



TRICKY TIMES by JITSKE KRAMER

Navigating the Messy Middle of Change

In *Tricky Times*, Jitske Kramer unravels the complexities of transformations and cultural change.

We are in a period of transition. As with any major change, we have to let go of what is familiar without knowing exactly what the future holds. This is a confusing *betwixt-and-between* time, when things are neither what they were, nor what they will become. Anthropologists call such between-times *liminality*.

Fascinated by the myriad changes impacting our world and universally fierce emotions they are arousing, best-selling Dutch author and anthropologist Jitske Kramer set out to unravel the patterns of this liminal time. In clear language she describes the opportunities, the dangers and the lures during major changes. When wild stories confound, tricksters continually toy with truth and power relations shift.

We are lost in a trickster culture. We hail the best spinners of truth as heroes and now have Jack Sparrows as CEOs and Pinocchios as political leaders.

Tricky Times is an unsettling book that will have you seeing society, and yourself, with fresh eyes. A book of insightful interpretations and personal views. Sharing lessons Jitske learned on her travels in diverse cultures. Offering a vision on the kind of leadership needed in liminal times. And an urgent book, because we can and must do better. We have work to do.

Navigating through uncertain times is a tricky business. It takes fearlessness and faith.

Taking the knowledge and tools of anthropology, this book delves into the patterns and dynamics of major change. Anthropology has the ability to illuminate and lay bare things we knew but could not yet put into words. In *Tricky Times; Navigating the Messy Middle of Change* (working title), Jitske Kramer unravels the complexities of cultural change. Focusing particularly on what happens in the uncomfortable, turbulent, precarious and messy middle—when we know we cannot go back to how things were, but also can't yet clearly picture what's to come.



Jitske Kramer is an anthropologist, international speaker, best-selling author and founder of Human Dimensions. Her previous titles, which include *The Corporate Tribe*, *Building Tribes*, *Deep Democracy*, *Jam Cultures* and *Work Has Left the Building*, have sold more than 150,000 copies and have been translated into English, German, Vietnamese and Russian.

The messy middle: opportunities, dangers and lures during liminality

This book follows Jitske Kramer's quest as she dives into the power of liminal times. Liminality offers untold opportunities. The temporary loosening of social structures and hierarchies makes it easier to look past biases and analyse situations as they are. It opens up space for self-exploration, to let emotions flow freely and to shape new realities. When we traverse a liminal space with others, it forges a special bond and a profound, at times spiritual, kinship. Shared liminality kindles a sense of community, of *communitas*. It puts us in touch with nature, with place and time. But, to experience and tap into these positive dimensions, we also have to navigate through and past the risks of liminality. Risks in the form of temptations that threaten to derail the needed transformation. This book takes readers through each of these risks. The seven main dangers and lures of liminality, which are at the heart of Jitske's quest and show up in different guises throughout the book, are outlined below.

The first is the danger of permanent liminality. This is where we fail to press on to the integration stage, put off taking decisions and never act on ideas, and so end up hovering at the threshold, neither here nor there. We know we ought to change, but don't. New initiatives are just variations on the old. Carving out a new identity proves impossible. We try to blunt or buffer the pain and emptiness we feel, instead of rooting it out and resolving it, leaving underlying problems to fester. We may even blame our state of affairs on each other, making conflicts boil over and thwarting any form of reconciliation. Street demonstrations grow endemic, border conflicts keep on claiming lives, divorces inflict years of agony and, try as you might, you cannot get past the death of a loved one. Resolution, completion, closure: these things are essential.

The second danger is the lure of pseudo-liminal activities. Instead of genuinely transformative rituals, we go for the rush of the electrifying experience without the pain that comes with real change. Modern societies often lack the clear group rituals that build ties and guide transitions. Often, we don't take the time to delve deeper, preferring to sidestep the discomfort of change. We prefer things to be fun and inspirational. This leaves us with activities that offer the thrill of a liminal experience but fall short of transformation. These kinds of liminoid activities keep us dangling, like experience junkies, in a state of permanent liminality.

