

The role of tribes in achieving lasting impact and how to create them

[This post is adapted from a talk we (Konrad Seifert, Nora Ammann) gave on this topic at EA UCL in February 2021]

[The role of tribes in achieving lasting impact and how to create them](#)

[Intro](#)

[Why tribes matter](#)

[1. Identification](#)

[2. Communication](#)

[3. Collaboration](#)

[4. Reification](#)

[5. Adaptation](#)

[Challenges](#)

[Summary](#)

[Resources](#)

TL;DR

To bring about grand futures, we humans have to figure out how to reconcile our current needs with our lofty ambitions. Tight-knit support communities - what we call tribes in this post - seem to be a good way to preserve our well-being and values while achieving more impact. Yet, building effective tribes seems like a relatively neglected puzzle in the life plans of many people who wish to improve the world, or at least would benefit from more collective model-building and coordinated experimentation.

In this post, we outline our current models for modern-day tribe building. We hope to initiate an exchange on the topic, motivate others to look into this, too, and achieve more together.

Intro

About this post

Coordinating with other humans is key to achieving lasting impact. Coordination helps us grow our well of common knowledge, build things, become better humans and create more value for the world than we could on our own.

Humans have developed myriad forms of coordination. This post focuses on one specific form: tribes.

As we are developing our own modern-day tribe, we have received many questions with respect to how we got to this point and how we're moving forward. To get feedback and inspire others, this post outlines our current models of how to find like-minded individuals, build trust, establish norms, get stuff done, commit long-term and adapt to changing circumstances. We will also discuss some common challenges. Some of the discussed ideas are generally useful for all types of relationships, e.g. getting more out of your friendships, organizing a community, or building an organization.

Our models are largely based on our experience with community building within Effective Altruism. We have also invested a lot of thought and resources into achieving new levels of positive-sum dynamics among our close friend group. As you will see, many of the ideas are inspired - or blatantly copied - from others. We link to resources throughout the post and end with a section listing those that we have found particularly useful.

What is a tribe?

By tribes, we refer to what is essentially a tight-knit support community. Members of a tribe have shared goals, values and interests. But that doesn't yet capture all of why we are interested in tribes over other types of communities. Beyond the shared interests (which is something we also find in firms, unions or clubs, for example), a tribe is characterized by the gifting of one's resources to the community. Resource sharing, paired with close personal bonds and autonomy, seem like a key combination of features for strong and sustainable coordination.

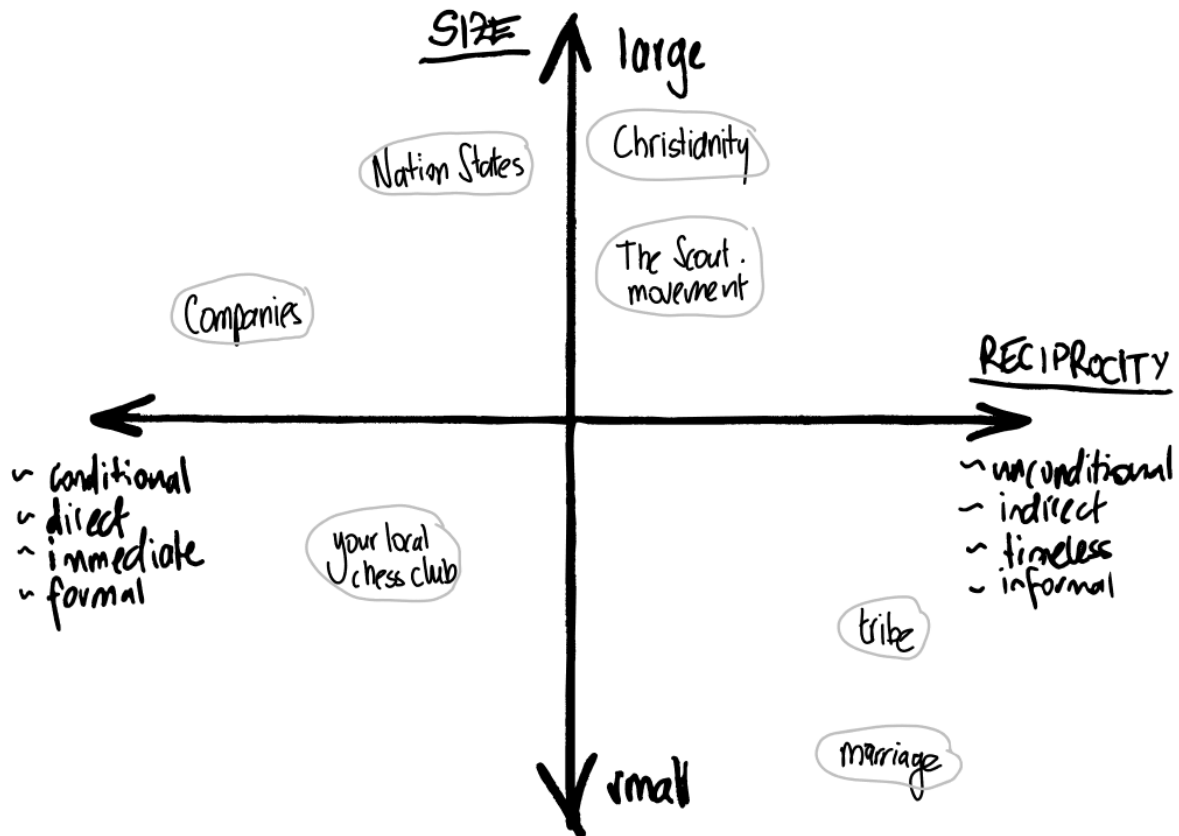
To clarify further what we do and don't mean by tribes, let's consider two axes along which we can categorize different types of social groups: size and logic of reciprocity.

