness. This is your mental image now, based on your experiences, your real world pain and suffering, not mine. I said I handed the paint brush to you and I should respect that. My guess is that it would be *none* of the things I described above.

These two cartoon extremes—Barbie-doll perfection versus googly-eyed Quasimodo—are too clichéd. There is as much beast in your culture's beauty as there is beauty in your culture's beast, am I right? I think if an artist followed your instructions, your manifestation of BigCorp's culture would turn out like a patchwork of images where different sides exposed different traits depending on which angle you viewed the result from. At times fuzzy. At other times crystal clear. It would taste both bitter *and*

sweet. It would have a faint smell like a dying rose whose best fragrance has long escaped into the ether but whose aroma wouldn't be so harsh as to totally repel you. Your shit pile is personal and local. With corporate culture, we're talking here about the 'collective shit pile' and if it really looked and smelled that bad, you wouldn't be living in it any more.

No, your BigCorp's culture is a strange beast indeed. A very personal beast. It intrudes in your life every waking day and pops up at the most inconvenient times as it mooches through your neighborhood wanting a handout. It always seems to be around when you don't want it to be. It's inescapable. But the idea of drawing your company's culture as a singular being is incorrect. It's an optical illusion. Thinking of something as opaque as 'culture' as a single object is a convenient trick of the mind. I'm going to throw something out there that will radically alter your viewpoint on corporate culture.

BigCorp culture is not singular. That's why it's so hard to draw.

Your culture is...a collection of *tribes*.

Maybe I'm slow, but it took me quite a while to figure out that people not only brought their own personal 'what's in it for me' to the table but they also brought a 'collective' one as well. They belonged to a different tribe than I did. It had a different set of norms than mine, different traditions and beliefs that influenced not only how they interacted with me but how they interacted with all members of my tribe in the same way.

We're talking here about tribes based on *function*. In anthropology, a tribe usually has a certain geographic range and all members are taught from an early age to protect this territory. This is true of a corporate tribe too. Its geographical range relates to its function in the organization. That function determines how far tribe members can roam and how much influence they have when they cross into another tribe's territory. At various points on your tribe's boundary, members of your tribe are taught to behave differently depending on which neighboring tribe faces them across the divide. Some opposing tribes are friendly, some are not. Some can be downright hostile. Knowing what tribe you belong to and how other tribes perceive yours is essential to surviving in BigCorp.

Let's take a closer look at tribal behaviors and how they arise.

At the simplest level, tribal boundaries are defined by the collective function the tribe performs. Engineering is a tribe. So is Finance. Production. Sales & Marketing. Purchasing, etc.

Did you know that being a member of one of these tribes endows you with a functional superpower regardless of how long you've been a member of that tribe? That's right. This superpower is embedded in your job description from Day One.

Let me explain.

Let's assume you're a newly graduated engineer hired into BigCorp's Engineering Department. Because of your professional status and your job description at BigCorp, you have a fiduciary responsibility of due care in your designs. Lack of due care is negligent. Negligence leads to product liability. By virtue of your membership in BigCorp's Engineering tribe, your superpower is your absolute authority to have the final word in any debate over a new product's design when an argument rages with opposing members from any other tribe *outside* of Engineering. You may have only been on the job for two days but you soon learn—like a cheetah's cub eyeing up antelope—that you can veto someone's opinion from Finance or from Purchasing even if that someone has been there for thirty years. How is

that? Even if you're the most junior engineer in the company, you learn quickly you come to the table with your tribe's collective 'what's in it for me' superpower. It's endowed in you simply through membership in the tribe regardless of your level of experience. Very soon you learn how to use this superpower and then, over time, how to abuse it. You are now exhibiting tribal behavior.

