

*Who do you think you are today - identity and work. An fe₃ mindstretch™
13 October 2009*

The views expressed here are the personal opinions of the individuals and not necessarily those of their organisations.

The following people were present at this mindstretch™ :

Alison (formerly Leonard Cheshire)
Angela (Transport for London)
Debbie (NHS Blood and Transplant)
Gary (fe₃ consulting)
Karen (fe₃ consulting)
Keith (Intellego Health)
Paul (Ministry of Justice)
Vanessa (Chevron)
Virginia (freelance communications consultant)

Our venue was very generously provided by NHSBT in the person of Debbie Greatorex.

After introductions Karen presented the following quote:

"I found out today that it is a lot easier being a salesman for 3M than for a little jobber no one has ever heard of. When you don't have to waste time justifying your existence or explaining why you are here, it gives you a certain amount of self-assurance. And, I discovered that I came across warmer and friendlier. It made me feel good and enthusiastic to be "somebody" for a change."

(Garbett, 1988)

The quote illustrates that what this person thinks about his company and what he thinks others think of it affect his perception of himself as a salesman.

Karen then outlined the agenda for the session:

- Identity and identification - same or different?
- Three frames for identity research - including "the dark side" of identity
- Measuring identity...or not
- Acting out of "character"
- Public and private sector differences?

Karen then introduced a kind of definition from Ybema et al. 2009:

“In the most general of terms, the formation of an ‘identity’ appears to involve the discursive articulation of an ongoing iteration between social and self definition.”

... which may translate into English as follows:

The formation of identity happens through ...

- Negotiating social situations, influenced by cultural conditioning, class affiliations, religious and moral codes
- Embracing roles, emotional distancing, position taking, adopting dress codes and rule breaking

In other words, identity emerges from the interaction of the environment and individual choices. Karen then asked Vanessa to describe herself. The interesting thing about this was how contextual it was (Vanessa described herself as a home-owner, having moved house the previous week) and also how it was not necessarily how other people might describe you (Vanessa, for example, did not refer to her gender).

Karen went on to introduce the subject of personal identity, with this slide:



Some initial thoughts on identity - personal

- People have many “identities”
- People want to maintain the continuity of their self concepts over time and across situations
- People value a sense that they are internally coherent - to maintain this integrity, people want to act authentically, expressing the characteristics they think they have
- The strength of identities in individuals are circumstance/context specific

Identities are multiple - they can be influenced and formed by gender, geography, job, sexuality, personality, religion. Continuity and coherence may explain some of the entrenched attitudes in change - it might be helpful in change circumstances if programme designers looked at the potential changes in worker identity that the changes require. It also means that a member’s perception of his or her organisation’s identity adds or subtracts from the

continuity that they experience over time....although not everyone agrees that identities ARE stable over time

Identities are also context specific. For example, you can be Catholic and a patron of the arts, but depending on the situation one identity is likely to be more salient in one situation than another. (Markus and Kunda 1986)

Angela thought that there must be boundaries in flexibility. Alison agreed, adding that they could not otherwise be internally coherent. Karen emphasised the point of context and salience. Vanessa wondered if they could be flexible in certain combinations - a bit like Rubik's cube. Angela thought that key life experiences might provoke an identity shift.

Virginia and Keith explored the analogy of the chameleon: people may learn to adopt new colours for new situations, influenced by others' reactions to them. This led Angela to think about the way we can actually put on colours through wearing a (real or virtual) uniform, which Debbie was analogous to armour. We were reminded of the recent story of a young soldier who went to his best friend's funeral wearing a dress, because they had made a pact to do so for each other.

Karen asked if one could be true to one's values but change identity. The view emerged that this could be done by adopting specific behaviours. Alison thought this would be a good thing to do as long as it was conscious - rather than just adopting a role.

Organisational scholars are increasingly concerned with organisational, managerial, professional and occupational identities. We went on to look at the notion that identity is socially constructed, so then also always provisional. It is often also described in rather crude terms. Ybema et al consider that how we talk about identity and even how we envisage it ourselves is often through the most black and white of descriptions, which depend on the verbal articulation of the individual, allowing us to categorise them as similar or other and to stereotype them.

And the differences are articulated not only as different, but also as less acceptable, respectable and sometimes less powerful; for example, working differently to the norm in a masculine, industrial setting may get a manager described as "pink and fluffy" or even "new age".

