



The PRIMES

How Any Group Can Solve Any Problem

THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

The PRIMES correctly names universal patterns of group behavior. They are an inextricable part of the human experience. PRIMES show up every time people join up in groups to solve problems, drive change and transform systems. Master the PRIMES and you can master leading groups. Master leading groups, and you can tackle the toughest problems you face.

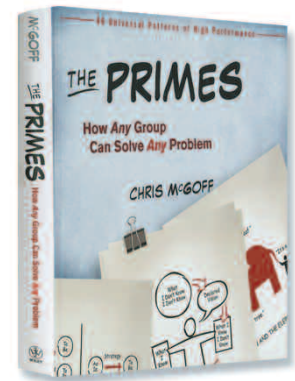
We as a people do not have a good track record of forming groups and solving problems when stakeholder complexity is high. Most of these efforts fail outright. The rest usually go significantly over budget and finish late. Of the few projects that get completed, only one out of two meets minimal expectations.

The good news is that outfitted with the PRIMES, you will beat these odds. You will recognize and decode the human behaviors that often appear on the surface as pure craziness when groups take on big problems.

The PRIMES are universal and unavoidable patterns of group behavior that emerge whenever people attempt to transform systems or collaborate to solve complex problems. Every leader has seen their effect, but few can recognize, anticipate and manage them. Unacknowledged, the PRIMES can put any leadership agenda at risk. An essential guide for 21st-century change agents, *The PRIMES* unveils universal secrets for how to step up to major challenges, create a brighter future and produce extraordinary results.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- How to lead groups in uncertain times.
- How to enroll others to their highest level of commitment.
- Why it is critical to maintain shared perspective amid diversity.
- The method to harness the universal patterns of outstanding group performance.
- How to overcome universal patterns of group failure.



by Chris J. McGoff

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THE COMPLETE SUMMARY: THE PRIMES

by Chris J. McGoff

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PART ONE: UNIVERSAL PATTERNS OF LEADING IN UNCERTAIN TIMES

How do some people, organizations and coalitions thrive in uncertain times? What enables them to appear so certain and take decisive action amid ambiguity about the future?

Yogi Berra was right when he said, “The future ain’t what it used to be.” Not much else is certain these days. Steady state now is changing at the speed of the environment. This frightens, overwhelms and immobilizes some people. For others, this global reset is a thrill ride, and they want a front seat. If this sounds like you, the PRIMES will get you outfitted to “make your dent in the universe.” ●

Being Clear on What’s Really Important

How did you decide how you spent your time yesterday?

LEADING

The LEADING PRIME defines the act of leading as setting direction, allocating resources and inspiring action. Any time you are not doing these three things, you are not leading.

Take a moment to highlight the times over the last five days when you were setting direction, aligning resources and inspiring action. If you own a law firm, when you were practicing law, you were operating your business. If you are cutting hair in the salon you own, you are operating your business. When you spend time doing what the business does, you are not leading. Even when you spend your time making your business more efficient, you are managing, not leading your business.

The question is, “Are the right people (including you) spending the right amount of time leading versus managing and operating?”

CHANGE VERSUS TRANSFORMATION

Are you fixing or creating? Does solving your problem require CHANGE or TRANSFORMATION? CHANGE is the right path when a problem is relatively simple and the current system needs only a tune-up. TRANSFORMATION is the right path when problems are “wicked” and a completely new system is required.

CHANGE requires you to become familiar with the current situation and to work to make things better, faster, cheaper or some other “-er” word. When we choose change, our future is really a reconditioned or improved version of the past.

TRANSFORMATION involves a break with the past that is traumatic but potentially freeing. TRANSFORMATION doesn’t describe our future by referencing the past (better, faster or cheaper); it births a future that is entirely new.

Ask your group or organizations, “What determines what they’re doing right now?” Is it about making a better, faster, cheaper past or committing to fulfill a declaration and create a future? It’s one or the other, but never both. Ignore this distinction at your peril. ●

Being Intentional and Going First

What are you committed to make happen and by when? What does “committed” mean? What does your commitment mean to others?