Third is the danger of wild stories. Faced with ambiguity and uncertainty, we are tempted to believe the most outlandish stories, explanations and solutions. There is a real danger when people flood social media with crazy messages that pit camps against each other. New divisions gain purchase more easily during liminality, and if we don't know the exact story, we make one up. If everyone around you is in panic mode, your body is swift to react. Much as we like to think we direct our own thoughts and behaviour, that's not entirely true. Emotions, behaviours and narratives are contagious. We copy what others do far more than our ideal selves would care to admit. But during liminality our usual points of orientation are thrown into doubt, leaving us unsure just who or what to trust and emulate. In extraordinary times we are open to extraordinary stories, even if they are beyond belief. We can't help it. Storytelling is what makes us human.

The fourth is the danger of tricksters who seduce us with pretty words and fixes that are too good to be true. We are always susceptible, but much more so in liminal times. Tricksters are both wonderful and despicable. They twist boundaries, juggle facts and fictions, and so craft new realities. Sometimes, with disastrous effects. They lure us with the promise of privileged knowledge. They pin blame on everyone but themselves and

scheme to make others take the fall when things go wrong. Tricksters are seducers, charlatans or villains who defy you to stick to your own moral compass. We all have trickster tactics of our own and can often tell when others are using them. Tricksters push through boundaries and tread on hallowed ground. Everything the trickster does is out of bounds and against the rules, yet by tearing things and people apart, they also clear spaces for new situations and fresh possibilities. Take Robin Hood. Hero or thug? Tricksters force us to think hard about our moral compass. They are brilliantly creative and essential for change, but, with too many of them, things get stuck. This is a problem we are seeing in many places. We have come to confuse trickster logic and tactics with leadership competences, drawing tricksters from the fringes into the very centre of power. And that is getting us into big trouble.

Fifth is the danger of a fierce, even violent, power struggle. Because: who gets to shape the new narrative, who pays the highest financial price of change, and who profits? Transformation calls for bold leadership. It calls for decisions that go beyond personal interests. Fundamental changes always bring about shifts in power and reshuffle rankings. While it is tempting to cling to what's familiar, if the status quo becomes untenable or unpalatable for enough people, it can lead to frustration, friction and, potentially, aggression. For there to be a peaceful transition to a new situation, those in charge have to be willing to change, too. Actively, but also by stepping down from or sharing power, rank and privilege. Which is awfully hard for people to do.

Sixth is the danger of a lack of safety and courage. The blurring of boundaries in the liminal space creates more room for everything, also for the darker side of human nature. People may do things they would normally never dare to. Brilliantly innovative things, but also transgressive behaviours

such as verbal abuse, physical aggression and substance overuse. Alternatively, people may be seized with indecision and apathetically wait for others to act. We need individuals who can create and hold spaces so we don't feel fearful to explore our boundaries. Particularly because we tend to be lousy communicators. Innovation hinges on people sharing ideas, even and especially if those ideas cause sparks to fly. Interaction and decision-making are how humans build cultures, but all the liminal emotions churning around are hampering our ability to do that now, just when it matters most.

The seventh danger is time. Or rather, the lack of it. We like things to be set in stone straight away and feel pressured to quickly hammer out solid plans, to know the end goal from the outset, and often lack the guts to leave room to let some magic in. It's much harder to have faith that new paths will present themselves to you along the way. Not by waiting around for lightning to strike, but by keeping your eyes open, meeting new people, experimenting with new options, asking and listening deeply. The challenge for our modern cultures is to let ourselves be liminal. To feel our emotions and to tap our imaginations. To create and to craft things into existence. And to have the courage to tune into our own magical powers.

