
THE CrossFit LIFE

My Tribe

Jeremy Striffler applies the concept of tribal culture to CrossFit and examines the five stages of the CrossFit tribe.

By **Jeremy Striffler** TwinTown CrossFit

February 2012



All images: Teddy Kim

On a crisp, cold Saturday morning in early December, I showed up at **TwinTown CrossFit** in Minneapolis, Minn., to participate in the preliminary round of the Winter PR Challenge. The sight of 30-plus members of the gym preparing to do the CrossFit Total welcomed me.

1 of 3



A CrossFit gym is more than a gym: it's a community.

For close to three hours, our group cheered each other on as we made our individual attempts at each element. A countless number of personal records were achieved, and the atmosphere was fun and celebratory and transcended any other experience I have ever had in the past at a gym or on a sports team. I was overwhelmed by the group's commitment to each other's success, which seemed more paramount than any individual worrying about his or her own accomplishments. What I had suspected over my past six months since joining the gym was finally confirmed that day—we are a tribe.

I first read about the concept of tribal culture in David Logan's business tome *Tribal Leadership*. In his book, he states that through history, people have always naturally formed tribes of 20 to 150 people. (Is it a mere coincidence that TTCF recently capped its membership around 150 members?)

Logan says that recognizing our tendency to form tribes is a key to understanding our own history: "Tribes helped humans survive the last ice age, build farming communities, and, later, cities. Birds flock, fish school, people 'tribe.'"

Logan identifies five tribal stages we all fall within, differentiated by tribal culture and language. While in his book he applies this model to the corporate world, its application can be seen within the CrossFit world. It can also explain why we have all benefited from the Stage 5 culture TTCF has developed.

Here are the five stages:

Stage 1: Life Sucks

In the lowest of the stages, people are lost, alienated and alone. It is the stage of gangs and prisons—thankfully, we are far removed from this stage at TTCF.

Stage 2: My Life Sucks

In Stage 2 of tribal leadership, language is focused on the mantra of "my life sucks," and it is where I believe most of us joined TTCF. Left to our own devices, we would skip workouts, make poor decisions about what we eat and drink, and resign ourselves to the fact that life is great for some people, but not for us.

To some degree, we all inquired about TTCF because we were looking for a way to improve our lives. Whether we wanted to lose weight, increase strength or just feel better about our general health and wellness, we sought out a membership in TTCF for some personal gain. Many of us thought, "My life sucks, but I know it can be better." Simply by becoming a member of TTCF, we allowed ourselves the possibility that life could become better at a superficial level thanks to the help of the trainers, the routine and the workouts.

Stage 3: I'm Great

While we knew life was going to be improved by committing to at least two classes a week, our confidence was still shaky. However, the culture of TTCF quickly raised us out of a mindset of "my life sucks" into one of "I am great." Time after time while doing push-ups and sit-ups and squats, the trainers cheered us on and applauded our efforts. This was true no matter whether we were using a green band or one hand to do a pull-up.

If we work hard, we are encouraged to believe in ourselves and know that with time and sweat we are going to do great things.

This is the stage where most tribal cultures remain. People believe themselves to be great and find ways to compete with others. They say, "Did you see how many pull-ups I did?" or, "Dude, I just deadlifted 400 lb.!"

As Logan writes in his book, "People in stage three tribes try to outperform each other and put each other down." But this is not the case at TTCF.



The TTCF tribe.

Stage 4: We're Great

The greatest challenge tribes find is moving from Stage 3 to Stage 4. However, it was an easy transition at TTCF. The key is that the encouragement and support that we receive does not begin and end with the trainers. Rather, most of the cheers and hugs and high-fives come from our fellow members. At TTCF we are united by our values, one of which is having an outward focus.

According to Logan, "We have become a tribe that is aware of our own existence." Because of this mindset we can do remarkable things. We can motivate and inspire each other to reach new personal records every day. Simply attend a clinic or a fundraiser or the Winter PR Challenge to see it in action.

Further, Logan writes, "In stage four groups, when two members of the group meet, they're excited about being with another member of the tribe. People are fully themselves. Everyone seems happy, inspired and genuine. The overall vibe of the room is 'tribal pride,' which is the mood of stage four." Witness the rapport between people at open gym, or just go to a bar on a Saturday night, run into a member of your CrossFit box, and tell me that's not true.

Stage 5: Life is Great

At TTCF, we don't dwell in a language of "life sucks" or "my life sucks." Nor do we tolerate those who simply think, "I'm great"—a narcissistic mindset often employed at chain gyms full of mirrors and preening muscle-heads. Rather, TTCF has created a culture that celebrates everyone.

Logan explains, "People who have ever been part of a stage five tribe—or even seen one at work—often describe it in the same tone of reverence and gratitude they use to tell stories of their kids."

I truly believe that TTCF—and many other CrossFit gyms—is a Stage 5 culture whose values are not based simply in the language of "my" or "ours" but have a global tone. We have developed an ever-growing network of organizations and groups whose values resonate with our own. TTCF members are active participants in Mud Run MS Minnesota, Bike MS and countless other fundraisers, giving their time and money to these great causes. And we support local businesses, like placing group orders for grass-fed cattle. We constantly demonstrate that we care about universal issues.

Built upon the foundation of CrossFit, TTCF has created a Stage 5 tribal culture that focuses on developing the body, mind and soul. And because of it, life is great!

