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# 24 KARAT SUCCESS



GOLDEN RULES FOR A  
FULFILLED AND SUCCESSFUL  
LIFE IN THE DIGITAL AGE

## Karat 5: No man is an island

### What groups are good for

"Got a bit Brahms,  
fell down apples,  
China picked me up,  
dog to trouble –  
what a bubble!"

If you have no idea what this means, you are not alone. For at least 150 years people have been irritated when they hear sentences like “Get your chinks off the table and hand over the bees” or “You have beautiful minces.”

This is 'Cockney Rhyming Slang', thought to have originated in the East End of London during the first half of the 19th century, and probably first used by street sellers, beggars and petty criminals. It is based on using words as code for the intended noun – but is complicated by the fact that the second part of the rhyming words is often dropped. Hence 'Brahms' is short for 'Brahms and Liszt', and denotes 'pissed'. 'Apples' is short for 'apples and pears', which denotes 'stairs'. 'China' is short for 'china plate' – meaning 'mate'. 'Dog' is short for 'dog and bone' – 'phone'. 'Trouble' is short for 'trouble and strife' – wife. And 'bubble' is short for 'bubble bath' – 'laugh'. All clear? So now you have the solution to the riddle. But in case there's any doubt, here it is!

"Got a bit pissed,  
fell down the stairs,  
mate picked me up,  
phoned the wife,  
what a laugh!"

And what about the minces? Well, you might be able to work it out now. 'Mince pies' – 'eyes', of course! And 'chalks' – 'Chalk Farms' – 'arms'. (Chalk Farm is an area of London). Finally, 'bees' is 'bees and honey' – 'money'. (Arms off the table and hand over the money.)

But amusing (or irritating) though it is to outsiders, why on earth would people go to such effort to develop an 'insider' language that excludes others? Well, it's all part of our need to belong.

The desire to 'belong' is hard wired in us.<sup>102</sup> It started in prehistoric times when we needed the protection of the group to defend us, hunt successfully, provide mutual support, and so on. Even today, most of us feel stronger in a group than we do on our own. The English poet John Donne summed up the need for belonging in his famous poem: "No man is an island entire of itself...." (Britain's Brexiteers clearly feel differently – but that's another story.)

Do groups of Homo sapiens differ from groups of other primates? Yes, and, in terms of size, quite considerably. As a rule, humans live in far larger groups.<sup>103</sup> Typical monkey groups have about 80 members, and it takes a lot of effort to keep them together. Look at the data: they spend about 20 percent of their time delousing each other. And not just their preferred bundle of fur, but many different ones, both inside and outside the family, across gender and status boundaries. This delousing benefits monkeys' health, and more importantly the social interaction involved releases endorphins which, in turn, contributes to peace and harmony in the monkey group. If the group was any larger than 80, the increased amount of time required for delousing would reduce the time available for other necessary activities such as hunting or defending themselves.

Humans, on the other hand, have almost always lived in groups of more than 80. British network-expert Robin Dunbar speaks of an average of 150 members. This was the case in the earliest settlements and in Roman army units.<sup>104</sup> Even in our digital age, the typical number of friends and acquaintances most people have is still between 150 and 200.<sup>105</sup> The researchers classify our relationships in terms of concentric circles: Most people have about five very close contacts (so-called 'supporters'), about 15 people in their 'personal sympathy group', 50 in their 'affinity group' and up to 150 in the surrounding ring. The person at the center of this personal network contacts people in the outer ring on average only once a year, but the others more frequently.

So how have humans managed to create larger groups than monkeys? It's all to do with language. We can reach considerably more members of our group through language than we could through delousing – particularly as we can direct words to several people at the same time.

Research shows that, like monkeys, we too spend about 20 percent of our day on social interaction. If you are awake for 16 hours, you'll spend roughly three of those hours chatting with people, whether 'virtually' or face to face.<sup>106</sup> What is this social interaction about? Interestingly, the majority (65 percent) is focused on social issues concerning the group you belong to. In other words, we spend far less time talking about facts than we spend on juicy gossip and tittle-tattle about other group members. Shallow? Bitchy? Maybe. But research shows that gossip and tittle-tattle create a sense of togetherness, of community, and confidence that others abide by the rules. So long live gossip, the human equivalent of delousing!