Finding our way out of the maze: lost but not forsaken

When faced with major changes in the world, we have to rethink old ways and question established truths. That can leave us floundering amid all the possibilities of our own cultural narrative, stirring existential fears. Unique as this experience feels while it's happening, we humans know how to tackle big transformations. We've done it before. The universal patterns of liminality can help us tread through this messy middle of change. There is much we can learn from what we already know.

Tricky Times is a field guide for navigating liminal space. Not a step-by-step roadmap with concrete tips for reaching your destination, but pointers for choosing a direction in situations where the landscape keeps changing and you feel lost between how things were, are and should or could be.

A short summary of each chapter

Chapter 1. Lost but not forsaken

In this first chapter, Kramer shares her analysis of the patterns she sees in our changing world. Large change can feel quite chaotic and it is hard to grasp what exactly is happening while you are in the thick of it. But if you look at the transformations from a distance you will see that this apparent chaos has its own patterns and characteristics. This gives the chaos some predictability and one could argue that this makes it less chaotic. In a crash course in anthropology, Jitske Kramer explains clearly how people shape cultures and how cultures shape people. This is valuable knowledge to understand what happens in the dynamics of fundamental change. Culture is a system that gives meaning and creates order in a chaos of possibilities. During fundamental changes, our truths, beliefs, values and standards are questioned. We feel the chaos, have lost our collective narrative, and people will fight to push *their* version of truth. Or even Truth.

In her analysis of the many crises taking place in the world, Kramer explains how our society's choice for 'economic growth' as a core value, has caused us to forget to take the value of the living world into account in our economic models. Nature has become a financial burden instead of a source of life. The effect of this decision has consequences on all areas and requires impactful changes. Most people acknowledge that it is time to make fundamental changes, but how to do so, which steps to take and which narrative to follow are still up for debate. We have lost our way, and finding new directions turns out to be a *tricky business*.

Paragraphs in Chapter 1:

1.1 Culture: order in the chaos

1.2 Economic growth as global core value

1.3 Any such thing as painless change?

Chapter 2. Liminality: a boundless in-betweenness

Liminality is a very useful anthropological concept that has been waiting in a corner of the academic world to be discovered by the general public. It describes the human experience of change and shows that each fundamental change has three phases: separation, transition and integration. You say goodbye to something, you try to find your way through change, and then integrate what you learned in your daily life. By gaining insight into the dynamics of these phases you gain a better understanding of transformational processes that are different yet comparable for individuals, teams, organizations and societies. This transitional phase is called liminality. It is the threshold between the old and the new, the ambiguous stage of something that is new but not quite there yet, the *betwixt* and *between*.

In this in-between our narrative is shaken and our certainties are questioned. It is often a confusing time in which we search for new beliefs and ways to behave. A time full of power struggles over who decides which truth to follow and what actions to take. In this process it is easy to lose perspective on the difference between fact and fiction, which is dangerous, because without our common stories and rituals we will experience chaos and loneliness. We humans need rituals to transform our collective stories and behavioural patterns. Liminality demands deep learning to be able to transform, but in

modern society we have more liminal-ish activities than proper liminal activities. We call these *liminoid* activities, in which we experience the rush of the ritual but fail to utilize the transformational integration. Understanding the human dynamics of liminal times will make us more effective in our approach to achieving transformational changes.

Paragraphs in Chapter 2:

2.1 Opportunities, dangers and lures of liminality

2.2 Three stages of major change

2.3 Liminoid: hooked on the thrill

2.4 Lines of change

Chapter 3. The trickster: toying with boundaries

During liminal periods we all experience uncertainty and start looking for ways to push existing boundaries. Anthropological research has shown that we all, globally, in every culture, always and everywhere, encounter the same special character in these dynamics. In every mythology, every origin story, every Hollywood movie, you find the *trickster*. The trickster is the master of the threshold. He brilliantly controls the borders and is the archetype of ambiguity with different appearances and various names. Sometimes a villain, sometimes a hero, and often a clumsy and unintentionally comical troublemaker. This chapter shows how trickster charlatans *and* trickster bastards threaten to play and cheat us from every angle. In many cultures we have come to embrace more trickster reasoning and tactics than is good for us. The trickster archetype has taken a central position in our lives and has confused our beliefs on leadership, to the point that we are now collectively lost in a trickster culture. Jack Sparrow is a funny character for a movie but a

bad choice as CEO, and Pinocchio would not make a great president or prime minister. The trickster has a sly appeal that could prove to be fatal. *Tricky business in a tricky world.*