Keith wondered if the ability to adapt to social interactions was an indicator of mental good health. Angela thought that it could be, but sometimes the context can take you to the edge of what you can cope with e.g. social situations in male-dominated environments, can create a tension. Karen observed that diversity legislation might have unintended consequences in terms of identity.

Karen then moved the focus on to organisational identity. She pointed out that seeing something as an organisation means endowing it with an identity. But organisational identity also changes over time, according to Ybema et al - they grow, acquire other companies, and respond to external threats. One example is how charities and arts organisations are changing to deal with a harsher economic environment. Karen referred to the TV programme, *Mary, Queen of Shops*, which featured Oxfam shops being given a makeover which alienated the volunteers who served in them. Alison said that she had done a very poor job of engaging the volunteers with the need for change.

Organisational identification - according to Kreiner et al (2006), organisations provide some element of identity which is otherwise lacking elsewhere in their lives. Karen quoted from Glynn (1998): "an individual's need to maintain a social identity derived from membership in a larger, more impersonal social category of a particular collective... and incorporate salient organisational attributes as part of the self."

Keith referred back to the beginning of the session and thought that the person quoted gave away that he needed the kudos of a large company - perhaps because he had insufficient belief in his own ability to create credibility - but there's a cost of being part of another (organisational) identity. Virginia thought this would be less of an issue if the values of the organisation were aligned to one's own. Vanessa thought that this was something of a two-way street, in that one can become aware of something important to the organisation and then adopt it as a personal value e.g. safety- consciousness.

Debbie wondered whether the organisational identity might be a false one, and thought there is a question about the extent to which it is explicitly made part of the way the organisation describes itself.

We moved on to consider the concept of identification, defined as: "When a person's self concept contains the same attributes as those in the perceived organisational identity, we define this connection as organisational identification."

(Dutton, Dukerich, Harquail, 1994)

Karen pointed out that work on organisational identification is often focused on full time workers employed by and working in a single organization, so there may be differences same for contractors, freelancers and consultants who are mainly part of the client organisation, rather than their employer. A lot of research positions identification alongside commitment and engagement - with links to positive organisational outcomes, although there are some downsides to organisational identification.

Organisational identity can affect employees' well being and behaviour - sometimes positively, as shown in the 3M quote, but also negatively, if the reputation of the organisation is perceived poorly. Coverage in the New York Times on "Companies that people hate" reports that Exxon employees found themselves expected to defend the company's actions in social situations. As the article says:

"It was only recently that executives at that company were able to admit their place of employment without the fear of being attacked by environmentalists infuriated by the company's handling of last year's oil spill at Prince William Sound. Slowly but surely, Exxon executives began to reappear at cocktail parties across the country, and occasionally, even had a good time.

Employees working at Exxon's credit card centre also suffered - they received oil soaked, cut up credit cards. When people identify strongly with their work organisation, they experience these sorts of incidents personally."

Keith pointed out that identity and identification can also occur at national level - and be subject to change caused by external forces. He gave the example of the impact of Hong Kong on the Chinese identity. Debbie thought that modelling could also be involved and that this meant there was a cross-over with culture.

Turning back to the issue of negative, imposed identification, Paul mentioned the demonising of Lehman Brothers' employees, pointing out that the politicians had inflamed the situation when there was a need to be objective and rational - an example of politicians and journalists feeding our desire for heroes and villains. Alison thought this was possibly an example of the dark side of identification, when individuals are deliberately made scapegoats for the behaviour of their organisations.

We considered how the financial community seems to have bounced back from their public castigation. Virginia thought this was an example of how a strong constituency can insulate its members from public outcry, helping them to tune out any criticism. Angela said this would be reinforced for City and Canary Wharf employees, who work in what is, in effect, a ghetto.

Paul commented that the popular reaction typifies our need to simplify what are often complex issues and to brand a group of people as culpable. Vanessa agreed, adding that it went as far as affecting tellers in bank branches, who were clearly not instrumental in creating the crisis. Angela thought that they might have been better able to cope if they had had an organisational sub-identity - at team level.

We went on to discuss the interaction between role and identity. Angela thought it might depend on the immediacy and impact of the role on the

performer, giving the example of care workers. Virginia thought it might also depend on one's level in the hierarchy, and wondered if the Enron cleaners had been affected by the crisis in their company at a personal level (i.e. to a greater extent than it caused them concern for their job security). We recalled that studies tend to be on office workers, rather than cleaners and temporary workers. Karen pointed out that the impact may be related to the salience of the organisation in relation to one's personal beliefs and values, whilst Angela thought there might be a link with perceptions of work-life balance.