Tribes are small enough that each individual is able to maintain a meaningful personal relationship with each other. This is opposed to larger groups where personal relationships between all members can no longer be maintained. Literature in sociology and political science refers to the latter as "[imagined community](#)". Nations, firms, or communities such as EA or the global scout movement are examples of it.

Members of tribes share their resources quasi-unconditionally with the rest of the tribe. This is in contrast to the direct and formalized tit-for-tat reciprocity inherent to, say, club membership or simple economic contracts. Marriage is likely the most widely understood example of such unconditional support made possible through hard-to-fake signals of complete buy-in. We think there are benefits of similarly intense mutual support beyond the nuclear family.

At the far end of this spectrum we would find pure, self-less altruism. Just short of that are examples of coordination where the idea is to achieve mutual benefit, but the "exchange of value" happens in a diffuse and timeless manner. Members of a tribe expect to benefit from

investing into the tribe - and they might decide to leave if those benefits never manifest - but it matters little to them when and how exactly they receive that benefit.



Why tribes matter

Humans have been coordinating for millions of years. From hunter-gatherer societies to nation-states, from soccer teams to modern supply chains, from marriages to organizations like the [Scout Movement](#) with an estimated 50 million members worldwide.

It is not a coincidence that humans have developed ever more complex forms of coordination: it unlocks positive-sum dynamics that realize more and more of potential. From science to engineering to entrepreneurship: cooperating, predictably and repeatedly, allows for specialization and increases synergies.

That said, historically speaking, tribes do not seem to be key drivers of progress. The sustainability of hunter-gatherer tribes who have survived until today, like the Tanzanian Hadzabe, seems in part due to never having experienced explosive population growth. Absent grand narratives of an afterlife or their future potential, they seem to live simple, content lives despite what could easily look like hardship from the outside.

Furthermore, despite [economic growth making just about everything better](#), it also comes with its own cost. Leaving aside, for the purpose of this post, the climate crisis, humans have not fully adapted to modern society. The value of living as a part of modern society is indisputable, yet some aspects of it make it harder to live healthily because of the lack of supportive, tribe-like structures.

Humanity has documented a lot of the knowledge relevant for adapting to a changing world. But knowledge is only useful if it can be acted upon. It seems plausible that we struggle more with [mental health](#) issues nowadays because our lifestyles and environment have changed drastically. We have forgotten - or are unable to enact - important lessons about [parenting](#) because that knowledge was implicitly embedded in now-disrupted customs. Our rapid progress has its costs but, luckily, those seem reparable and the benefits lasting.

Thus, it seems valuable to invest more effort into consciously engineering our social structures to help one another thrive and improve the world. Building modern-day tribes by combining the best of all worlds - from ancient social structures to modern tech - seems like a strong bet.

Highly functional coordination does not come for free. It usually requires a lot of upfront investment, with uncertain payoff and continuous maintenance costs. What are the benefits of coordination for individuals like you or me? (When) is it worth it?

Benefits from building a tribe, as we have experienced them so far, are:

- ❖ A sense of community, belonging, and emotional support
- ❖ Access to more knowledge and skills (you can develop expertise in only so many areas, only so quickly)
- ❖ More data and different perspectives (think: collaborative truth seeking, e.g. more productive “[double cruxing](#)”, or gaining access to “[different worlds](#)”)
- ❖ Access to feedback and sanity-checks (those tend to increase in value over time, as the others gain more context on you)
- ❖ Access to more resources (a lot of things become cheaper if shared, e.g. co-living, and you more easily surpass relevant *thresholds* of resources, e.g. to start a company)
- ❖ Ability to take more risks individually because a collective can provide a better safety net

All these translate into an increased ability to achieve our goals.

The balance between what you invest and what you get out of being in a tribe depends on the specific case. One thing worth keeping in mind, however, is that the pay-off compounds over time. As you build knowledge about each other, your ability to trust, support, and provide growth-inducing feedback increases. A lot of the investments in bridging gaps, building a shared map of the world, and developing a shared vocabulary really only start to pay off after some time. Chances are we underestimate just how good the best case scenarios are in the long run.

Why do we post this on the EA Forum?

The role of tight-knit personal networks beyond the nuclear family is potentially very relevant for people who dedicate their lives to doing good effectively. The contribution of personal support networks to happiness, risk perception, personal and intellectual development are important impact factors in EA life planning. But, they seem relatively underemphasized compared to, for example, considerations regarding career capital.

The EA network cannot and should not be anybody's main support network. Given its ambitions, it luckily has well surpassed the size where meaningful personal relationships with each member can be maintained. It has become an "imagined community" (see above) - tied together by shared ideas rather than shared relationships - even at the local level. This is not a critique of EA, nor do we suggest that EA plays no role in creating an environment conducive to people's wellbeing, mental or otherwise. This is just to say that even if you're well embedded in the EA network, your family and friends still matter a lot. Of course, (some) your friends may in fact be part of the EA network, but it is them who form your support network, not the network.