INTEGRITY

Leave all other connotations of INTEGRITY aside for a moment. In the context of the PRIMES, INTEGRITY



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means, “I say what I am going to do, and I do what I say ... every time.” INTEGRITY is not based on values or morals. It is based on honoring and keeping your word. When people choose to operate in INTEGRITY, their words about the future cause the future. People trust them. They reach a level of performance that otherwise would be unattainable.

At the outset of any project, I ask the people involved to live in INTEGRITY for the duration of the project. The rule is that there are no small or big promises; there are only promises. And all promises will be kept.

DECLARATION

Are you willing to live unreasonably? A DECLARATION is a statement of “what” will be achieved by “when.” President Kennedy’s DECLARATION was an American to the moon and back by the end of the decade. Mahatma Gandhi’s was a free India before his death. Babe Ruth’s was the next pitch over the wall. These leaders pointed, then hit. Athletes today swing away. When they happen to hit one over the wall, they stand and point. That is not declarative leadership. The order matters. ●

Enrolling Others

While all teams are groups, not all groups are teams. Teams are groups in which the feeling is one-for-all-and-all-for-one. Teams have someone to whom they all report and who can tell them what to do. Teams are a luxury. But many groups you will be leading and of which you’re a member are more like coalitions. The problems you’ll solve and the change you’ll drive will increasingly require that strangers, competitors, cautious allies and suspicious stakeholders participate and commit. Those who master leading these heterogeneous coalitions will never be without a purpose — or paycheck.

POWER

Any group’s power is a function of the degree to which its members are willing to operate from a shared perspective, the degree to which they will commit to a shared intent and the level of coordination of their actions. A weakness in any part of the triangle erodes the power.

Power is one of three ways to get something accomplished, along with authority and force. The source of the energy is what distinguishes each of the three.

1. Force. Force gets members of the group to do something because they are intimidated by your sheer strength.

2. Authority. Authority requires that you compel someone to do something because you have been empowered by a larger community to enforce its will.

3. Power. Power is energy that is generated from within the group by the group itself when members freely choose to work collectively toward a common outcome.

The POWER PRIME reveals the components required to generate unprecedented levels of power. Leaders must set their sights on mastering the skill of generating power in groups as opposed to teams. Teams are only one kind of group, and their future is limited. Globalization, interconnectedness and systems thinking are producing an entirely new level of problems and possibilities that no single organization or authority can get its arms around. The highest skill to master is the ability to generate power in groups composed of strangers, competitors, cautious allies and suspicious stakeholders. This is the world in which we live. ●

PART TWO: UNIVERSAL PATTERNS OF POWERFUL ALLIANCES

Gaining Shared Perspective

Shared perspective enriches and sharpens the conversation and is the first step in generating and accessing the group’s full power.

BLIND MEN AND THE ELEPHANT

Countless people have heard the tale of the blind man who holds the elephant’s trunk and has every reason to identify it as a snake. The same may be said for the blind man who stands next to the elephant’s leg and perceives it to be a tree. The two men arrive at different conclusions because they have different information. Once members of a team observe this dynamic and recognize that they each hold only a part of the elephant, they often resolve their differences quickly.

A few years ago, I witnessed firsthand the awesome power of “seeing the elephant.” The question at hand was, “Why were the responses to Hurricane Katrina and the Haitian earthquake such dismal failures?”

We began by interviewing many of the stakeholders and asking simple questions. While the answers to the questions were all over the map, we unearthed a single key insight: that the collective group lacked a shared picture of the overall response. In other words, even the word “response” had different meanings depending on which organization you asked.

Our solution was to gather everybody together and “draw a picture of the elephant.” Once we had a shared,

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explicit representation of the “response,” we were able to agree on the root causes of the problem and ways to make things go more smoothly going forward. This wouldn’t have been possible if we hadn’t taken the time to gain a common picture of the entire system.

You don’t have to be an artist to draw the “elephant,” and the pictures do not need to be pretty. Simply get to a white board or grab a sheet of paper, and draw a picture that answers the question, “How does this system work?” Do not be surprised if you end up with two to four different pictures. And always remember that the most important part of this process is the conversation you have during it. The picture, the “elephant,” represents an explicit and shared model of how the system works. And there is a rule when building models: All models are wrong. Some are useful. A useful model is one that positions people at a common vantage point that allows them to discuss what they see — and how to affect it. ●

Establishing Shared Intent

How do you lead the group to be intentional?