Don't get me wrong. Engineers *must* push back when non-engineers make boneheaded comments about what can and can't be engineered. If they didn't, they wouldn't be good engineers. That's not where I'm going with this. What I'm talking about is the tribal culture that grows around this superpower and from any other powers the Engineering tribe believes it has. And that's the crux of the issue. Belief versus fact. Very often tribal behavior is derived from *perceived* mythical powers rather than real ones. And it is the abuse of real power plus the conjuring of mythical power that is at the heart of culture wars between functions inside a BigCorp. You cannot escape being a part of this. What you have to do is recognize it exists and come to peace with it.

Survival Tip: Every tribe has its own mix of real and mythical powers. Learn how to identify them. Be attuned to their use in meetings, especially when important decisions need to be made. Is the power the tribe claims to have a *real* power with embedded authority? Or is the tribe just fluffing up its feathers, sticking its tongue out and growling like a Maori warrior just to make you afraid? Is this power a *faux* power that in reality is just a whiff of smoke? Knowing the difference is important. Getting it wrong can be problematic. The identification of tribal powers is a skill of observation that requires time and patience. It requires understanding both the written and unwritten policies affecting tribal authority, and how the corporate decision-making process vests that authority in its deliberations.

Let's explore some examples.

Let's have a meeting with Finance and throw a handful of bones and stones on a table. You would think that counting them would be simple, that their quantity is fixed, that anyone in the room could come up with a count, and that any ten people would arrive at the same number without much argument. But that would make the Financial tribe worthless to the organization. The practice of accounting you soon learn in your meeting—as it's executed by members of the Finance tribe—is more like the black art of voodoo. Accounting is Finance's superpower. 'Divining' the numbers so they predict the future is really why you have a Financial shaman in the room. It's their role in BigCorp to summon the demons from the numbers and become possessed by them. A prophecy results.

This tribe's zeal is religious. Their scriptures and rituals are sacred and often secret. They practice their most important ceremonies behind closed doors. Woe be to anyone who challenges a Financial conclusion, they will be excommunicated from BigCorp. The power to excommunicate non-believers is one of the 'mythical' beliefs Finance holds. Another one is that they are the High Priests with whom the CEO *must* confer before any decision is made. They believe that only what is tangible and can be measured or counted is important, and only the Finance tribe can decide which of several such 'counts' is relevant. Considering the intangible in decision-making is a useless waste of time. Really? Challenging that assumption will put you on trial for blasphemy. How dare you!

What about Purchasing? That tribe has the superpower of negotiation. The Elders of Purchasing have risen to their heights by virtue of becoming Grand Master Negotiators. But how special is that? Almost daily, everyone negotiates *something* in our personal lives, don't we? We purchase big ticket

items like houses, cars and boats. We haggle over prices at appliance stores to get free shipping and installation. We barter at flea markets and yard sales. With a simple five-day training course, you can upgrade what you've learned by trial and error and be certified to conduct a basic professional negotiation. And that's exactly the training every newbie in Purchasing goes on within weeks of being hired.

But here's the difference: when someone belonging to the Purchasing tribe exits from Negotiating 101, they acquire more than just a pretty certificate to hang on their cube wall. You see they've been endowed with the august title of Buyer by the Purchasing tribe. And with that title and a Purchasing business card, comes both real and perceived superpowers; superpowers other tribes believe they also possess but can't exercise within BigCorp because they've not been granted the appropriate authority. So that means even the newest buyer in the company can decide when a negotiation is over and can legally bind the corporation to a deal. And that's a big deal indeed. Suppliers know that. So that *real* authority gives that newbie buyer the *perceived* ability to grow in size during a negotiation until they believe they're ten times bigger than they actually are, just like Alice in Wonderland swallowing the purple pill.