EAs actively build their professional networks and discuss their mental health. But effective networks and life satisfaction also benefit tremendously from a stabilizing, local anchorage. This is in part the reason why the SF Bay Area and London-Oxford-Cambridge are strong community hubs: the number of aspiring EAs is high enough for people's personal support networks to largely overlap with the EA network. Elsewhere, you're less likely to find people who focus on ambitious world improvement and whom you can imagine starting a tribe with. Thus, building EA-minded support structures outside of such hubs requires more work and has a higher chance of failure.

Given this context, we argue that it seems valuable to invest more effort into understanding the intentional development of modern tribes. They can provide stability through anchorage, long-term planning horizons, and personalized support. When it comes to big projects - from kids to companies - high coordination capacity (e.g. trust, reliable information exchange, long-term planning horizon) seems critical. And that capacity doesn't come out of nowhere - it's the product of years of interaction and conscious cultivation.

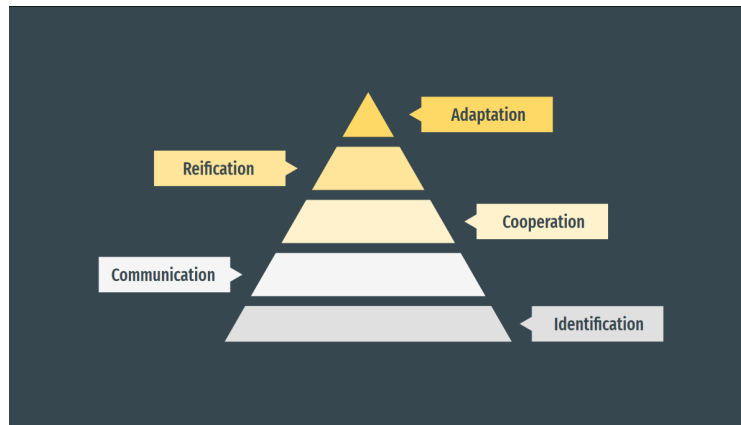
Having shared a quick overview of what is motivating this post, let's move on to the "how-to" of tribe building.

This post is structured along "stages of development" - five steps on how to build a tribe.

1. [Identification: find and be found](#)
2. [Communication: increase bandwidth](#)
3. [Cooperation: create value](#)
4. [Reification: make your group "a thing"](#)
5. [Adaptation: find the dark forces to preserve the essence of your thing](#)

Even though the process is not necessarily linear, this 5-step abstraction can be useful for understanding where your group is at and where it's headed.

We'll discuss each of these stages in turn and close with key challenges groups might face throughout the process.



"Stages of development" (not actually linear)

1. Identification

Find and be found

Before you can coordinate, you need to find people to coordinate with. This is hard but there are ways to significantly raise the odds of encountering great humans. It's obvious that proactively shaping your social circle brings many benefits.

One strategy to make it easier is to make yourself discoverable by the kind of people you want to be with.

1. **Put yourself out there.** Stand for what you care about and are interested in. For example, when meeting new people, speak about your interests and what you are passionate about. Or, be the one to organize the types of gatherings you want to attend. The more you do so, the more likely it is that people with similar values and interests will gravitate towards you. Once others know your interests, they can refer like-minded people to you, too.
2. **Be enjoyable to be around.** More specifically, be enjoyable to be around *for the type of people you want to have in your life*. Some people enjoy intense conversations about vague theories, others prefer getting to know people while building things, exploring nature, or making music. Figure out what you like (or [want to like](#)), then act accordingly.
3. **Be in, or create, the places where you're likely to meet interesting people.** If you're interested in bouldering, find out where the local bouldering scene hangs out and go there. If it turns out such a place (whether physical or virtual) doesn't exist yet, create it.

By taking these steps repeatedly, you will eventually stumble into like-minded people.

You might be worried about coming across as self-promoting. It can be hard to keep a balance between talking about your interests and actively listening to others. But overtime, with trial and error, you'll develop a sense of how and when to talk about your interests.

There is a fundamental tension at this stage. On the one hand, you want to set a high bar for people you spend a lot of time with. On the other hand, getting to know people can take time. It is hard to tell early on whether a person is someone you'd want to hang out with more. Here are few heuristics you may find helpful:

- Don't expect to meet the perfect match, if you see potential, be willing to embark on a joint journey of helping each other to become the best versions of yourselves.
- A priori, your instinct/gut-level impression is probably pretty well-calibrated on who you will get along with.
- If you're not sure, the value of information in getting to know somebody better is likely pretty high.
- Someone's willingness and ability to critically self-reflect, to learn from feedback, and their propensity to communicate transparently tend to be particularly good predictors.

2. Communication

Increasing bandwidth between brains

Communication plays a fundamental role in any relationship, and it will play a fundamental role in any tribe. Good communication can allow you to avoid collective action failures. You want to set good communication norms from the get-go.

Communication norms

Communication norms are a pervasive factor influencing the functioning of your group. They are an important part of a culture and a means of shaping it. The culture influences people's expectations and priorities and determines which behaviors are acceptable and which ones aren't. For example, communication strengthens or weakens shared norms around the [good faith principle](#) ([Hanlon's razor](#)), around proactively or reactively [saying the truth](#), around what it means to be [a robust agent](#), [what it means to commit](#), [how to break a promise](#), the importance of self-care or the value of exploration.