CORE PRIME

The CORE PRIME distinguishes five essential agreements that generate creative tension and establish deep and sustainable shared intent:

1. **As Is.** Stakeholders must see their current situation — the whole thing — as it really is as opposed to how they want it to be.
2. **Environment.** They must agree on what’s happening around them — which they’re unable to affect but that will affect them.
3. **Stake.** They must agree on what’s at stake if they stay where they are and don’t change.
4. **To Be.** They must agree on a vision of the future with which they have fallen in love.
5. **Strategy.** Finally, they must agree on how to break out of the “As Is” and chart a course toward the “To Be.” ●

Taking Coordinated Action

How do you get the group to do everything persistently about a few critical things versus doing a few things about everything?

COHESION

COHESION may be one of the most critical elements to manage as a group charges against its challenges. It is

present when everyone gives the same answers to the following three questions:

1. Where are we starting?
2. Where are we going?
3. What do we have to do to get there?

COHESION among group members is an unnatural state that requires constant energy to maintain. Without the group’s investment in it, individuals tend to have slightly — or significantly — different views of their current situation, the urgency to change and where they are headed. While this is natural, these differences — when unchecked — fragment the group’s focus, dissipate its energy and create an environment ripe for conflict. The COHESION PRIME reminds us that people work on different activities for different reasons and at different intensities. So expect fragmentation, but invest to establish and maintain COHESION.

REDPOINT

The REDPOINT PRIME can be summed up in one word: focus. It reveals the fastest, least risky path from our “As Is” to our “To Be.” At its core, REDPOINT embodies a simple concept: Rather than do a few things about everything, the most powerful leaders and teams do everything about the fewest, most important things. They willingly live with complete Integrity to realize their declared “To Be” on time. ●

PART THREE: UNIVERSAL PATTERNS OF OUTSTANDING GROUP PERFORMANCE

Making Decisions

In the context of PRIMES, decisions are “irrevocable allocation of resources.” The group may have used brainstorming to generate ideas and get to “the end of what it knows” to get to this point. Members of the group might have taken the next step and formed various recommendations. However, the only way to cash in on the energy invested thus far is for someone to make a decision.

The truth is that a single individual makes a decision in a single moment. Contrary to some popular notions of leadership, groups do not make decisions.

CONSENSUS

The most challenging environments in which to pursue transformation and problem solving are institutes of higher learning and multilateral organizations like the World Bank, the International Finance Corporation and the United Nations. They’re stuffed full with brilliant

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people. Yet as Peter Keen, a gifted colleague at the World Bank, once remarked, “Intelligence is like having four-wheel drive: you usually end up stuck like everyone else, just in a more remote location.”

When I sat with my colleague Michael Doyle one afternoon and lamented my inability to secure a critical decision at the World Bank, he asked gently, “What are you trying to do?” I replied, “I’m just trying to get everyone to agree!” Michael looked at me penetratingly and said, “Why would you ever try to do that?”

My job and your job is to get the group to adopt the working definition of CONSENSUS embodied in this PRIME, then make sure that everyone answers “yes” to the following three questions:

- 1. Process Satisfaction.** Was the process we used explicit, rational and fair?
- 2. Personal Treatment.** Were you personally treated well? Did you have ample opportunity to be heard, to make your opinions known and to consider others’ opinions?
- 3. Outcome Satisfaction.** Can you live with the outcome and commit to supporting the decisions of the group? (Notice the words *live with* as opposed to *agree with*. This is a critical distinction.)

Michael’s point was that if people are satisfied with the first two elements, they typically agree to the third. ●

Building an Intentional Culture

When culture fails to drive behaviors that are essential to the success of the group or organization, authorities develop, implement and enforce rules, policies and laws. Excessive rules, policies and laws represent a failure of culture.

CULTURE

CULTURE represents the difference between the behaviors that groups tolerate — and encourage — and those that they do not tolerate.

Some groups make their culture explicit by writing it down. Stating the culture explicitly makes it easy for all, especially new members, to know where this line is. Explicit statements of culture also make it easier to reinforce and enforce the culture — especially for those lower in rank. This articulation is important because unlike with rules and policies, adherence to culture must be the responsibility of every member of the group regardless of placement in the hierarchy.