Paragraphs in Chapter 3:

3.1 Trickster: a mythological archetype

3.2 The trickster threat: trickster charlatans and villains

3.3 Seven top trickster tactics

3.4 Lost in a trickster culture

Chapter 4. Shaping our narrative

Reality is the sum of many partial realities that co-exist and can even contradict each other. The world is filled with phenomena of which we can only see parts, and we love to see our small personal pieces of reality as ‘the truth’. A truth that we are more than eager to impose on the people around us. But fundamental changes challenge us to let go of our old narrative and collectively create a new one. A narrative constitutes the sum of our convictions, beliefs and values that drives our behaviour and shapes our world. If we fail to come to a new coherent, collective story, we will get stuck in a continuous journey of searching for who we are and what life really means. *Homo sapiens* are playful beings. We love to tell stories and play with language. Sometimes we don’t take stories too serious and sometimes we fail to take them seriously enough. Unfortunately, we are not that skilled in always making the right distinction. Conspiracy theories and fake news are an inseparable part of transformational processes. It’s up to us to distinguish trickster tactics from actual information. Continued liminality will treat us to many wild stories, and a shaky narrative is tricky business. During liminal

times, we will have to create a new narrative that will challenge old beliefs and put new behaviour forward. Such fundamental changes are accompanied by an inevitable power struggle that challenges us to take courageous decisions. And the need to take responsibility to truly do things differently. True transformations only come when new stories are put into action.

Paragraphs in Chapter 4:

4.1 We are our story

4.2 Wild stories: the lure of conspiracy theories

4.3 Old and new narratives: what should we give up and where will that leave us?

4.4 Narrative of change: the story of the in-between

Chapter 5. Chaos in power

A liminal time is a period of chaos for everyone involved. It brings new power dynamics, new relationships and psychological and social challenges. In this chapter, Jitske Kramer describes why social hierarchy is essential and how it can be turned upside down. She discusses the freedom paradox and shows what happens when the lines between friend and foe become blurred and indistinct.

Paragraphs in Chapter 5:

5.1 Ranking: power relations among people

5.2 Fighting for truth and boundaries

5.3 Fear of freedom: the freedom paradox

5.4 A new normal as a common cause

Chapter 6. Navigating liminal times with courage and creation power

We need leadership to overcome the confusion of liminal times. Leadership for day-to-day activities, but also for extraordinary situations. Day-to-day leadership is action-driven and concerns reshaping and consolidating. Liminal leadership is creation-driven and is about creating and imagining. Both types of leadership are sometimes at odds with each other, and this tension is the main theme of this chapter. In it, we explore what it takes to enable a transformation. We look into four roles to understand what type of leadership is needed during liminal times: managers, leaders, shamans and artists. We learn the difference between clock-time and magical time, how this impacts liminal times and how important campfire conversations and rites of passage are to guiding change processes. Kramer gives examples from various cultures and traditions that teach us how we can successfully support these processes of transformation.

Paragraphs in Chapter 6:

6.1 Changing with courage and creating space for magic

6.2 Rituals and campfires for grounding and new insights

6.3 Liminal leadership: conceive, connect, cultivate

6.4 Kasàlà: a ritual to reconnect

Chapter 7. Lost and found: finding our way out of the maze

Liminality is a confusing period. It feels like we are lost in our own stories and possibilities. In this chapter, Kramer uses the metaphor of being lost to discuss how we can find our way back during these uncertain times of transformation. This is a chapter of guidance and hope. Kramer learned from

a *natural navigator* what to do when you get lost in nature and has translated these lessons for how to navigate liminal times: for yourself, for your family and in organizations. She offers a practical roadmap for finding your way in situations of uncertainty, incorporating skills for doubt, creation, vitality, vulnerability, courage, perseverance, uncertainty, rituals and personal leadership. Finding your way is less about *connecting the dots* than *walking the lines*. Jitske Kramer doesn't show you the way, but challenges you to find your own, following your own lines.