Communication norms are also critical to a tribe's ability to reason in a way that systematically improves its understanding of the world. *Collective sensemaking* relies in large part on language as the interface between people. This is why communication norms and epistemic norms are closely linked. Norms such as indicating one's confidence in a belief, [being specific](#), [stating one's cruxes](#), sharing [raw impressions as well as "all-things-considered" views](#) are important pillars to a tribe's epistemic hygiene.

Based on our experience, we recommend following these communication norms. They might not be the right norms for any type of tribe, but they have proven valuable for us:

1. **Paraphrase** each other, ask for clarifications and [steel-man other people's takes](#)

2. Make your **predictions** explicit (e.g. by remembering to [make your beliefs pay rent](#) and by [making bets](#)) and work on belief [calibration](#)
3. Make your **assumptions** explicit, as much as possible
 - a. For example, you might want more spontaneity from your friend (because to you, being up for doing things together spontaneously is a sign that they value you highly) while your friend wants to plan events upfront and put them in a shared calendar (because to them, putting in the effort to plan doing nice things together is a sign of mutual appreciation).
4. Don't agree to disagree, learn to have **constructive disagreements**
 - a. To some people, disagreements *feel* like conflict; they don't have to be, and avoiding disagreements comes with a high price. It doesn't have to feel bad to figure out where you might be wrong if you learn to disentangle your self-worth from your belief system.
5. Encourage [pre-mortems](#) and [red teaming](#) - it doesn't have to be nay-saying, it can just be about increasing your chances of success
6. Rewarding **transparency** and **integrity**, usually through leading by example

Two books that provide further tips for a constructive communication culture are [Messages: The Communication Skills Book](#) and [Nonviolent Communication - A language of Life](#).

Communication bandwidth

The notion of “*bandwidth*” captures a number of useful intuitions for what is important with regards to communication. The higher your communication bandwidth, the more information you can exchange per unit of effort/time. If you care about your tribe's ability to make sense of a complex world, a high or constantly growing communication bandwidth is crucial.

Shared vocabularies and [common knowledge](#) play an important role in increasing communication bandwidth. So does trust (more on this later on). Here's an example of how a lack of communication bandwidth can often lead to coordination failures:

Let's look at the stag hunt scenario, where you are part of a group of hunters. You have the choice to either hunt a rabbit or a stag.

- The rabbit promises a small but certain reward, because you are not dependent on the other hunters in hunting the rabbit.
- The stag promises a much larger reward, but you will only be successful in your mission if everyone else in the group also chooses to hunt the stag.

What can you do to foster cooperation? And when it fails, how can you mitigate the negative effects of the failure for the group's ability to coordinate in the future?

The stag hunt scenario helps us see that, sometimes, uncooperativeness looks like defection when, in fact, [the person “defecting” acted rationally](#) according to their understanding and incentives. I.e. choosing rabbit over stag does not have to imply the conscious abandonment of an allegiance or duty for the sake of personal gain.

Sh			
		COOPERATE	DEFECT
	COOPERATE		
	DEFECT		<td></td>

By Christopher X Jon Jensen (CXJensen) & Greg Riestenberg (Own work)
[CC BY-SA 3.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>)] via Wikimedia Commons

There is an important difference between “being compelled to act in a certain way because, according to one’s honest assessment, it seemed to be the correct choice” and “consciously choosing to ignore potential shared gains or willingly inflicting harm on others by choosing the option that seemed narrowly more profitable to oneself”.

The stag hunt example can teach us about the importance of being able to understand, account for, and communicate each others’ perspectives on a collective action problem. Figure out why someone did what they did before you assume they defected. If your friend “defects” on your suggestion it can be you have not yet earned their trust. If you haven’t bothered understanding whether your idea was a viable option for them, *you* also have work to do.

The stag hunt dynamic is also described in [this post](#) (see “2. Defection and discontent”). Also check out “[Some Ways Coordination is Hard](#)” for more thoughts on how to navigate stag hunt-type situations.

3. Collaboration

Working together to become better at coordinating beyond work; weave the social fabric

As much as *thinking* about how to improve your group is valuable, never forget to also get to things *done* that you all are excited about.

Consider: in order to become a world-class rowing team, the single most important thing you need to do is practice rowing together.

In the same way, a group can become excellent at coordinating through... coordination. Collectively working on a concrete project trains the “coordination muscle” of your group.

Working together can also be an extremely enriching and sobering experience. It is enriching because people learn, gain traction, motivation and a sense of meaning. It’s sobering because it provides a real-world test to the quality and strength of the coordination fabric your group has been building, stripping away the relative comfort of theoretical discussion. Shared experiences also contribute to common knowledge, which can implicitly improve your ability to communicate with each other (see section 2.).

Trust

The purpose of collaborating is twofold. For one, it is to build trust *in each other*.

Trust is essential for coordination. Importantly, trust is *built* over time, incrementally, rather than gained at a single moment. It’s a sequence of updates, rather than an immediate understanding.

The second purpose of collaboration is to build trust *in your coordination mechanisms*.