Rules and policies pale in comparison with CULTURE when it comes to determining behavior within any

group. When a group steps up to state its culture on a piece of paper, its words create a place from which to stand and operate. These are some of the most senior conversations on the planet.

CONGRUENCE

By stating your intended CULTURE, you run the risk of behaving in a way that is not congruent with what you’ve stated.

This risk is mitigated through the CONGRUENCE PRIME, which reveals the constant tension between what is “stated” and what is “experienced.”

A simple and fast way to determine how much CONGRUENCE your group is experiencing is to ask everyone to draw two circles, one labeled “stated” and another labeled “experienced,” and ask them to overlap the circles to the degree they feel the stated culture is in fact the culture they are experiencing. Display all the papers, and discuss what you see. Ask for specific stories about when the “stated” and “experienced overlap” and when they do not.

The energy that pushes these circles together is FEEDBACK. This occurs when someone says to someone else, “Hey, I want to acknowledge you for acting in congruence with our stated culture” (positive reinforcement), or, “Hey, I don’t think that what you are doing is congruent with our culture” (negative reinforcement). The capacity and willingness of group members to give feedback to each other is essential to actually experiencing the culture that is stated. ●

Social Contracting and Accountability Within the Group

How do peers give each other commands?

TRUST

Everyone discusses how critical it is for high-performance groups to establish trust. But what exactly is it? How do we generate — and destroy — TRUST? And if we do destroy it, can TRUST be regenerated?

To TRUST is to believe that a person keeps his or her word. That’s it. Some people, upon first meeting, assume they can TRUST you. They start out relationships with a full TRUST bucket, while others start out with an empty bucket and need evidence to fill it. Frankly, this is a distinction without difference. It really does not matter how people choose to start out in relation to their TRUST in you because you have the power to generate TRUST. The key is to give your word and keep it

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— over and over again. Doing this will fill any trust bucket and/or keep it full.

Being trusted is the result of living in INTEGRITY with everyone you encounter. Every time someone makes a REQUEST of you, something is going to happen to the TRUST bucket.

This is why there are no small requests. Giving your word is giving your word regardless of the magnitude of the REQUEST. INTEGRITY is binary. You either keep your word, or do not keep your word; size does not matter. ●

Saying and Not Saying; Listening and Not Listening

GOSSIP

In this context, GOSSIP is defined as when two (or more) people talk about a third person ... in a manner that leaves the third person diminished in his or her eyes with no one doing the talking committed to helping the third person directly.

GOSSIP is pure, negative energy that destroys possibility and is the most harmful behavior any group can choose to tolerate.

However, GOSSIP is tolerated in most organizations. Attempts to eliminate it often prove ineffective because the efforts are focused on eliminating the “saying” of GOSSIP. The problem with this approach is that many people fail in the moment to recognize that they are spreading GOSSIP.

If you want to build a GOSSIP-free culture, you must instead focus on eliminating the “listening” to GOSSIP — because GOSSIP stops when no one listens. It’s as simple as this: When anyone begins to complain or talk badly about another person, no matter the reason, ask, “Before you go on, will either of us approach him directly about this?” If the answer is “no,” stop listening. Elimination of GOSSIP creates the possibility of sustaining a CULTURE in which group members actively invest in the development of all other members. ●

PART FOUR: UNIVERSAL PATTERNS OF GROUP FAILURE

Overcoming Resistance

While most people resist change, the patterns of this resistance are fairly predictable. By understanding these patterns, you can channel a significant portion of the

energy spent resisting the change into energy that instead drives it. And you can learn alternately to recognize and ignore sources of insignificant resistance.

High-performing groups have learned to distinguish which people resisting the change matter and which ones do not. They spend the maximum amount of time working with the first group and virtually ignore the latter group. This skill is teachable.

You must embrace resistance while not allowing it to defeat you.

Laggards

Three percent of your people are “visionaries” who will jump at anything. Early Adopters are willing to take a risk if basic questions are answered satisfactorily. The Early Majority relies on Early Adopters for direction, while the Late Majority moves because it doesn’t want to be left behind. LAGGARDS, however, never come along; they destroy possibility by constantly asking questions, ignoring answers and declaring why things won’t work.

