Tribal Alchemy: Turning Lesser Into Better, Together

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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 experimentation 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. 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 über process (see Figure 1). This alchemical 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