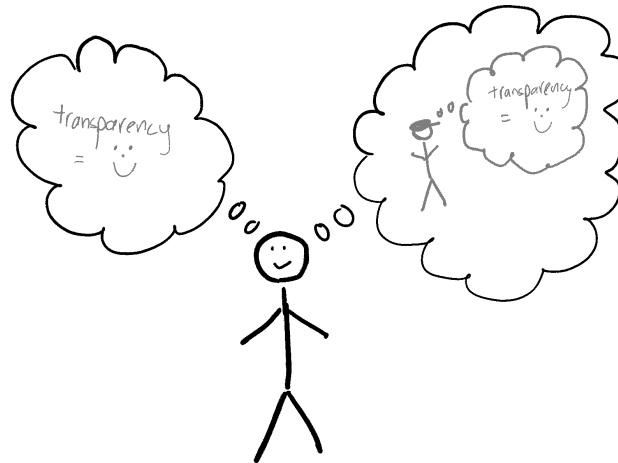
Coordination mechanisms include:

- formal processes (e.g. weekly meetings, shared task management systems and calendars, group decision-making procedures)
- informal processes (e.g. norms about checking in at the start of a meeting, about expected response times to messages, or about whether and when to inform others about not making a project deadline).

These mechanisms affect communication, decision-making, work and resource allocation, collective memory and more - virtually all processes a functioning tribe is interested in.

Why establish trust in these mechanisms? What is important about them?

Let's take communication norms as an example. Say, our tribe came to think that a norm of transparency is desirable. All else equal, you will have an easier time being transparent with the tribe members if you trust that they, too, are transparent with you. In other words, the more you *trust* that the norm of transparency is well-established, and the more this trust is common knowledge among the tribe's members (meaning: others trust that others trust that...), the stronger your incentive to live up to the norm yourself.



This echoes insights from the stag hunt mentioned earlier. Within that set up, the more you trust that the other hunters will stick to their commitment of hunting the stag, the less *subjectively risky* it is for you to stick with your commitment to hunting the stag. From the perspective of the tribe, your ability/willingness to take subjective risk translates to a tribe's ability to "take leaps" - to aim for ambitious goals despite the possibility of failing. The stronger the fabric of trust within a tribe, the better it becomes at coordinating on "stag" over "rabbit", even if the risk differential increases.

If I decide to "hunt stag", even if doing so is a risky move from my individual perspective, it is a *leap of faith*. Whether this is a smart move (or a really dumb one) depends on whether the other people also decide to "hunt stag". But we shouldn't just expect people to put their faith in others, or ourselves. Trust is built and earned. At the same time, as a tribe, you want to clearly expect from one another that people choose "cooperate" over "defect". This expectation in itself, if sensibly applied, is a coordination mechanism.

A distinct, but related, way of thinking about the developing strong coordination is as the result of an ever-escalating dance of increasing asks and rewards from and for everyone involved. It's a process where people put in increasing amounts of effort and get out increasing amounts of

value.¹ We encourage readers interested in this alternative framing to check out section 1 (“Buy-in and retention”) of [this post](#).

To sum up, a group becomes more like a tribe by actively practicing collaboration. Seek collaboration to forge the trust that permits coordination to arise.

4. Reification

Make your group “a thing”

Until this point, you have been building a group of people who are coordinating, building trust in each other, strengthening coordination mechanisms, norms for communication, interaction and collective epistemics.

If everything is going well, it can be valuable to *reify*² your achievements — start explicitly thinking of your group as a unit.

This can help you continue the streak.

What does reification involve? The answer will vary depending on your circumstances. The examples below can help you get the gist. As a part of reification you can:

- Define, track and periodically evaluate shared goals, whether they relate to building a product, training skills, or simply discussing the amount of time you want to invest in interacting with each other.
- Plan weekly meetings, weekly (rotating) 1-1s, regular personal retrospectives/personal development/feedback sessions, or quarterly retreats.
- Give yourself a name (like group houses do)
- Think through mechanisms for communication, systematize information sharing and collective memory retention in a way that suits your purposes.
- Increase the investment in whatever institutions you have already established; e.g. you could decide to put more time into challenging each other’s personal development or working on shared projects.
- Consider living together. Being closer to each other is generally valuable, whether that means living in the same building, quarter or city. It increases serendipity and decreases the cost of interaction.
- Define long(er) term commitments, be that writing a blog together, starting an organization, supporting each other in raising family(s), etc.
- Figure out how to handle somebody moving away (temporarily) or new potential members showing up.

The specifics depend on your tribe’s goals and circumstances. We recommend regularly reviewing the purpose of your tribe. What value are people getting out of it? What value would people ideally like to get out of it? Keep your tribe alive and purposeful by making sure you regularly and collectively ask and answer the questions that matter.

If successful, explicit and credible long-term commitment by everyone will create a shared

¹ One slight caveat to this: this is a great model for the initial phase of community development. At some point, you want the “efforts put in” to stagnate, while the value that you’re getting out continues to increase (e.g. because “old investments” start paying off).

² reify: to consider or make (an abstract idea or concept) real or concrete.

understanding. Your tribe will be perceived as something worth investing in and something that will yield further benefits.

You can complement the core idea of reification with the notions of (1) co-ownership, and (2) a minimum viable set of coordination mechanisms.