Leaders must identify the traits of individuals in a group; they have to ignore the LAGGARDS and invest their time and energy in the Early Adopters.

When presented with a new idea or change, Early Adopters ask important questions: “What does this new possibility mean? How is it going to affect our existing market share? What are we going to do with our existing products?” They ask good questions, need good answers and listen; they want to be convinced. When Early Adopters’ questions are answered satisfactorily, they say, “Okay, we don’t have it all worked out yet, but we have enough information to move. I am in.”

LAGGARDS rarely enroll fully in a universe-denting effort. They drag their feet and often need to be carried. They love getting attention; it fuels their resistance. ●

Managing Intractable Dilemmas

How do you end a never-ending argument?

RIGHT VERSUS RIGHT

When conversations deteriorate into disagreements that disintegrate into arguments, the great misperception is that one position must be right, and others must be wrong. While right versus wrong issues certainly create opportunities for disagreement, it can be as debilitating and destructive as gossip to mistake a RIGHT VERSUS RIGHT issue for a right versus wrong dilemma. It is imperative to recognize immediately the collision of two

“rights”; this recognition enables a leader to intervene, honor all the “rights” and reorient the group toward the defined “To Be.”

You will recognize RIGHT VERSUS RIGHT dilemmas everywhere. What happens when the needs of the group are in conflict with the needs of a specific individual? These issues confront us throughout the human experience.

RESOLUTION PRINCIPLES

You’ll likely encounter one or more dilemmas on the path to your declared outcome. The RESOLUTION PRINCIPLES PRIME can help you find the highest “right” when faced with the toughest choices.

There are only three ways to make the best choice when faced with such a RIGHT VERSUS RIGHT dilemma:

- 1. End-based.** Select the option that generates the most good for the most people.
- 2. Rule-based.** Choose as if you’re creating a universal standard.
- 3. Care-based.** Choose as if you were the one most affected by your decision. ●

Avoid Tripping Hazards

Tripping hazards are easier to avoid when you know where they are. When it comes to working in groups, can you see them coming?

PROCESS-CONTENT

You can run the process. You can contribute to content. Pick one.

If you work with a group that has more than seven participants, someone has to facilitate the process. And whoever takes responsibility for facilitating the process must surrender his or her right to offer content. Unfortunately, people constantly violate this PRIME.

I regularly see senior leaders running meetings. They facilitate the process while offering content and assigning value to what is being said. This is completely inappropriate; it does not prompt the best ideas to come forward with the best buy-in from stakeholders.

The reason for this is simple: If you are running the process and have a stake in the outcome, you will manipulate the process to get your outcome. When the stakes are high and many stakeholders are involved, process and content must be separated. Someone must be held responsible for designing a well-thought-out process design and make that design explicit and fair. ●

Refusing to Hide Out

We all live our lives trying to avoid embarrassment. Can you recognize when you and your group are hiding out and playing safe?

VICTIM-LEADER

Groups are moving toward being LEADERS or VICTIMS at any single point in time. They talk either about things they can do or about what’s being done to them. Once it can distinguish this PRIME, a group becomes directly responsible for tolerating victimhood. This awareness makes what once was easy — hiding out and blaming others — suddenly unpleasant and intolerable.

To take responsibility at all times — to be the causes — may feel like a huge burden. VICTIM-LEADER, therefore is one of the few PRIMES best introduced in explicit fashion sparingly. This PRIME is valuable even when you keep it to yourself. So even if you don’t speak of it, pay close attention to which way the group is headed. Guide group members to talk about things they can control. That’s where their power is stored.

COURT-LOCKER ROOM

Planning is a near-death experience. We step out of living (COURT), and we step into talking about living (LOCKER ROOM). At best, planning helps us become organized and take action. In the business environment, it more often serves as giving us something to do so we do not have to actually do anything.

