

Conflict is story meets belonging

One of my favourite thinkers is Yuval Noah Harari, author of the seminal work *Sapiens* – highly recommended if you're interested in the human condition.

He was recently interviewed by another of my favourite people, Stephen Colbert. They were discussing the conflicts in the world and Harari said:

“We are a storytelling animal. Some people think that we fight with each other for the same reasons that other animals fight, over territory and food, but this is rarely the case. The terrible conflict between Israelis and Palestinians is not really about territory or food. There is enough land to build houses and hospitals and schools for everyone. There is enough food to feed everyone. People fight over the imaginary stories in their minds: who is God's favourite children, who God gave Jerusalem to. This is what most of the conflicts in the world are about. This is good news, because if conflicts are about objective things, the only way to end them is with violence. But if conflicts are about the stories we believe, there is a chance, at least in some cases, to just talk about it and perhaps change the story and find a common story we can both be happy with.”

I wholeheartedly agree that most conflict is about story, but not only about story. Most conflict is about the interplay of story and belonging. We don't just believe our chosen story because we were taught to by our parents and our community as children, though that is the way our beliefs develop. We continue to believe our chosen story as adults because it is fundamental to our most basic need, to belong. If we believe a different story to our community, we risk our belonging and our subconscious tells us that we will die. Some of us don't even believe the prevailing story, but we pretend we do to preserve our belonging. Some of us go to great lengths to hide our true beliefs in personal and professional life because our families, friends and work colleagues will reject us if we don't.

Our need to belong is so strong that we will refuse to accept even objectively true facts if they conflict with the prevailing story and risk our belonging. We see this playing out all over the world. Millions of people in the US are walking around wearing red hats as a symbol of belonging to their tribe. Many of them don't really know what facts they're aligning themselves with, but they absolutely know that if they don't wear the red hat, they will cease to belong - and that is unthinkable. They know the story.

I've mentioned in other articles a fascinating study that put a group of people, none of whom had ever met before, into a room and divided them into two completely arbitrary 'tribes'. It took less

than ten minutes for people to like and trust members of their own tribe – and dislike and distrust members of the other tribe. Less than ten minutes.

Humans are so deeply hard-wired for belonging that we seek to belong to the people who believe the same stories that we do. And those who believe a different story are automatically 'other'. We are 'us', they are 'them'. And we protect what we have from them and fight for our own tribe's survival.

These stories and their associated tribes are playing out in every organisation you can name, including your own. But once we know this, we can work with human hard-wiring instead of against it. If we can identify the prevailing stories and tribes, we can change them and/or create new stories and tribes for people to belong to. It's actually relatively simple, but it is by no means easy.

I define organisational culture as the rules of belonging. One of the most fundamental rules is the story you believe.

If you want to change your culture, you need to change the rules of belonging.



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