(1) Co-ownership

People don't respond as well to principles that have been externally imposed on them. They are more likely to enact principles that are "theirs". If, in their mind, an action is clearly linked to something they already care about, it becomes much easier to take the action.

This is important to keep in mind during the reification phase. Everyone should be involved in establishing your tribe's goals and values, and deciding how you coordinate with each other. True belonging is always the product of **co-construction**. This requires mechanisms that: create buy-in, ensure people are and feel heard, facilitate collective decision making and error-correction.

If your tribe is relatively small and highly value-aligned, the creation of co-ownership likely won't require the introduction of new formal structures. The larger the group, the more beneficial formalizing coordination mechanisms tends to be.

This [retrospective of a high-commitment co-living experiment](#) contains several valuable lessons on this matter.

(2) Minimum viable set of coordination mechanisms

We've mostly talked about *increasing* commitment and input. At this point, you might think to yourself "hell, this sounds like *a lot* of work! Even if the idea is cool in theory, I'm not sure I could invest that much effort."

We hear you! As much as having a tribe can be rewarding, it also needs to be practically viable to upkeep, else it won't last long enough to produce the juiciest rewards.

Aiming for a set of *minimal viable coordination mechanisms* is particularly helpful in making the project last. It's surprising how much you can achieve if you're well organised—even without putting in a lot of effort, and with people living in different countries. Weekly meetings, weekly 1-1s, goal tracking and evaluation, quarterly retreats can already sound like a lot. However, there are three reasons why it requires a lot less effort than commonly thought:

- you can share the workload with other tribe members
- many processes can be automated and systematized
- you learn doing these things more efficiently and better over time

Here are a few examples:

- If you run a weekly meeting with a handful of people, you can rotate who is doing the bulk of preparation. This means any one person will only be responsible for preparing the meeting approximately once a month.
- You can create templates, checklists and automated reminders for recurring structures or tasks (e.g. reminder for who is responsible for preparing the next weekly meeting, a

(baseline) retreat timetable, templates for personal retrospectives or feedback templates, a spreadsheet where you collect and score discussion topics for 1-1s or discussions).

- After having organized a first event of a specific format (e.g. the first retreat), subsequent iterations will likely require 50% or less of the initial preparation effort. By solidifying how to run certain aspects of your activities, you also free up resources to experiment with other aspects to keep improving how much your group is getting out of it.

Overtime, you learn more about what works for your group and what doesn't. It becomes easier to run minimal-viable versions of the activity that still provide a lot of value. This gives the group slack in case you are going through a particularly busy time. Conversely, when you have more time at hand or are particularly motivated, you can make additional investments and run more innovative or polished versions of your activities.

For a community to remain healthy, it is crucial to periodically “prune” its structures—removing systems that no longer support the purpose of the tribe. You want to preserve the essence, while getting rid of the frills. Good pruning mechanisms also create more space for innovation—you don't risk getting stuck with useless systems that stick around due to inertia and weigh you down.

It takes time to clarify the core values of your tribe. This effort will make it easier to decide which systems to keep and which ones to remove in your pruning process.

5. Adaptation

Success is not a function of zero failures, but one of resilience and learning in the face of failure.

We've shared a lot of advice on how to make your tribe strong and robust. But, even if you follow all of it, from time to time, your coordination efforts will still fail.

That's okay.

A successful tribe is not one that *never fails* at coordinating. It's one that is [antifragile](#)—one that has a set of *proven-to-be-robust* mechanisms to handle failures.

Antifragile groups are able to learn from coordination failures, as opposed to letting them shatter the attempt at building a tribe. A group that has no tolerance for miscommunication and coordination failures is unlikely to last for long, let alone grow and improve over time. The real world is too unpredictable and noisy for this strategy to be successful.

An antifragile tribe will even see occasional friction as something desirable. It's a mechanism that helps build the skills involved in conflict resolution and confidence in the group's ability to “figure things out”. Having the [locus of control](#) located *within* a group will make it grow stronger over time.

To strengthen your tribe's ability to grow from coordination failures it's worth paying attention to the following areas:

- **Conflict management:** coordination failure can be caused by or lead to interpersonal tensions. It is thus necessary to have some capacity to constructively deal with conflicts and, where possible, resolve them. Non-violent communication ([NVC](#)) seems like a good

tool to start to raise the tribe's ability to manage conflicts.

- **Learning:** transform failures into lessons that trigger growth and make you stronger.
 - For example, you can use meetings or retreats to discuss whether the tribe is providing the value you are looking for. Regularly ask yourself what is working for the group and what isn't. Keep track of your collective learnings and set up systems that remind you of them from time to time.
 - An important part of learning is the ability to **confront** and **be confronted** on issues that might require improvement. Neither making nor receiving confrontations is easy, but it's a skill that can be practiced. And if not with your tribe, with whom then?
- **Trust in the meta-level:** Are you 100% confident in your tribe's ability to have constructive conversations and avoid talking past one another? No. And you don't need to. Instead, it suffices to be confident that someone will notice *when* you are talking past each other and that you will be able to figure out why this happens and fix it. Similarly, you cannot be absolutely certain that the way your tribe pursues its goals is a good one. But, you can be pretty confident that flaws will eventually be recognized and the approach updated. This is a collective version of [confidence all the way up](#).
- **Holding values/standards high:** adaptation and learning are important, but they're not the same as giving up on your principles or values in response to the slightest signs of resistance. You *also* have to maintain your values and preserve the essence. Just because a coordination attempt around a given standard failed doesn't immediately mean you will want to drop that standard altogether.