Paragraphs in Chapter 7:

7.1 Acknowledge that you are lost

7.2 Keep calm and don't point fingers

7.3 Build a fire and be frank

7.4 Find your location and map the terrain

7.5 Choose your compass, not your route

7.6 Travel up, down and make it fun

7.7 Beware of sacred cows, trickster tactics and wild stories

7.8 Celebrate your homecoming (and look ahead to the next journey)

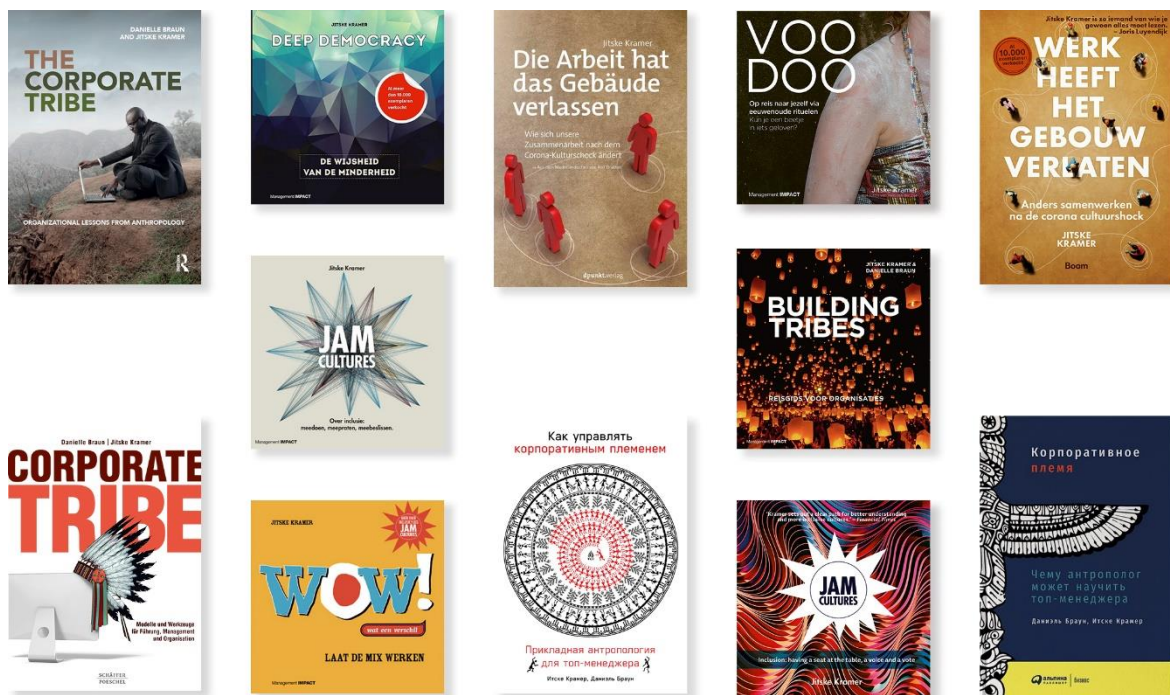
About the author

Jitske Kramer is a corporate anthropologist who travels all over the world to learn from traditional healers, leaders, surprising innovators and random passers-by. She looks at the world and at organizations through the eyes of an anthropologist. Cultural anthropology is the discipline that asks what it means to be a human among humans.



