

The Tree-House Effect

by Chris Ladd
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I started a club with some friends of mine a little while ago. I'll tell you about it, except it's a secret club, and

I'm not really supposed to say much.

Our club began the way many clubs begin. It's cliché and overdone, but our club began with an idea. If I told you the idea, you'd probably figure out what

we do at our meetings, and if you figured that out, the great part of our club, the secret part, would be gone. And I might get kicked out.

Actually, I can't get kicked out. It was my job to draw up our charter, and I've allowed myself several liberties.

Back when we started this club we didn't even have a charter, and we didn't think we'd need one. I'm not certain why we need it now, but I think the story of how we got it, of why we thought we needed it, says a lot more about us and our club than anything I could tell you, if I were to tell you, about what we do, or what the idea was.

When this club began, we had no titles, no rules of procedure. Members behaved as equals. We gathered at our first meeting and did the thing we had met to do, and then when we'd finished we left the place where we'd come to do the thing that began with the idea, and all agreed that the idea was a good one, and

that we should meet at the same place as before the following week, and do the same thing again.

It was during this second meeting that we strayed from the original ideals of our club. I think I can trace this back to our fourth member. Not that he did anything, not that he's responsible. Think of him as more of a catalyst. A spark.

This fourth member triggered what I like to call the "tree-house effect," or the tendency for established groups, good ones anyway, to get more and more exclusive, to become less welcoming and more suspicious of the outside applicant.

I would name this fourth member, but even if I only used his first name, you could probably figure out his second, and it's enough that I've used the pronoun "he" and the possessive "his," enough that I've told you that I am a member of this club, and if you knew the name of this fourth member, you would know half of our current roster. And now I've told you that there are four of us. This is all supposed to be secret.

I'd use more discretion, choose my words more carefully, but like I said: I'm a charter member of this secret club, a member of the triumvirate, and I hold a very secure position. But I just used the word "triumvirate," and I shouldn't have.

From now on, I'll just refer to this fourth member as No. 4.

We started our second meeting, and because No. 4 was present, the conversation turned naturally to membership. We all thought that No. 4 would make a good member; he was just as able to do the thing we all did at our meetings as us, and just

as pleasant to be around. With a simple vote, the "ayes" had it. This is how No. 4 became our fourth member.

This vote was the first formal act of the secret club, and it snowballed. Later, when we'd finished a



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first draft of our charter, we all agreed that No. 4 was lucky to get in when he did.

I think I said already that No. 4 was the cause of all this. He was. His presence begged the question of who else we would let into our club. What characteristics should our members possess? How selective should we be? It was around this time that the three of us who started the club, all of us except No. 4, began referring to ourselves and each other as "the Triumvirate."

Now, it may seem natural for me to withhold from you the qualities we agreed future members should have, but I'll be perfectly candid. You've probably gathered that the people in this group, the four of us, share some characteristics. We are more alike in some ways than others, and you've probably deduced that the characteristics we share will probably

be the ones we'll look for in new members. Probably.

Because you already know that the characteristics are modeled after the group's individual members, and because I already let slip that I am one of these members, and because

with a little digging you could root out the qualities that I myself possess, I think that it's all right that I tell you what we wanted in our members. You were so close to finding out on your own, anyhow.

Here is what we wanted. We wanted for them to be bookish. They must read. They should be casual in attitude and attire, and funny. Not "wocka wocka" funny, more of an understated thing. Also, they must make good conversation. Our club is relaxed, but certainly not quiet. These qualities didn't go in our charter. They were more or less an understating.

Things went from there. No. 4 became our faculty liaison, in charge of professor invites, correspondence, that sort of thing. We have plans in the works to invite a member of the English faculty.

Me and the other two founding members, we are the triumvirate, and

we wield all the power. Our charter is four pages long, and filled with language like this:

"The triumvirate shall convene from time to time to discuss the time and place of future meetings. These discussions shall be carried through in a private manner, so as not to draw undue attention to the club."

"Guests to the club must be approved beforehand by the triumvirate, and be suitably bookish and interesting in nature. Member opinions will be considered by the triumvirate in their decision making process."

"New members shall be admitted only after appearing twice as scheduled guests, and then only after a unanimous vote by the triumvirate."

All of this, the charter, the procedure, is completely unnecessary. We have a cell phone clause. If I told you the thing that we do in our meetings, if I told you the idea, you would think our club was ridiculous. But we have a faculty liaison. A lot of things are ridiculous in life, and a lot of those are exclusive. We've merely joined the ranks.

If you'd like to join our ranks, our secret ranks, it would be a good idea to move quickly. There's a motion on the floor to amend section three of the charter and require written recommendations accompanied by a two-page application and passport photo. Our club, the tree-house that we've made, is going places. It must be. Look how hard it is to get in.