Chapter 9
Performance Culture: The Organization as a Tribe

Abstract The continuing success of exceptionally successful businesses has, according to scholar as Cameron and Quinn (1998, 2011), less to do with the influences of the market it is operating in, than with the company’s own values. It is not so much about the competition than about personal beliefs, less about means than about vision. Despite the obvious importance of strategy, market presentation or technological innovations, exceptionally successful companies capitalize on something else; the powerful influence of a well-developed and managed unique corporate culture.

Keywords Organizational culture · Performance indicators · Sustainable performance

9.1 Tribal Cultures

Just like in the past, anthropologists Danielle Braun and Jitske Kramer could have easily said. Their bestseller The Corporate Tribe (2016), was even named Management Book of the Year in 2016. It is a beautifully written book about the importance of (organizational) culture and the personal fit of individual group members with their tribal culture. In anthropology, a tribe refers to a group of related families or clans, subgroups. The most important connecting element of a tribe is its culture, its shared language and religion (Braun and Kramer 2016).

But exactly how can a strong culture of performance be achieved? According to Braun and Kramer, to understand how organizations operate, we need to return to the basic building blocks of these constructs—human beings. We need to look at more than just the psychology of the individual. The focus should be on human beings as pack animals. Organizations consist of groups of people. Anthropologically speaking, an organization consists of different tribes, each with their own chief, rituals, and rules. If we want to understand, influence, change, and/or manage groups, we must understand how people operate. As Marcel Proust puts it, “The real voyage of discovery, consists not of seeking new landscapes, but of having new eyes (Braun and Kramer 2016).”

My quest for sustainable performance continued. I came across the most successful tribe, many say even the most successful organization in recent decades: The All...
Blacks. Their customs, rituals, and manners, combined with the results of my three-year quantitative study of performance characteristics and selection criteria among Dutch professionals, led to new and surprising insights concerning the benefit of a strong performance culture in our own organizations.

In his book *Legacy* (2013), James Kerr beautifully describes how the New Zealand national rugby team is able to continue on winning. The All Blacks are the most successful rugby team in history but are also considered the most successful sports team in general. Their win rate of 86% is unequaled. Even now, the All Blacks are the reigning world champions. How are they able to do it, again and again? New Zealand cannot be the largest rugby nation with the most available talent to draw from, right? What is the secret to their success? How does the team go from victory to victory? And what can they teach us?

James Kerr believes that the All Blacks are so successful because they select the right people, define the right goal, and maintain the right culture. For several years, Kerr was allowed into the All Blacks’ inner circle in order to record their legacy. In his book, Kerr describes 15 leadership lessons that we can all use to achieve higher performance.

Naturally, my main question was how the All Blacks select their players. Could they perhaps use similar ideas and performance criteria that I found to be important? The answer was a vowedly yes (although the All Blacks use very different terminology, of course)! “Talent was irrelevant. We carefully picked the players. We used matrices to back intuition because there are certain stats in rugby that determine a player’s character,” says former coach Wayne Smith.

From victory to victory; it requires a goal and a fit to the job requirements (1), ownership and development of your most important personality traits (2), a sense of connection to each other and to the organization (3), and last but not least, engagement; a positive attitude to life and an attitude of great personal prestige (4). The All Blacks even have a perfect word for it: mana. “Talent is good, character is better.” More about that later. After all, for the All Blacks, it all starts with that initial concept, the higher purpose, and the fit with the job requirements: whakapapa!

### 9.2 Whakapapa: The Higher Purpose

The All Blacks’ success story starts in the small rural town of Christchurch in 1997. Christchurch is where the heart of the now extremely successful team is located. Several players and coaches of the local Crusaders were born there. Wayne Smith says: “Back in 1997, professional rugby was still a long way off. That was certainly true for Christchurch. The Crusaders had had a very poor start to their season, and there was no existing culture to build on.” No reason, no purpose, and no well-established principles. The players were simply going through the motions. The Crusaders were having an identity crisis (Kerr 2013).

Wayne Smith: “The more you have to play for, the better you play. It is about purpose and personal meaning…Those are the two big things.” The emotional glue in
any culture—of a religion, country, or sports team—is its identity and purpose. “The things we consider important to ourselves—our deepest values—have the emotional power to shape behavior.” Smith coached the Crusaders to two titles in 1998 and 1999 before he was appointed coach of the All Blacks (Kerr 2013).

This connection between personal values and a higher purpose is something that drives the All Blacks to an almost obsessive degree. When the team members’ values are linked to the values and goals of the organization, they will put in more effort to achieve those.

When they do not, it will negatively affect their personal motivation, and eventually the survival of the organization as well. Organizing always starts inside out; by formulating a higher purpose: “Being part of the legacy,” as the All Blacks put it (Kerr 2013).

Several other authors and scientists support this concept, including Pink (2011), Sinek (2009), and Maslow (1943). In the end, it is all about purpose; the why, the meaning of it all. This was also demonstrated by the research and work of Frankl (1946):

“When asked what they found to be the most important part of their job, 16% of respondents answered, ‘earning a lot of money’; 78% indicated that their main and higher purpose was, ‘finding meaning and purpose in my life.’”

How do you think the current generation of young professionals would respond to this survey? Finding a sense of purpose and meaning for ourselves and our organizations has only gotten more important! Just like with the All Blacks.