This network capacity of about 150 people is also applicable in the business world. For example, Gore Associates, manufacturer of Gore-Tex, has a maximum of 150 parking spaces for any of its premises.<sup>107</sup> If the building becomes too cramped and people are having to park on the lawn, they construct a new building. The management is convinced that more than 150 employees in any one building prevent people from sustaining meaningful contact with each other, resulting in social alienation and damage to the corporate culture. You see this almost magical 150-person limit in start-ups too. That's the 'standing-on-a-seat' number<sup>108</sup> – the number of people who can hear the bosses when they stand on a chair to deliver their strategy and motivation speech, even if they're in the back row. Any more people than this, even shouting does not help and communication as well as many internal structures, must be adapted.

So, given this almost biological limit of 150, how do humans manage to belong to even larger groups? How do they manage to be citizens of a country, members of an association, devotees of a religious group or employees of a multinational organization? The Israeli historian Yuval Noah Harari explains that language can also be used to create 'fictitious realities'.<sup>109</sup> He includes constructs such as the United States, the United Nations, Catholicism, Manchester United and Siemens in this category. Language brings such constructs to life, he explains, and allows people to identify with them.

But for people to continue to identify with these bigger groups, those groups have to cater to at least some of our individual preferences. Even babies identify more strongly with a group that has similar

preferences: 11-month-old babies choose a cuddly toy wearing the same color as they are over one wearing different-colored clothes.<sup>110</sup> Apparently, we are hard-wired to join groups that we find similar to us and avoid or even reject those that seem strange.

The feeling of belonging also develops through experienced proximity. Neighbors, classmates or work colleagues soon find themselves drawn together despite not having voluntarily chosen each other. People who experience crises or dangers together connect even more strongly. This is not just because they have shared experiences, but also because our psyche helps to strengthen our intimacy thanks to a programming error in our brain. Imagine the following situation. A man walks over a suspension bridge above a yawning abyss. It swings in the wind; a roaring river tumbles below. His heart starts to beat more quickly, his hands become sweaty, adrenaline courses through his body. Finally, when he's safely across, a woman approaches him and asks him to fill out a questionnaire. She offers to explain the background to her research in more detail and scribbles her mobile number on a piece of paper. Now hazard a guess: Which group of men is more likely to call the interviewer – those who have staggered across the shaky bridge or those who have walked calmly across a solid stone bridge? A whole 40 percent more men contacted the interviewer after crossing the unsafe suspension bridge.<sup>111</sup> Why? People often fail to explain why their bodies react with excitement (heartbeat, sweat, adrenaline) and are quick to attribute this to the wrong cause. "Of course, I am not frightened, my heightened pulse is due to this sexy woman!" So the men attributed their bodily reactions to the interviewer and not their fears! Things work in a similar way for groups that have gone through a lot together. The physical arousal (not in a sexual sense) is often interpreted as affection and belonging. In other words, fear and stress situations experienced together strengthen the sense of community.

As a rule, individuals feel comfortable in their group because they benefit from it – on both a physical and mental level. Interaction in groups keeps people healthier, even to the extent of keeping Alzheimer's at bay.<sup>112</sup> By contrast, people who are socially isolated have a demonstrably lower life expectancy.<sup>113</sup>

How does someone perceive their own group? As the very best, of course! Therefore, people categorize mistakes by their 'in group' as

unfortunate human failings. Mistakes of the erring 'out-group' members,<sup>114</sup> on the other hand, obviously demonstrate that these people are vicious, stupid and bad. But do we make such judgments consciously, or do the unconscious parts of our brains act on our behalf?

