Tribal Dynamics in Succession

By Francesca Cardona

The approaching death of a parent can deeply impact family dynamics. In Shakespeare's *King Lear*, an aging monarch who is determined to stage his own succession, sees his overbearing demands provoke ambition, greed and profound unhappiness, which lead to the disintegration of his family. Successions in organisations can be equally complex, triggering very primitive emotions.

I discuss the challenges of succession in a chapter of my recent book *Work Matter*s (Routledge, 2020). I look at the troubled succession that unfolded at The National Theatre while it was directed by the great actor Laurence Olivier. Here, the succession process was conducted opaquely; actively managed behind Olivier's back, with his appointed successor, Peter Hall, sworn to secrecy. Olivier, who had no role in his heir's selection, was confronted with a fait accompli, and felt that he had not only been excluded, but stitched up (Billington, 2013)

This example provides a glimpse into the difficulties of facing the end of an era. It underlines the guilt associated with letting go of a leader, particularly Olivier, one of the most distinguished actors of our times. This complex emotional context creates the conditions for 'acting out', exemplified by the stealth of Olivier's ostracism from the succession process. The secrecy of the succession process is evidence of the anxiety of confronting Olivier's likely disappointment and anger and also shows the apprehension of fully embracing the need for change in the National Theatre.

The desire to take a parent's place is a very powerful dynamic. The guilt associated with the desire to take the parents or leaders place is one of the central motives for painful and messy succession

processes. The need to 'kill' the father is, as Winnicott says, an inevitable stage for adolescents to gain maturity and independence (Winnicott, 1969).

Recently, I have explored the connection between the challenges of succession and the concepts of *tribe* and *tribe identity*. Leaving our professional tribe or allowing someone new to join our tribe can be tough. It can challenge our sense of identity and belonging.

The notion of an organisation as a tribe can be linked with the organisational concept of closed systems. This is a system that is reluctant to be open and encouraging towards new members (Obholzer, A. Roberts, V, 2019). One of the key dilemmas in this framing, is understanding when the tribe is a '*force for good'* – wanting to preserve the integrity of its approach and practice – and when tribal dynamics become an excuse for protecting one's own interests, position, and affiliations.

An extreme example of an organisational closed system is seen in organised crime syndicates such as the mafia. Given their nefarious intentions and brutal outcomes, the mafia can be understood as a *'perverse tribe'*. Although, originally, it wasn't like this. The mafia was born in Sicily as a way of life: an instrument to protect one's family from the injustice of imposed government. Something reinforced in Italy's unification, where a liberation from colonial powers in the north was accompanied by an invasion of the south, perhaps explaining long lasting mistrust in government. As the 19th century progressed, this insular mentality saw the mafia starting to extort protection money from landowners and eventually, through ever-increasing *'perverse tribal dynamics',* mutate into the global criminal organisation we know today.
The perverse state of mind, as described by Long, '…is not simply a deviation from normative reality. It has to do with individual pleasure at the expense of a more general good. It reflects a state of primary narcissism…Perversion begets perversion …because of the

complicity of the accomplices and their subsequent denial and self-deception'(Long, 2002, p. 191-192).

Key aspects of *'perverse tribal dynamics'*, such as nepotism or protecting our tribe at all costs, can create a shadow on any process of succession.
For example, it may prevent people from challenging a leader who is staying in their position for too long, or who is blocking new people or diverse actors from joining the organisation. These dynamics also impact new leaders from taking up their role effectively if they are perceived as outsiders, or too different from the dominant culture. They can be marginalised and undermined in their authority.

Behind this defensive attitude and protectionism is the anxiety of losing our own *tribal identity* if the status quo is challenged or changed. When we are part of a tribe, it can become very difficult to leave. We might feel anxious of letting go of our professional home and network, fearing to be excluded from our 'sentience' group, where we invest our loyalties and feelings, and lose the status and comfort of belonging to a particular group. There is often the concern of not having another tribe to go to.

If our own professional identity is too strongly related to our tribal identity, leaving might feel almost impossible as the following example shows.
In my role as organisational consultant, I have tried to help the main players described in this vignette to gain new insights into the succession process and to engage with their situation in a more thoughtful way.

