



The Leadership and Professional Development column will take on a slightly new look in 2014. During the coming year, all of the authors featured will address ideas and strategies that were suggested in our January column—The Future of Oncology Nursing Research: Research Priorities and Professional Development. The following article on tribal alchemy speaks to the passion and purpose we all feel as oncology nurses, and offers strategies for harnessing our energies so that we can work together more effectively to translate research results into quality care for our patients at the point of service.

Tribal Alchemy: Turning Lesser Into Better, Together

Dave Fleming, DM

Close your eyes for a moment and perform an imaginative replay of your last three shifts or days at work. Try and recall faces, situations, issues, and accomplishments. Without knowing you, or your circumstances, it is relatively safe to assume your replay included challenges and opportunities. You may not have labeled them as such, but, indeed, that is what you encountered.

Every day, we face vexing challenges and promising opportunities (Meadows, 1997; Pepper, 1942). It is the landscape of health care and the landscape of life. The interplay among challenges, opportunities, and people is what I call the “C.O.P. Effect” (Fleming, 2014). At the intersection of these three dynamics—challenge, opportunity, and people—lies the possibility of meaningful and productive change. How leaders and organizations engage these dynamics increases or decreases effectiveness (Stoltz, 1997). The C.O.P. Effect yields simultaneous frustration and delight. On one hand, challenges create resistance that frustrate and thwart the savviest of strategic leaders. On the other hand, opportunities create possibilities that inspire needed innovations. The way in which people think, feel, and act during challenge and opportunity influences both productivity and progress (Amabile & Kramer, 2011).

In light of the ubiquitous C.O.P. Effect, organizational theorists and practitioners consistently search for effective forms of organization and leadership (Mitroff, Mason, & Pearson, 1994). Now, in the 21st century, we must be skilled

at the facilitation of an ancient-future leadership art that I call tribal alchemy (Sweet, 1999).

What Is Alchemy?

History tells the story of a peculiar group of people known as alchemists (Maxwell-Stuart, 2012). Among other pursuits, alchemists obsessed over elaborate theories of transmutation, turning lead into gold. They spent their time searching for the right combination of substances that, when applied together, would make magic happen. As one can imagine, speculations, mythologies, and experimentations abounded in pursuit of that goal. Always the fun dinner guests, alchemists were ever-ready to share their latest attempts at transformation. Lead into gold? How ridiculous. What kind of nonsensical pursuit is that? Turns out, they were right (sort of).

The urge to turn lead into gold is one we all share. Ancient alchemists just had the wrong substance. Apparently, lead just would not cooperate. However, tapping into the urge to turn something lesser into something better is both primal and productive. For our purposes, we will define alchemy as the power or process of turning something common into something special. If change is inevitable, then alchemy is the way to make that change meaningful.

As the definition suggests, alchemy is not only a primal urge, but also an uber process (see Figure 1). This alchemic process begins when we cease to whine about our situation and instead notice that something lesser can be turned

into something better. For example, consider patient-centered care, clinical and nonclinical working relationships, quality issues and outcomes, unit or clinic outcomes and systems, coding and revenue issues. Each of those subjects or

See It: See into the potential of the challenge or opportunity. Notice it, reflect on it, explore it, and describe it. Great tribes do this through the art of questionmaking and strategic conversation.

Name it: Create collective ownership and frame the challenge or opportunity in realistic and optimistic ways. Make it tangible, changeable, and measurable. Naming it makes the challenge or opportunity real and creates a sense of responsibility for the needed change.

Engage It: Emotionally embrace and strategically use the challenge or opportunity as the raw material of change. Start with what you have and make it better. Find the gap between “what is” and “what could be” and work to close it. Bring the future into the present.

Transform It: Enhance people, situations, and relationships through the hard work of creative solutions and innovations. As a tribe, let the transformation teach you how to alchemize better in the future. Learn from it. Finally, celebrate the change to create energy for the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.

Figure 1. Tribal Alchemy Process

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ONF, 41(2), 209–211.

doi:10.1188/14.ONF.209-211

objects could be better for you and your teams, at least in some way. The ability to make those and other dynamics better comes through this interactive alchemic process.