In fact, our brain does something truly magical when it comes to groups. The brain actually processes unknown people who belong to its group (university, football fan club, etc.) much more easily and faster than it can others.<sup>115</sup> The perception lens is sharpened for group members. In addition, a part of the brain (the lower parietal lobe) is considerably more active when observing in-group members.<sup>116</sup> This part belongs to the 'mirror network' with its so-called mirror neurons. Let me explain in more detail: When we see someone eating, yawning or in pain, these mirror neurons become active in our brain and simulate the same action in us. In other words, these mirror neurons ensure that we always partly experience what is happening to someone else. Unsurprisingly, mirror neurons are even more responsive when it comes to people who are close to us. Therefore, we don't consciously think that our own group is better; rather, the brain perceives activities of in-group members more strongly than those of out-group members. So when someone claims their team played better than the opposition they are not exaggerating or distorting the truth; their brain has actually 'seen' that their own group performed better.

Group membership also influences people's willingness to help. In a staged 'accident' scenario, Manchester United fans helped other Manchester United fans rather than Liverpool fans or people not wearing a club shirt.<sup>117</sup> However, those Man Utd fans who had previously taken part in a survey about the general value of soccer were almost as likely to help the Liverpool supporters as they were their fellow Man Utd supporters. However, the injured showing no affiliation (they weren't wearing a club shirt) still fared badly. Clearly, people who don't worship a soccer club aren't worth helping!

So what we can see here is that the sense of belonging to a group is flexible and easy to manipulate. This is why new common enemies can unite groups that were previously at odds. What seems to be the key here is the perceived immediate benefit of the group to the individual.

Man Utd fans' selective willingness to help shows that strong group membership can also have adverse effects. We know this from the numerous reported situations in which the more people there are gathered around a victim, the less inclined anyone is to help. Apparently, our brain is so busy feeling socially safe as part of the group that it forgets all about the helping bit.<sup>118</sup> The victim has to be proactive and shout: "You, the gentleman in the blue sweater, come and help me," to break the spell and prompt us to revert to our helpful nature.

We are all aware of the most pernicious effects of group membership. Internal group pressure can be so strong that it prompts people to commit acts they could never have imagined on their own. The Reserve Police Battalion 101 from Hamburg during the second world war provides one of the many terrible examples. When 500 ordinary policemen were granted the right not to participate in the shooting of 1,500 Jewish elderly, sick, women and children in Jozefow, Poland, in 1942, only ten of them took up the offer. What happened to those ten brave deviants? All that happened was that they were excluded from the evening campfire, slightly insulted and no longer treated as part of the group.<sup>119</sup> The other 490 other men opted to be part of a brutal execution squad rather than endure this slight inconvenience! Their need to belong was more powerful than their inner moral compass.

Fortunately, group membership in general delivers more positive than negative outcomes. The sense of belonging leads students to achieve better academic results<sup>120</sup>, helps people deal more effectively with adversity<sup>121</sup> and motivates them more strongly to face difficult tasks<sup>122</sup>. If people feel excluded, they become more dishonest<sup>123</sup>, more aggressive<sup>124</sup> and live more unhealthily<sup>125</sup>. This is because without the group many people lose their self-esteem, their sense of being in control and their sense of purpose.<sup>126</sup> There are notable exceptions of course. Groucho Marx appeared to immunize himself against such losses, famously declaring: "I refuse to join any club that would have me as a member."

So everything speaks for belonging to a group with human values. How do you feel in a group of like-minded people? ABBA, of course. Why – and now be ready for something that may make well you wince – because ABBA belongs to trouper, and that rhymes with? Super!

## 5<sup>th</sup> golden rule

### I belong to a group – I'm cock-a-hoop!

People tend to group together. This makes them stronger and more robust. However, people typically over-indulge members of their in-group and exclude out-group members. Be aware of this. Have the courage to leave your own group to broaden your horizons or to distance yourself from ethically questionable groups.





## **Brief story to delve more deeply into golden rule number 5**

Many Germans emigrated to Australia in the 19th century for economic and political reasons. In 1838 the first ones to arrive were winegrowers from the Rheingau, followed by Protestants from northern and eastern Germany. These 'New Australians' were well accepted for several decades. But then came the Boer War, and the first and second world wars, which drove a wedge between the 'old' and new Australians – who also included Italians and Japanese.

Winemaker Peter Lehmann (1930–2013) told me: “To show the Germans in the Barossa Valley that they were not wanted, English farmers stuck metal rods into the fields of the Germans in 1915. Hundreds. At night, so no one would notice. When the harvest began, the sticks got caught in the harvesters, ruined them and made harvesting impossible.”