Rachel is the founder of a pioneering department in blood diseases in a large NHS Trust. She has been at the core of its development and success. After many years as a principal consultant, she was promoted to the Trust directorate, a role she accepted with some ambivalence, as she has always seen herself as an outsider,

irrespective of her achievements and success with the new department.

Despite her new commitments and challenges, Rachel still spends time in the department, clearly not feeling settled in her new role. She often goes back there on Wednesdays, the day her successor is not in. Though she doesn't sit at the same desk, she is still based in her old office. Unsurprisingly, people consult her when she is there- they feel reassured by her experience and wisdom. Yet, there is a widespread feeling she is keeping an eye on Henry, the new principal consultant- and not always in a benign way. Henry feels mixed and slightly confused towards Rachel: as his mentor for many years, her advice has been invaluable. Now, he feels implicitly criticised and even undermined in his authority.

It wasn't surprising that Rachel found leaving the department challenging; it has been her professional home for most of her career. Her identity has been intrinsically linked with her role within the department, but her continued involvement risks perpetuating a closed system and stunting the organisation's development.

I was also aware of her ambivalence towards the leadership of the Trust: she often referred to them as 'the old school network'. As a woman of colour, it has not been easy for her to have a place at the top table, regardless of her competence and skills. Her different cultural background has also been an issue; her blunt and forceful approach has been at times perceived as autocratic and authoritarian. However, she was highly regarded within the department, seen as a very capable leader and ultimately the team's matriarch.

The department was her *tribe*. Moving out of her tribe, even for a more senior role, felt hard. A few years away from retirement, it made sense to take up a higher position in the organisation. A last chance to exercise some influence on a larger scale. Though, she

wasn't ready. Her desire, emotional involvement and passion were still in her old job: as a clinician and leader she belonged there. Outside that tribe she felt quite lost and foreign. Yet, her ongoing presence enables elements of perverse tribal dynamics that help maintain a closed system and inhibit an embrace of new approaches.

While the nature of work has dramatically changed in the last twenty years, it remains a crucial element of our identity and emotional investment. It '…represents our capacity to invest in something away from our own immediate surroundings, a 'third dimension' beyond our individuality, family and community' (Cardona, 2020 p.8).
An important ingredient for a successful succession is the desire for the next chapter, a libidinal investment in a new venture. It is also key moving forward without feeling a sense of betrayal towards the tribe we are leaving.

It is our need for *belonging* that drives us to be part of a group that shares values and purpose. Yet, this shouldn't mean our professional tribe had to be a closed system. Anthropologists have uncovered numerous examples of tribes that incorporate members who speak different languages, practice different rituals, and follow different leaders. Tribes can be fluid; they don't have to be too close or insular.

An organisation can't survive as a closed system. It needs new blood and injections of different ideas through new generations and needs to explore diverse approaches. The organisation also needs to maintain its core practice, providing a sense of stability and continuity. The tension between innovation and continuity, openness and stability are difficult to sustain, particularly if our own professional identity is strongly associated with our tribal group.
I have experienced and witnessed the challenge of succession – *letting go and letting in* – in my own professional world. The transference toward a particular individual in a role can be hard to

shift. The new person stepping in – the *step-parent* – can be a source of anxiety, suspicion, or contempt.

It has been argued that having a *'transitional leader'* after a charismatic leader has stepped down can be more effective and provide a necessary temporary containment, a bridge before the appointment of a permanent leader. The interim nature of the situation can protect against rivalrous and ejecting feelings, allowing the team to experience being led by someone else- a weaning process from a dependency on the founder/charismatic leader.

My consultancy to Henry, the new principal consultant, and the haematology department has focussed on the dynamics at play in their succession process, which include the sense of tribe, rivalries and issues of identity and belonging. While supporting Henry to take up his authority in a more confident and assertive way, I have also tried to help them imagine how Rachel could move from a parent to a *grandparent* position.
Stepping down from a role in an organisation doesn't always have to be final. The departing leader can still offer some significant contribution if the role generates from a real organisational need rather than from the desire to placate or appease.

Henry should be able to feel free to exercise his authority without fearing and deferring to Rachel as his previous boss. Rachel's extensive experience, broad perspective and wisdom can be an invaluable resource, provided she can recognise the limits of her role and the necessity to step back, giving space to Henry to lead without her shadow. By not letting go, she risks replicating King Lear's domineering presence in the succession process that will reinforce the closed loop of tribal dynamics.

References

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