We've said that Purchasing has the power to end a negotiation and that is true. In reality, the ingrained tribal behavior exhibited by Purchasing means the *opposite* is more likely to occur. Negotiations never end. Other tribes inside BigCorp are eternally frustrated by the Purchasing tribe whose buyers take every opportunity to extend, re-open or otherwise re-negotiate done deals with suppliers. They've been encouraged to do this because of the tribal teachings of their Purchasing Elders. In the middle of a new product launch, this behavior can create chaos. The tribal mystics that lead Purchasing have schooled every newbie and seasoned pro alike, that keeping the person you're negotiating with off-balance is the key to successful negotiating. This tactic was taught in the third hour on the second day of Negotiating 101, and reinforced every day since by Purchasing's supervisors and managers, until every good member in standing of the Purchasing tribe knows that chaos is a key negotiating tool. In turn, Purchasing believes creating and managing chaos is one of this tribe's most sacred *perceived* superpowers.

We've discussed the tribal behaviors of Engineering, Finance and Purchasing by way of example. At the end of this chapter I'll list some thought-starting one-liners on what the basic superpowers of various tribes might be. BigCorps vary in the delineation of their functional components and what they name them. But all BigCorps exhibit tribal behavior. That is a given. So feel free to adapt the list to suit the tribes on your BigCorp's organization chart and the circumstances of your BigCorp's business. It might be a fun exercise to gather a small group of your colleagues over coffee and donuts, and brainstorm what you think any particular functional department's superpowers are. You need to separate them into *real* powers vested by legitimate authority and/or professional qualifications, and *faux* powers based on tribal lore. The most fun you'll have will come from determining what *mystically perceived* superpowers blowhards from your opposing tribes think they possess. Don't forget your own tribe in this exercise. It's important to understand what real superpowers your tribe has. It's equally important to discover what powers other tribes challenge because they consider them to be so much hot air.

This leads us to the topic of tribal warfare. In truth, open warfare between tribes is a rare phenomenon usually restricted to BigCorps going through bankruptcy. At that point, chaos reigns supreme at every interface between BigCorp's numerous tribes and mutually-assured destruction is the

superpower of the day. We won't go there. Bankruptcy is a force that is best compared to stepping beyond the event horizon into a black hole. Even the smartest scientists really don't know what will happen next. In the chapter, *A Change in Culture is Just a Short Bankruptcy Away* we discussed the accelerating death spiral of deluded management thinking and failed management philosophy that is the root cause of bankruptcy and a symptom of decaying corporate culture.

What is relevant and useful here is to discuss the more common event, 'border skirmishes' between tribes. These occur virtually on a daily basis. They are most obvious whenever formal committees meet, but in truth a border skirmish can flare up spontaneously whenever two or more different tribes have cause to meet, formally or informally.

Conflict arises in three ways. The first is that one tribe trespasses into another tribe's territory. That can be accidental, like hiking into North Korea's de-militarized zone because your GPS app failed. Or it can be deliberate, a foray to test the reaction of an opposing tribe to see how vigorous they will defend their border. What are examples of this kind of trespassing? Scheduling a meeting on a topic that is clearly some other tribe's prerogative to chair. That'll do it. Or how about writing a report that scuttles the conclusion another tribe has reached? Has that ever happened? Step into the minefield my friend and smell the dead roses. We'll send lilies to your funeral.

The second way that generates conflict and causes a border skirmish relates to real and perceived superpowers. Defying a real superpower is the act of stepping on that land mine. Engineering holds meetings with suppliers without Purchasing all the time. If Purchasing suspects a secret deal has been struck with commercial terms affected, you can be sure that action will result in an equal and opposite reaction. Don't be at ground zero when atoms collide.

The most entertaining and frequently-occurring border skirmishes result from challenging *perceived* superpowers. That's the gray area where exact borders are in dispute and where tribal legends teach the membership of both sides how the other side bluffs its way onto your land to steal your cattle. Often one tribe will co-opt yet another tribe to do its dirty work or will bring another tribe's authority to the table to back up what they're doing. Which may in your eyes appear to be an exercise of conjuring up rabbits out of thin air.

Huh? you ask. Okay, I'll give you an example.