Alchemy, at its best, happens when groups of people (tribes) work together in specific ways to make everyday magic. Individual alchemy has a place, but tribal alchemy can change your world. It can change the world. That is why these two disparate words—tribal and alchemy—mashup nicely. The hope of humanity lies in the ability of tribes to do far more than get along. Tribes must embrace and master the magic of turning lesser into better, together (Woolley, Chabris, Pentland, Hashmi, & Malone, 2010).

What Is a Tribe?

In your mind, picture those with whom you share a passion. This alone is amazing; you have intersected around a desire, a mission, and a purpose. Amazing fact number one: You found each other. This is no small feat. Your births coincided enough to meet. If you were a decade or two apart, the possibility of connection would have been lost to timing that was not meant to be. Amazing fact number two: Your choices brought you together. Think about the choices, circumstances, and happenings that have occurred in your life—all the various zigs and zags that mark your story. Ponder all the places you have lived and decisions

you have made that altered your life-trajectory. Now multiply all those choices and experiences by the number of people in your tribe, and it is staggering to ponder each one's arrival into the circle. Amazing fact number three: You were all drawn by something bigger, whether passion, mission, or purpose. Whatever the "something bigger" is, it has drawn you together like a magnet you could not avoid. It pulled, evoked, pleaded, and cajoled, and you answered because you had to answer. You had a choice, but not really. You believe in it, whatever it is. It draws you all. You hear the same call, see the same need, and desire the same change. This is what makes you a tribe. You are more than a team. Your identification is deep, pervasive, and life giving. And together, you have the power to alchemize—the power to turn everyday lead into extraordinary gold.

The Raw Materials of Alchemy

A tribe needs elements to make magic, which are the raw materials that enable the process to occur. Leaders and organizational stakeholders must have something to work with, to start with, to transform. Alchemists knew this and worked with raw materials in hopes that the magic of the process would transform those elements into something better. They were onto something important.

No such thing as "out of thin air" exists. Humans are magicians of already-existing elements. Our manifestations are secondary. We take what exists and turn it into what could be. If we then can make things better, and if doing so is a noble pursuit, just what are these lesser things—the raw materials—that we use to turn lead into gold? We have already identified them, and it brings us back to the C.O.P. Effect. The raw materials consist of difficulties (challenging situations or people) and opportunities (hopeful possibilities

or people) (Fleming, 2014). How leaders and their tribes interact with difficulty and opportunity determines the quality of their transformations.

How Do Tribal Alchemists Turn Lead Into Gold?

Tribal alchemists commit to a repeatable process that enables them to consistently transform tough situations and great ideas into productive change (see Figure 2). This process may seem deceptively simple. But make no mistake, it requires focus, intentionality, and sustained commitment.

Of course, more to this process exists than can be covered in this article. A beginning point for your tribe, however, would be to discuss the process and determine if you currently use elements of the process. If you do, then what can you do to enhance the process? If you do not currently use such a process, what would have to change for your tribe to begin doing so?

What Do Tribal Alchemists Practice?

Whether tribes are beginners or advanced practitioners of alchemy, four practices increase effective use of the alchemic process (Fleming, 2014). These four practices enable a tribe to alchemize with greater speed and effectiveness.

- **Attending:** A growing awareness of self, others, organizations, and situations that fosters sensitivity and insight.
- **Exploring:** A discovery-based and learning-centered posture that fosters openness to new ideas and possibilities.
- **Creating:** The translation of ideas into innovative action that increases well-being and meaningful productivity.
- **Adapting:** Discerning the need for change and graciously reforming current reality to ensure future success (Fleming, 2014).

Time to Alchemize

Every day, tribes face a choice; what will they do with challenge and opportunity? Great tribes have an answer to that question. They do not leave the answer to chance, but engage in a process and a set of practices that increase the likelihood that they will lead into gold. Though tribal alchemy requires rigor and discipline, it also frees a tribe to experience the joy and delight of turning something



Figure 2. Tribal Alchemy

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common into something special. This alchemic urge and process make the work of patient care both exciting and rewarding.

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Key words: strategic change, adaptive leading, high-performing teams

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Leadership & Professional Development

This feature provides a platform for oncology nurses to illustrate the many ways that leadership may be realized and professional practice

may transform cancer care. For more information, contact Associate Editor Cindy J. Rishel, PhD, RN, OCN®, at rishelmom@gmail.com.