Jitske is always looking for ways to build strong tribes and strengthen relationships. Through challenging keynotes and masterclasses, she brings worldly knowledge and experiences back to the world of organizing, cooperation and leadership, helping to improve the strength and results of individuals and groups (and to make the world a more beautiful place). She trains people so that we never have long and viscous meetings again. In her stories, what is familiar gradually becomes strange. And what is strange becomes familiar.

She previously wrote *Wow!; Diversity Works* (English and Dutch), *Deep Democracy; The Wisdom of the Minority* (Dutch), *Jam Cultures; Inclusion: having a seat at the table, a voice and a vote* (English and Dutch), *Voodoo; Journey To Yourself Through Ancient Rituals* (Dutch) and the bestseller *Work Has Left the Building* (German (dPunkt Verlag) and Dutch). She is also the co-author of the bestseller *The Corporate Tribe; Organizational lessons from anthropology* (published in English (Routledge), German (Schäffer-Poeschel), Russian (Alpina), Dutch, and Thai (Nha Nam)) which won Management Book of the Year in 2016, and the follow-up *Building Tribes; Travel guide for organizations* (Russian (Alpina) and Dutch).



Jitske Kramer is a popular speaker on the international stage, delivering keynote speeches at the Nordic Business Forum and the German professional social media event Xing. She has shared the stage with the likes of Simon Sinek, Erin Meyer, Yuval Noah Harari, Robert Cialdini, Amy Edmondson, Rutger Bregman and Alex Osterwalder.

This is a list of her international keynote speeches:

- **Balkan Business Forum:** keynote Building Tribes for Serbian entrepreneurs, CEOs, CMO, and C-Level managers
- **BayWa.re Global Management Summit:** keynote Building Tribes for their executives worldwide
- **Boskalis:** online keynote Work Has Left the Building for the international HR employees
- **Carrier Benelux:** online keynote Jam Cultures for the entire organization
- **Cevora**, the largest Belgian training center: online keynote Connective Leadership for entrepreneurs
- **Crowe Global Meeting:** keynote Building Tribes for over 200 accountants, auditors and tax professionals, managing partners and international liaison partners
- **Dutch government:** online keynote Work Has Left the Building for most of the ministries and parliament
- **European Space Agency:** online keynote Work Has Left the Building for the directory Navigation of ESA
- **GlobalSkin Conference:** online keynote Work Has Left the Building for international interest groups for patients with skin diseases
- **Janssen Pharmaceutica Belgium:** online keynote Work Has Left the Building for the entire organization
- **Leadership Forum Milan:** keynote Jam Cultures for 1,000 Italian C-Level executives
- **Michael Kors:** online keynote Building Tribes for the sales department
- **New Work Experience, NWX21:** online keynote Building Tribes and Work Has Left the Building for Xing (the German equivalent of LinkedIn) – <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ARvZyKc3NTg>

- **New Work Experience, NWX22:** keynote Building Future-Proof Cultures for German entrepreneurs and CEOs in front of a live audience of over 2,000 people
- **Nordic Business Forum:** keynote Building Future-Proof Cultures for C-Level executives in front of a live audience of 7,000 and 20,000 people online – <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9rHQC5gObY0>
- **Oslo Business Forum:** Working Cultures after Corona, in front of a live audience of 500 and 5,000 people online, 50% C-Level executives
- **Philips International:** keynote for International Women’s Day on Tribes and Decision-Making for their international employees
- **Riga Business Summit and Vilnius Business Summit:** keynote Worldly Wisdom for top government officials, business leaders, technology developers and language researchers
- **Samsung Airco:** online keynote Work Has Left the Building for international B2B managers
- **Schneider Electric:** online keynote Work Has Left the Building for their international sales teams
- **Vistage:** keynote D&I Insights and Building Tribes at their National CEO Conference in front of a live audience of 150 and 400 people online
- **Vistage:** keynote Jam Cultures at their National CEO Conference – People and Culture, in front of a live audience of 300 CEOs and over 400 CEOs online
- **VRT, Belgium broadcaster:** online keynote Work Has Left the Building for the entire organization