Last but not least: as the world around you changes, your tribe, too, needs to change.

Tribes are living organisms. Even if nobody joins or leaves, members of the group change and the world around the group changes. Your rules, norms and goals will evolve. This can be great, because you are learning more and the updated rules, norms and goals move you closer to what you care about. The tricky bit is to find the right balance between innovative and preserving forces. The key, again, is to have processes that guide the development of the tribe while preserving its essence - whatever that is.

To sum up this section groups need to be adaptive because success is a function of how well you're able to adapt to, and become stronger within, a changing world.

Challenges

Let's take a final look at some challenges a group might face when going through the above process.

We will keep this section short, also because we don't add much *new* content but summarize some of our key points through the lense of common challenges. These are dynamics that to look out for.

(A number of these challenges have also been described by Duncan in [Open Problems in Group Rationality](#).)

Defection vs miscommunication

Defection happens, but if you selected your friends on the basis of shared values, genuine

defection is pretty rare.

The most common cause of defection is miscommunication. As illustrated by the stag hunt example in the [section on communication](#), it is easy to misunderstand others. Internal lives are complex. We all, to some extent, live in “[different worlds](#)”, have different priors, and are subject to our personal narratives. Individual context shapes our perception of the option space and what the “payoff matrix” looks like.

It is useful to learn to decouple the feeling that someone defected on you from your immediate course of action. As long as you don't have strong evidence that you should abandon the good faith principle, the more promising option is likely to cooperate *again*, not to retaliate. ([Nicky Case's “The Evolution of Trust”](#) is an excellent illustration of this point, in particular section 6 “Making Mistakes”). In a world where genuine mistakes and misunderstandings are possible, forgiveness is not some lofty virtue, but a solid strategy for success.

The real-world version of “cooperate again” often means talking about what happened: explaining how you interpreted someone's behaviour or clarifying how you feel. Nonviolent communication offers a framework to have these types of conversations without further escalating the dynamics.

Making discourse about defection vs miscommunication explicit, and keeping in mind the difference between “feeling defected on” and “being defected on” is helpful. It requires to keep a tough balance. You'll need to acknowledge each other's differing subjective experiences without giving up on the idea of there being an objective reality. Striking this balance is what allows you to help each other become stronger. Then, collectively, you can strategize about how to handle similar situations better in the future.

Minor grievances

Another common way in which a lack of communication can lead to defection is through the accumulation of [minor and repeated grievances that remain unvoiced and unresolved](#). This is how you end up with each person maintaining a list of unreturned favours or sacrifices that weren't properly acknowledged. The disputes that eventually erupt from such dynamics are particularly hard to resolve—everyone feels in the right and defensive, making it hard for anyone to break the cycle. Proactive and transparent communication can preempt these dynamics from escalating and is therefore an important norm.

Adopting a culture of transparent communication where grievances are voiced proactively has its own pitfalls. A common one is that communication can become entrenched in being subtly negative or adversarial. To prevent this from arising, it can be helpful to make sure your tribe has an equally strong norm of expressing loving, caring or otherwise positive emotions towards each other.

Safety and standards

Creating a space that is safe for people to be in, physically and emotionally, is an important precondition to fostering deep relationships and personal growth. However, groups that value safety above all else tend to lose “their essence”.

There are situations where considerations about safety (or comfort) trade off against holding each other to certain standards and striving to become stronger. Genuine growth will

periodically be uncomfortable; giving and receiving candid feedback, confronting each other about ways we are not currently living up to our own standards, challenging each other to become better and aim higher.

Insisting on certain standards can make people feel periodically unsafe. For a lot of people it is hard to emotionally differentiate between being challenged on a specific problem and being attacked as a person. That's a fact about human psychology and doesn't say much about a person. It is something we can get better at disentangling.

This is genuinely difficult to navigate but the answer is not to give up on either standards nor safety.

This is where communication comes back into the picture. We can strive for communication norms that allow us to more easily differentiate matters of safety from matters of standards. To do so, we need to first collectively acknowledge the difference between local discomfort from challenge and genuine lack of safety (even if this difference is not always clear). Developing shared language around the topic can further help to identify, address and unpack difficult social dynamics where someone tries to enforce standards and another person feels threatened.

It's up to your tribe to figure out where the trade-off between threats-to-safety vs threats-to-standards should fall. Making these negotiations explicit is what allows members of your tribe to consciously decide whether they take this deal. The point is not to be eternally bound to a set of rules - people are allowed to change their minds as they and the world around them change. The point is to help each individual to more easily understand their ideal and strive for it. For example, even if your volition is a continuous search for growth, you might still occasionally fall for a more myopic, comfort-seeking outlook. Your friends can act as a scaffold to help you align these seemingly conflicting preferences.

Independence, autonomy and cooperation

When you coordinate, you give up some amount of your independence for collective gain, for example in the form of safety, emotional support or success. At least that's the idea.

As we've seen before, the correct trade-off depends on the specific people in your tribe. And again, better communication norms enable you to negotiate these trade-offs more successfully.