A witch doctor from Marketing expounds on the need for a new product. The Design function in Engineering balks at the arguments that are being made. Marketing data is presented that is the equivalent of selling refrigerators to the Inuit of Baffin Island. That marketing data is challenged by Engineering. Marketing perceives a threat to its perceived superpower: a power that states any marketing data it provides to another tribe is golden and any analysis of any market is always plated in platinum pixie-dust. How dare an engineer challenge Marketing's conclusions! Have they ever been to Baffin Island?

Engineering pushes back. They have other budget priorities and limited resources. What to do? Marketing co-ops an analyst from Finance to add authority to the debate. That analyst calculates the return on investment for designing and manufacturing this new refrigerator. The conclusion Finance reaches is that Marketing's idea has a stellar payback. *So there!*, the marketing marauders declare, bashing their swords on their shields. Bringing in Finance—with its real superpower of payback calculation—is a bold attempt to tip the scales in Marketing's favor. The skirmish continues.

The devil will be in the details. The method Finance uses for its payback calculation cannot be challenged or else the heretics in Engineering will be burned at the stake. The only opportunity to repel the Marketing invaders is for someone in Engineering to discover a flaw in the front end argument. Perhaps the payback calculation was based on a market forecast which projects sales of refrigerators every year that exceed the entire population of Baffin Island? Game, set and match to Engineering if they can turn over the appropriate rock. Depending on how adroit Engineering is, this skirmish may result in a Marketing win, or it may push Marketing into a forced retreat from the border to fight again another day.

Survival Tip: Challenging another tribe's perceived superpowers requires either generating data of your own or challenging the data that tribe attempts to use to win the skirmish. Be wary of co-opted co-conspirators from other tribes/functions brought in by the opposing side. They are being conscripted in order to use their stamp of authority to validate an otherwise debatable claim. Find your own tribal ally to bring to the table. A counter-punch from someone with legitimate authority may often trump your opponent's clumsy attempts at fisticuffs.

The third source of conflict between tribes is what I call, 'dancing with the wrong partner'. Basically this occurs when a member of another tribe crosses your border, becomes disoriented and starts acting like a member of your tribe. On the surface this may look like an attempt at spying or sabotage. Usually it's a boneheaded mistake or an act of stupidity. Be gentle with the remedy. That member of the transgressing tribe might be needed in the future to assist you.

How does this *faux-pas* occur?

Have you ever lost your car keys and can't for the life of you remember where you put them, only to find out they're in your coat pocket? The one you're wearing. Have you ever lost your reading glasses only to find out they're on the end of your nose? Absent-mindedness shouldn't be punished. It's surprising how absent-minded people can be inside a BigCorp when they're in the heat of a debate. One of the manifestations of this is where two people are arguing with one another and they don't realize they have *both* switched sides to argue from the other tribe's perspective.

Here's a real life example from my own experience. The subject was a supplier's capability to be accepted as a qualified bidder to supply a new product. The two tribes involved in debating 'yes or no' are Engineering and Purchasing, the latter represented by a supplier quality engineer. So in effect, we have two engineers arguing—one with legitimate authority over our product's design, the other with real experience in judging the supplier's technical capabilities.

Here's a compacted version of the debate:

Engineer from the Engineering tribe: "The supplier's manufacturing process capability lacks the assurances I need that the final product will always meet our specifications."

Quality engineer from the Purchasing tribe: "The supplier has an excellent engineering staff who can ensure our designs are optimized for function and durability."

A raging debate ensued. The engineer from Engineering went into length about what they judged to be the faults with the supplier's quality control. The quality engineer from Purchasing counter-argued about how helpful the supplier's engineers, laboratories and pre-production prototype capabilities could be. They were just what the doctor ordered if judged with an open mind.

I stepped in where a fool dare not tread. Don't worry. I survived didn't I?

Me: “Why don’t you, Mr. Engineer from Engineering, visit the supplier to see their test labs, etc? And why don’t you, Mr. Quality Engineer from Purchasing, gather data on the supplier’s performance to determine what their quality track record is? When both of you have done this, come back and we’ll start the debate over.” Essentially what I said was, “Why don’t the both of you do the jobs that are on your business cards?”