In the face of such hostilities, members of the 'immigrant' group reassured themselves that they did in fact 'belong' at least to some group by finding solace in their dialect. In 1998 Peter Lehmann told me: “Until recently we still had the Barossa-German, which consisted of sentences like: 'Come in for a Schluck and a Schnitte', 'Would you like it mit or mitout garlic?' and 'It makes for me no undersheet' (The German word for difference is 'Unterschied').

Research confirms that dialects strengthen the internal cohesion of groups of outsiders.<sup>127</sup> People use the dialect consciously to reassure each other and to arm themselves against attacks from outside. Today there are only a few so-called German Clubs left in Australia, and what was a clear out-group has been almost entirely absorbed into Australian society. As a result, Barossa-German has also disappeared as a mechanism for demarcation. This is a sad loss for those who study language, but no doubt beneficial for the people, who are at last an integral part of the group.

### **Lessons for you personally**

#### *At work*

- If you want to bring your colleagues or your team together, spend a lot of time with each other. Develop joint ideas, strategies and plans,

cook together or cross a suspension bridge together: Anything undertaken with others fosters the in-group feeling and strengthens the team.

You don't need to go as far as setting up a commune or going on holiday with your employees, of course. Indeed, the proverb 'Familiarity breeds contempt' is true in that humans actually appreciate a certain lack of knowledge about each other.<sup>128</sup> The more you get to know someone the more you tend to realize how different they are from you, even how strange they are.... You start to interpret further information about them in a way that alienates you even more – and the distance just grows bigger.

So, if you want to stay popular in the group, don't reveal too much of yourself! Being mysterious is very attractive.

- If you sense that groups are not sharing information ('knowledge is power') or that energy-sapping rivalries have developed, you can develop joint activities between the different groups. Extend the network with a new superimposed group!

#### *At home*

- Do your children quarrel constantly? Give them a joint task or problem to solve, or set up a 'parents versus children' competition. This won't stop the squabbles permanently, but it will help to build up a reservoir of memories that allow the siblings to recognize at least for a few moments the advantage of being related to each other.
- A good friend has found such a strange new partner that you worry it might affect your friendship. But as an acquaintance of mine puts it: "If you have a punk in your family, you start to like punks." Rather than dismissing the incomer out of hand, why not test their merits through arranging some joint activities? You might discover qualities that you like – perhaps their wit, film recommendations, honest affection for your friend, and so on – with the result that your relationship with your friend is actually enriched. However, if this strategy doesn't work, emphasize to your friend how important it is to you to maintain your traditional one-to-one meetings. You thereby avoid conflict and honor your former group membership.

### *For yourself*

- You sometimes feel that you understand only your own group and are therefore increasingly uncertain on 'foreign' terrain. Why not address this head on and spend more time with other groups? This will train you to remain objective and avoid restrictive 'group think'. If you've tended to socialize with old school-friends, throw a party for your neighbors. Alternatively, enroll in a language course that will catapult you beyond national boundaries.
- Do you have a lot on your mind and spend little time on anything apart from work and family? Do you sometimes feel the need for inspiration and variety, but are convinced that you can't take anything else on without getting stretched too thinly or stressed? Research shows that getting involved in activities outside your own narrow circle – particularly when you are over 40 – has a dramatic effect on physical and emotional wellbeing.<sup>129</sup> So join a club, a book group or a walking group, volunteer in a charity shop or school, take a language class. So even if there is solid comfort to be drawn from a small core group, the stimulus of an additional external perspective is invaluable.

### **Five questions for reflection**

1. What distinguishes your favorite colleagues from the others? To what extent are these differences real – and to what extent do you perceive these to be real because you have chosen these colleagues as your in-group?
2. How much time do you spend with people outside your (core) group? Why could it be worthwhile to be more strongly involved with them?
3. What do other groups think about your group? And how do you find out?
4. Do you sometimes manage to break away from the group and act independently? Or does this make you feel isolated?
5. Does being too much part of the group ever harm you (or someone else in your circle)? In what way? And how do you deal with it?