Overcoming Our Tribalistic Nature

**Competition for scarce resources can easily trigger tribalism, resulting in a mindset that pits one group against the other.**

Humanity is facing unprecedented risks to its very survival, ranging from climate change to nuclear terrorism. Such problems require global cooperation: if everyone works together, these issues can be effectively tackled. Yet there are inherent challenges to global cooperation, and every lost day of joint work results in increased risk of catastrophe.

Why is it so difficult for nation-states and other stakeholders to work together on global problems of mutual concern? On a rational level, there is a shared interest in collaborating to improve the environment, enhance security, and promote physical and mental well-being. But competition for resources, prestige, power, and information can pit stakeholders against one another, producing a dangerous mindset that I call the tribes effect. The moment a group feels threatened, they enter into this mindset and start to see the conflict in adversarial terms: it becomes us versus them, and innovative solutions for mutual gain are replaced by myopic policies that satisfy one tribe over another. Each group argues that their perspective is right and legitimate – and closes their ears to the other’s perspective as they rally their own troops for battle.

To make matters worse, once this dynamics is at play, it becomes taboo for us to engage in constructive problem solving with the other side. Any such act is viewed as a betrayal of our tribe – and the punishment for such a breach can be severe.

The deepest forces of tribalism arise as we view the other’s rhetoric as an assault on what we hold as sacred. Nothing more intensely roils the fury of passion than a threat to our deepest beliefs and values. In fact, the savvy leader may intentionally invoke longstanding grievances into the contemporary political narrative to turn loose followers into tribal loyalists.

Social psychology offers a crucial insight to address this problem. We can emotionally attach to a global identity with as much fervor as to a national one. The core principle of identity formation remains the same: we imbue emotional significance to our membership in the group and commit loyalty to that entity. Problems tend to emerge as more localized identities clash, whether between nations or neighborhoods. Mitigating such tension requires that our systems of global cooperation build a strong institutional sense of camaraderie while simultaneously ensuring that members feel sufficiently free to determine fundamental aspects of their provincial identity.

To enhance international cooperation around global challenges, we must remember that nothing holds greater meaning than human connection. A threat to our tribe can lure us toward adversarial behavior that may not serve our long-term, rational interests. The development of a strong global identity – one that does not threaten the local one – can stack the cards in favor of increased cooperation around the most perilous threats of our time.

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