It was an astonishing case of tribal role-reversal that was actually a much more protracted debate than what I’ve pictured here, one that was about to escalate into an active declaration of war between Engineering and Purchasing. Which would be silly since Purchasing was arguing Engineering’s side and vice versa. The two people in question had simultaneously forgotten which tribe they belonged to and had crossed over into someone else’s territory to argue from the perspective of the other side. It happens all the time. Call it absent-mindedness. Call it selective amnesia. The point is, there was no malicious intent. These are border skirmishes where common sense is the best deterrent to all-out war.

Survival Tip: Learn the art of facilitation. Take courses in it. Every BigCorp offers them. Try to see both sides of a debate no matter which tribe you belong to. If you can be a neutral party—a trick in its own right—pause the action to summarize both sets of points. Have the debate participants switched roles? Separate the combatants and carefully align the debate’s points according to their functions. Don’t *tell* them the error you’ve found in their approaches to the problem. *Show* them. Let them realize it for themselves. If the goal is agreement, this may defuse the situation and allow them to stand down their nuclear weapons. If the topic is truly controversial, consider employing a professional facilitator. Every BigCorp has one or maybe several. It just depends on how important your meeting is as to whether the managers who control this precious resource deem you worthy of using it.

Survival Tip: Know when to agree to disagree. Often a debate between functions reaches a standoff where one tribe rallies around its flag and the other tribe around theirs. At this point, real and perceived superpowers merge into one on both sides of the border, and the two tribes challenge one another to step across and risk being annihilated. Back away. No one will win. Summarize the opposing tribe’s position and get them to acknowledge that you’ve done that summary correctly. Respect their authority and tell them so. Acknowledge their superpower. Maybe they’ll acknowledge yours too. Summarize your own position, step back from the border and re-schedule the fight for another time. Let them rattle their sabers if they still want to. Better that than have them shove the pointy end in your gut.

I promised a list of thought-starting superpowers before we ended this chapter. Grab some buddies, find the nearest coffee station and talk them over with a cup of joe. Make your own list based on the divisions of responsibilities within your BigCorp’s functions. Keep adding to your list. As your corporate culture changes, tribal behavior changes too. Policy changes may create new, legitimate superpowers for some tribes. The cult of personality at the top of one tribe might create new mythical powers in the minds of its leaders which will roll down to the minions. Don’t forget to include your own tribe in your list-making. Knowing your tribe’s *real* superpowers is important to your survival. Knowing your tribe’s *perceived* powers is also important. The latter determines when and how to back down from border skirmishes with other tribes.

Here's my thought-starting list of superpowers:

Engineering:

Real: Validating the safety and durability of a product's design.

Perceived: All-knowing insight into what the customer wants.

Purchasing:

Real: Authority to bind BigCorp to a contract.

Perceived: Successful negotiating by creating chaos.

Finance:

Real: Predicting bankruptcy.

Perceived: Accounting voodoo.

Sales & Marketing:

Real: Organizing a luxurious boondoggle.

Perceived: Understanding a changing market.

Production:

Real: Keeping a manufacturing process going regardless of cost.

Perceived: Re-engineering products when Engineering has failed.

Public Relations:

Real: Claiming 'black is white' with a serious dead-pan face.

Perceived: Politics.

Human Resources:

Real: Setting policy traps for people to fall into.

Perceived: Organizational psychology.

From author Charles A Cornell:

If you enjoyed this excerpt from *A Survivor's Guide to Working at a Big Corporation*, this book can be purchased in Kindle ebook form or in print on Amazon.

There's a lot packed into it and in this economy you need all the survival tips you can get!

It would be greatly appreciated if you could take the time to submit a review. Even if it's just a few words.

It would mean a great deal to me! Thank you!

Charles A Cornell