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A Magician with Words: How Garry Ridge Uses Language to Transform WD-40's Culture

Garry Ridge doesn't call WD-40 employees variations of clichéd corporate terms such as "team" or "team players." Instead, Ridge uses a metaphor of a tribe to talk about organizations, which "has made it much easier for me to communicate certain values within WD-40," says Ridge. "For example, think about tribal leaders—they sit around a fire and share their learning with younger tribe members. So that's the number one responsibility of the WD-40 tribe—to make learning inclusive and evolutionary." Such magic with language and an ability to torque words in ways that make people "get it" is one of Ridge's talents and one of the keys to WD-40's cultural transformation since Ridge stepped up as CEO in 1997.



In essence, by altering WD-40's culture, Aussie-born Ridge has changed the company's business and its results. Since he donned the leadership hat, WD-40's revenue has doubled to over \$286 million and its profitability has been moderate but stable at a 3 percent compound annual growth rate. Under Ridge's leadership, WD-40's products have expanded beyond its mainstay blue and yellow-canned lubricant to eight other brands such as 2000 Flushes toilet cleaner to Spot Shot carpet stain remover, and counting. Beyond basic growth, Ridge and his tribe also managed to shift WD-40's mix of sales from mostly revenues in a saturated domestic market to revenues in the untapped global market.

Using tribal nomenclature gives Ridge a vehicle to talk about organizational attributes that are important to WD-40, not just some attributes if he were only to use the term "team." "A team is about getting stuff done in a positive way and winning," Ridge says. "A tribe is a much richer communication tool." It's a communication tool Ridge has been testing and using since 2004.

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In addition to “Learning & Teaching,” the number one mission of WD-40’s tribal leaders, there are eight other aspects of tribal thinking within Ridge’s organizational model. Organizations, like tribes, have an “Identity” and people feel a sense of “Belonging” to a group for a greater good. “One of the most important desires that people have in life is a desire to belong to something,” notes Ridge. Since people join tennis clubs or poker clubs to feel a sense of belonging and affinity, Ridge applies the same concept to an organization, by building one that people actually want to belong to.

Tribes also have “Folklore,” or traditional beliefs, myths, tales, and practices. Ridge says: “Folklore in non-tribal language is ‘we’ve always done it that way,’ which has a confrontational feel. Instead, we call it folklore.” In a tribe, folklore can be positive and enabling, or restrictive and negative. “If it’s restrictive and negative, we identify it and bury it,” he says. The whole point of Folklore is to give WD-40 employees a way to dialogue and to socialize instead of being confrontational. Now during meetings, people identify practices or beliefs and have a fruitful framework in which to discuss whether to alter traditions or to propagate them.

Tribes have brave and determined “Warriors” too—ones that defend each other and the tribe. But members of tribes also have “Individual Work” that builds personal esteem and a high degree of confidence in a tribe member’s own ability. They have “Ceremony” too, which in an organization translates to recognition and awards, as well as integration ceremonies for new members.

Tribes have “Constant Evolution” so “let’s make sure we’re not sitting next to the lake or pond that dries up,” says Ridge. “If our lake is drying up, our roles as tribal leaders are to make sure we’re moving onto another pond,” which is another metaphor for making sure the organization stays adaptive and works towards the future. Tribal “Customs” are the different norms in different countries where the organization might operate. Finally, tribes have unique “Culture” or tradition, codes of dress, and a unique language.

When Ridge first thought of the tribe model, he described it to his people who rather quickly embraced the idea and started saying: “We’re a member of the WD-40 tribe.” Ridge disseminated and continues to spread the idea in every which way possible. He physically visits employees around the world, including Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, Europe, and Asia. And the fact that WD-40 is now sold in more than 160 countries around the world, Ridge spends a lot of time in other countries. “I’m in charge of corporate well-being so I spend a lot of time in the field with the tribe-members to be a part of their world—to listen to them and to let them know I’m there for them,” says Ridge. He also sends weekly emails to tribe members that have a personal and quirky feel to them. In the emails, Ridge recognizes tribe members from all over the world and includes personal messages, celebrations, and concerns.

Ridge’s transformation of WD-40’s culture was also driven by a new leadership model he dubbed: “Servant Leadership with Edge,” a philosophy that fostered a caring, empowered, ethical, and trusting organizational culture. Servant Leadership was originally developed by Robert Greenleaf, director of leadership development for AT&T and professor at Harvard Business School. Ridge’s leadership model comprises a series of steps within a circular continuous process of Vision, Values, Planning, Execution, Review, and Learning. “We’re here to help people succeed,” says Ridge.

Prior to the last step of Learning was what Ridge calls the “Learning Moment” which means that tribe members at WD-40 don’t make “mistakes” but rather they experience learning moments that are applauded, creating an atmosphere of openness and learning, rather than a culture of fear or loss.

Part of Ridge’s leadership model includes his catchy mantra: “Don’t mark my paper, help me get an A,” which is about creating and enabling leaders to be successful. Helping leaders get an A involves first defining what an A embodies and then creating a culture where leaders can achieve an A. It means an empowerment culture rather than a hierarchical micro-managing culture. It means completely removing fear of failure from the organization so that people can achieve and help others achieve an A.

Despite the seemingly soft and fuzzy tribe culture and servant leadership models, Ridge is creating a culture that, at the end of the day, needs to be accountable—whether accountable to shareholders, other tribe members, customers, or to the company as a whole. Although he believes WD-40 is a great company, it’s not a good fit for everyone. Even his termination nomenclature is a bit softer than Donald Trump’s “You’re fired.” Ridge kindly says: “If our culture of accountability, responsibility, candor, and caring doesn’t work with you, we’ll share you with a competitor.” He adds: “You have to be careful how you communicate with people because they hear things that you say and my belief is that you don’t have to destroy them in the communication process.”

Ridge lives his own mantras and that means measuring his leadership philosophies and models such as the tribe organization and servant leadership models. WD-40 has its own report card where tribe members have the option to fill out employee surveys every 18 months where the organization measures its own performance against the agreed upon A’s in terms of company values. Even though the survey is voluntary, in the last round, 98 percent of tribe members globally participated. “It goes back to the tribe,” he says. “People feel like they belong and they feel like they’re doing meaningful work.” In fact, in the last survey 94 percent of employees said they were “engaged.” Ridge says: “We have the support structure and the measurement structure. If it isn’t measured, it doesn’t matter.”

WD-40’s success in the last decade can largely be attributed to the monumental cultural change that Ridge and his tribe have achieved. His wizardry with language, through the creation of catchy and memorable phrases and nomenclature such as the tribe organizational model, has led to cultural transformation and subsequently positive business results. One of Ridge’s dreams is to have WD-40 viewed as a leadership laboratory for business where ideas such as his tribe culture could be formulated, tested, and tweaked.

“Our mission and goal in life is certainly to create shareholder value,” he says. “But as part of that process, we are using this learning laboratory to create great leaders that we send out in the world to be better leaders in the business world, in the community, and in their personal lives.”