Cooperating implies giving up some amount of personal independence by relying on others and having others rely on you. But, it does not mean that you're gambling away your autonomy—your right to make decisions about what you do and what happens to you.

As a tribe, you need to coordinate without a clear authority. According to the model of co-ownership, decisions are made collectively. That doesn't necessarily mean that everyone has to be part of every decision. You can collectively decide on processes for someone to make decisions for the tribe - but that is never irreversible. In any case, collective decision making is not a trivial feat. You will have to figure out how to productively combine each other's views to make progress.

Different people have different needs when it comes to things like autonomy and support. Different people have different default strategies for solving their problems or processing their emotions. To find good trade-offs, you want to discuss these differences.

Scaling and dilution

Growing your tribe creates more resources that can allow you to reach higher goals. New people bring in new knowledge, new ideas, more attention, etc. At the same time, as the tribe grows it becomes increasingly harder to maintain highly trust-based group dynamics. The potential for conflict increases and so does the time required for maintaining or establishing new norms or common knowledge. Simultaneously, the amount of time you can spend having in-depth personal conversations with individual group members decreases.

We don't have a good sense for what the maximal "carrying capacity" of a tribe is. If you are interested in growing your tribe, you probably want to adopt a slow and careful approach, one that allows you to slow down further or take a step back if it looks like you have been moving too fast. Generally, it seems valuable to also experiment with different settings. Working with someone on a project, or renting out a place for a month to test coliving will provide valuable data.

Of course, the decision mustn't be between having someone join your tribe as a full member, or not interacting with them at all. We sometimes refer to this idea as the "[onion model](#)". There are a lot of great people that you can mutually benefit from cooperating with. Not only do you benefit from new input and faces from time to time, your tribe probably also has a lot to offer to the world.

Summary

At its heart, this post is motivated by the belief that "doing community/friendship well" is a) something that we can gain insight on and get better at and b) something that is worth pursuing.

We have shared some of our learnings and thoughts on important stages to foster increasingly strong coordination. There are other plausible ways to delineate and name the different stages, you will have noticed that several ideas recur throughout the post. Some of the most important ones are:

- Trust and communication
- An intricate balance between consistency and change
- A constant dialogue about the purpose/essence of your group
- An appreciation of the fact that we are all running on monkey-brains

The post is dense and yet merely provides a glimpse into what it means to build a tribe, but it's a topic we're interested in exploring. Don't hesitate to reach out to us, discuss further or write your version of this post to highlight differences and other models. We're just as keen to engage in exchange and learn from you as we're happy to share whatever we can.

Resources

- Duncan Sabien: [Open Problems in Group Rationality](#), [Common Knowledge and Miasma](#), [Reneging Prosocially](#), [The Social Motte-and-Bailey](#)
- Nicky Case: [Evolution of Trust](#), [Wisdom/Madness of Crowds](#), [Attractor Landscapes](#), [Parable of the Polygons](#)

- LessWrong tags: [Coordination/Cooperation](#), [The Craft and The Community](#), [Group Rationality](#), [Robust Agents](#)
- EA forum tags: [Cooperation & Coordination](#), [Discussion Norms](#)
- Communication: [Non-violent communication](#), [Messages: The Communications Skills Book](#), [Authentic relating](#) (e.g. [circling](#))
- Epistemics: [Inadequate equilibria](#), [Worldview diversification](#), [Scholarship & Learning](#), [Superforecasting](#), [Fermi estimates](#)
- Academic literature, such as: on trust (psychology & sociology), on decentralized governance, institutional development, game theory (political science, economics and history)

CUTS

There are things to be understood about how to coordinate successfully with other people - so called [Group Rationality](#).

To explain what we mean, let us share a personal example. Like you, we had been building a small group of individuals who were increasingly dedicated to coordinate with each other to unlock new sources of value. I specifically remember the moment where one of these individuals voiced what had been in the air for some time, but which hadn't yet been spelled out explicitly. *Are we committing to this thing?*

What is meant by commitment will vary from case to case, but what is important is that it means *something* of substance.

For the lack of a better word, let us from now on refer to such groups as “guilds”, for it is fittingly defined as an association of people for the pursuit of common goals, a shared craft and for mutual aid and protection.

[maybe] Key ingredients

- Trust
 - Iteration, emotional maturity
 - Escalating Asks and Rewards / Build trust through buy-in
 - Things will fail but good faith will eventually let you see that together you can go further -- commitment to growth and adjustment rather than to having it figured all out
 - The role of buy-in and increasing commitment
 - Trust depends on
 - A culture of shared values, a shared language of good and evil
 - Meta on the above: a set of proven-to-be-robust rules that allow you to talk about values
 - Iterated interaction
 - Integrity and authenticity
 -
- Communication
 - Epistemic and communication norms
- Attraction / what you can offer
 - Growth: Imperfect Containers
 - Commitment: Flags and Pledges
 - Alignment beyond interest: shared values - talk about the things that really matter (intrinsic values!) and make them explicit
- Co-constructing your communities
 - Imperfect containers
 - self and mutual discovery, continuous redefinition (à la imperfect containers); Room for growth/flexibility to adapt and understand that things change

- In defence of punch bug
- Commit to longterm coordination
 - Unless you chose the wrong group, then abort mission and try again elsewhere
 - [Minimum viable culture](#) & coordination mechanisms
- Realizing value for the world beyond the local