This PRIME began to reveal itself when we were asked to support an 18-month transformation effort in Washington, D.C. Regular meetings were scheduled for leadership to participate. Near the end of our first planning meeting, with only 30 minutes to go, we asked, “Is there anything obvious that we could take on now to get this transformation started?” People were flustered. They said, “We are only on the first day of this planning process. It is too early to take an action.” We asked them, “How long have each of you lived and worked in D.C.?” Collectively, the number was over 500 years. And so we replied, “We have 500 years of experience and dozens of recent studies. When you close your eyes and imagine D.C., isn’t there anything obvious, no matter how much longer we study it, that we simply must do now? Because it either must be part of our vision for the city or must not be part of the city we imagine.”

After just a few moments, the city administrator made a suggestion to close D.C. General, the only public hospital in town. As he explained, “The building is old and loaded with asbestos. We have studied this for years. We

know the costs to bring it up to code are simply not worth it.”

We encouraged the leadership team to think of the transformation of D.C. like a basketball game. We will develop an overall game plan. Then we will get onto the court and act. While on the court, depending on what is showing up, we will call some plays and adjust our plan. We leave the court, go to the locker room, do some planning and then get back onto the court. ●

PART FIVE: UNIVERSAL PATTERNS OF THRIVING IN AMBIGUITY

Avoiding Bright and Shiny Objects and Squirrels

How do you manage distractions? We as people are chronically interrupted. This problem is going to get much worse as our appliances, vehicles and even food products vie for our attention.

A CLEARING

A CLEARING is a void where nothing exists. You can create CLEARINGS in your schedule or physical CLEARINGS in your office, home or hotel conference center. And you can create CLEARINGS in your mind as they are spaces where possibilities can exist. In the context of the PRIMES, we remove all facts, thoughts, technology, people, meetings, distractions, interruptions, biases and legacies. In short, you push aside everything. In this space of nothing, you place your DECLARED OUTCOME. You guard the CLEARING. You let into the CLEARING only what is essential to achieving your DECLARED OUTCOME.

So, create CLEARINGS for your group. Push the noise back. Make an opening where nothing exists except what is essential to your outcome. Here are some tips:

- Keep your group as small as absolutely possible, and try to encourage each person to bring something essential and unique to it.
- Minimize the amount of data you consider.
- Get off the grid when you need to do critical thinking. Disconnect from text messages and email as much as you can, and manage your connectivity.

The CLEARING PRIME is not about making major life changes. It simply requests that we focus on the task at hand while we're performing it. ●

Taking Great Care of Yourself

Can you give up coming from “something is wrong”?

Be

The BE PRIME reveals a simple way to give yourself the freedom to BE how you want to BE, independent from everything that is going on around you.

I discovered the BE PRIME while working with a group from the Women Presidents' Organization (WPO). This particular meeting took place at the height of the global financial meltdown in 2010. The challenges were beginning to take their toll.

One of the participants helped us realize a critical element to controlling our “way of being” and not letting our circumstances control it — and this was to “notice” our way of being. She and the others eventually stripped the essence of “controlling your way of being regardless of your circumstances” down to four steps:

1. **Be.** Acknowledge that at any point in time, you are being some way.
2. **Notice.** Regularly pause what you are doing, and notice how you are being.
3. **Choose.** In that moment of noticing, choose any way of being.
4. **Be.** Instantly become that chosen way of being.

The BE PRIME is not about one way of being over another. It simply reveals how you can be any way you want to be regardless of what is happening around you. That is it. Be any way you choose to be. Just be it because you choose to be it — not because the situation caused you. When outfitted with the BE PRIME, you and you alone are forever the source of how you are being and how you are showing up to others.

Now What?

Now what? That is easy. Outfit yourself with a few of the PRIMES, run out onto the court of life, and make your dent! ●

RECOMMENDED READING LIST

If you liked *The PRIMES*, you'll also like:

1. ***The Synergist* by Les McKeown.** A successful team includes bold dreamers (Visionaries), pragmatic realists (Operators), and systems designers (Processors), but it takes a Synergist to blend the motivations and goals of the three types and get everyone to work together effectively.
2. ***How We Decide* by Jonah Lehrer.** Lehrer offers a fresh yet informed perspective on the subject of how we make up our minds.
3. ***Team Turnarounds* by Joe Frontiera and Daniel Leidl.** Learn the art of turning around a team's performance with examples from sports and business.