9.3 Ubuntu: Connection to Others and the Organization

According to retired bishop Desmond Tutu, “Ubuntu is the essence of our human existence”. It is about our connection to others. The impossibility of living in isolation as human beings. Ubuntu is an ethical or humanist philosophy from sub-Saharan Africa about dedication and relationships between people. The word occurs in the Bantu languages of southern Africa and is considered a traditional African concept. Still, the New Zealand Maoris embraced this important concept as the core of their own culture (Kerr 2013).

Ubuntu is not about having your own goals or your own interests, as Nelson Mandela also explained in an interview with journalist Tim Modesi (Kerr 2013). “But you do it in a way that enables the community around you to improve itself. Those are the most important things in life.” Ubuntu means that we send ripples through the greater community, knowing that our actions affect everyone, not just ourselves.

But then what was that “why,” that higher purpose (the whakapapa) and the connectedness (Ubuntu) of the All Blacks? How did they define it in order to win everything that could be won? Officially, according to NZRU sources, their initial purpose was “to unite and inspire New Zealand.” However, every All Black knows that it
goes far beyond that. Their ultimate higher purpose is very simple: “To add to the legacy. To leave the jersey in a better place.”

“There now is a rich tradition of players who contributed and continue to contribute to this higher purpose, our legacy,” says Wayne Smith. “They stood for and stand for the idea that it is about leaving your uniform, your black jersey in a better state than your predecessor left it in.”

“The only thing I did,” tells legendary former All Blacks captain Sean Fitzpatrick, “was to leave an even better team to my successors, the next generation of All Blacks. All that was required was a single word; winning.”

9.4 Whanau: Ownership

From winning to winning. “Pass the ball,” as James Kerr writes in Legacy (2013). A shared responsibility (partnership) means shared ownership. But it also means personal ownership and development of your most important personality traits. A kind of connection in which each individual is much more willing to give up parts of themselves, all for the greater good. The All Blacks are all owners of what happens on the field and know how to optimally use their most important personality traits to achieve success.

Haka

*Haka* is the name of a group of ceremonial Maori dances from New Zealand (hakas are also danced on Samoa and Fiji). During a haka, a certain text is spoken. With the dance and the words, they appeal to the gods (forefathers). It is often wrongly thought that the haka is always a war dance. A war dance (the Peruperu) does exist, but there are also hakas for, for instance, funerals. Hakas are performed during all kinds of occasions. For example, tourists can be welcomed to the traditional hangi, a welcoming dinner, with a haka. Hakas are also performed during certain festivities or sports matches. Certain dances are set, others allow dancers the freedom to express themselves however they want.

The dance itself consists of a range of gestures, often starting with knees bent and feet apart. The dancer then flexes his or her muscles and beats them (for instance starting with chest, moving to the arms and thighs). They also use a yanking motion aimed at the heavens to pull down the power of the gods into the warrior. In addition they use varying facial expressions, like rolling back their eyes and showing their tongues.

The Ka Mate is probably the most famous Haka. For years, it has been used by the All Blacks before the start of every match. Nowadays, they sometimes also perform the controversial Kapa o Pango or other hakas. Several other teams from the region also perform this ritual.
“Talent is irrelevant. It is all about purpose and personal meaning… Leaders don’t create followers,” According to management scientist and leadership guru Peters (2005). “They create more leaders.” Group members who feel ownership of a shared purpose and realize that everyone might (have to) play the most important role in the team. In 2011, this happened to Stephen Donald, considered by many to be one of the greatest rugby talents in the world. A year earlier, Donald thought that he had played his last match for the All Blacks. During an earlier, crucial match against Australia, his performance was—to put it mildly—unsatisfactory. His coach had not used him since then. So, during the 2011 world championships, he spent his time fishing in the Waikato-river.

However, a string of bad luck for the All Blacks during this championship would change Stephen Donald’s life in a spectacular fashion. First, Dan Carter—one of the most talented and the highest scoring rugby player in the history of the sport—became injured. This was a major loss to the team. Soon after, the same thing happened to Colin Shade. New Zealand was in a panic. With only one experienced fly half (an important position in rugby and the person who also takes free kicks) left. The All Blacks were in serious trouble. All Blacks coach Graham Henry picked up the phone right away and called Stephen Donald: “Get over here!” (Kerr 2013).

In the 43rd min, during the final against France, the last remaining experienced fly half and free kick taker, Aaron Cruden, had to leave the pitch. Murphy’s law seemed very real for New Zealand at that moment. A day after he had been fishing, having barely trained for weeks, Stephen Donald was called up as a substitute. He was wearing a borrowed All Blacks jersey two sizes too small. The whole country held its breath.

In one of the most exciting finals ever, the French allowed a penalty in the final minutes of the game. The most important moment for any free kick specialist had arrived. Without even being asked, Stephen Donald stepped up to the ball, eyed both goal posts, and … scored! New Zealand’s fourth choice, who had not played for even a minute in six weeks, became the pride of the nation that day. He has been a hero to the All Blacks and its supporters ever since (Kerr 2013).

Whakapapa, Ubuntu, Whanau, and Mana. Leaders create leaders. People who feel a connection to a higher purpose, who feel ownership of the tasks that they, regardless of circumstances, have to perform. People who show the right attitude for sustainable performance: “Talent is good, character is better!”

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