We turned next to considering research into identity. Karen introduced the subject. She pointed out that there are some uneasy thoughts that the idea of identity may well be a "fad" - fashionable but without telling us anything new. Mats Alvesson believes that identity scholarship does not substitute identity for culture, attitudes, beliefs or values.

In an introduction to a special issue of the journal *Organisation*, Alvesson considers that currently, there are three approaches to study in the field of identity:

Technical - which you might call normative, too - which looks at the links between identity and identification and managerial outcomes, and the potential to improve organisational effectiveness. For example, identification levels can affect decision making and behaviour - as in the 3M salesman - and group cohesion. This type of research often looks at organisational identity - and how it can be measured.

Interpretive - which is about how we communicate to generate and transform meaning. There is little concern about the instrumental utility of such knowledge and the approach focuses on how people craft identity through interaction or how they weave "narratives of self" with others. This type of research looks at identity work.

The critical or emancipatory approach is where attention is focussed on power relationships and in revealing ways in which people can be liberated from repressive relationships which hinder their individual agency, or action. Critical scholars have approached identity as a powerful way to understand control and resistance and this type of research looks at ways in which management seeks to control and regulate identity - Karen called this the dark side of identity. It carries some of the hallmarks of emotion work - where people are asked to become something which is in line with company policy or brand but works against their nature. A fascinating journal article by David Collinson suggests that by engaging in resistance, employees begin to construct an alternative, more positive sense of self to that provided or prescribed by the organisation (see Disney).

Alvesson and Willmott (2002) recently argued that identity regulation is a central feature of organisational control in contemporary “post bureaucratic” organisations - particularly in terms of the idea of “career”

We then looked at whether identity can be measured. Karen introduced some approaches to this question. The technical approach looks at the similarity of values perceived by the individual and asks them to consider how closely aligned they are with those they believe they possess. Sometimes this is through questions on shared interest, although this doesn't seem like quite the same thing; it looks as though it has been made more instrumental because of the perspective researchers are coming from.

But if identity is transient then surely any measurement must fluctuate over time and what you get on one occasion may be different from another

Ybema et al - believe that the study of identity often fails to take into account the external context and macro-situations. So they believe that identity study, whether at an individual or organisational level is not about the “essence” of an individual, but the *presentation* of self in everyday life. Any legitimacy in identity measurement is a result of the actor's CONTINUING capacity to enact the identity. Karen illustrated their point of view with this quote:

(Identity is) “a socially negotiated temporary outcome of the dynamic interplay between internal strivings and external prescriptions between self presentation and labelling by others, between achievement and ascription and between regulation and resistance.”

(Ybema et al, 2009)

Keith commented from his experience of working for the Industrial Society. He said that its employees identified with its core purpose of being for the good of industry, but identified themselves as improving skills and capability in an almost charitable way. Vanessa said that people in the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority behaved in a similar way - there was almost a disconnection between the organisational identity and that of its professional employees.

Keith went on to say that, despite the apparent lack of cohesion between organisational and self identity, there was a significant sense of loss when the Industrial Society disbanded. Angela thought this implied that there was also a significant identification with the organisation's identity, which came to the fore when challenged.

Vanessa observed that a similar pattern may be yet to come for the QCA in its new guise as the QCDA; although there has been constant change, many of the same professionals have been with the organisation throughout. Alison felt that the narrative is more important than the name of the organisation and

Angela thought that it didn't really matter if the performance of individuals is good. Keith pointed out that professional/ occupational identity is often divorced from a specific organisation: for example GPs may not see themselves as business runners, even if that's what the NHS wants them to become. Karen mentioned that a similar shift in identity is also being caused in other public sector organisations e.g. head teachers.

Debbie said that her organisation uses some profiling tools that show the differences between work v home and stress v normal situations. Paul said he had used the Thomas International instrument in this context also.

He thought that identity might have a number of levels of visibility:

- Self (some visible, some hidden)
- Attitudes (interpretable)
- Behaviours (observable)

Perhaps engagement happens when individual values align with organisational ones - referring back to an earlier mindstretch™. Karen thought that organisations need to tread a careful path when they think about doing work on values - unless they are articulated from within.

Paul found it odd that we continue to focus on competencies in recruitment rather than values, as the latter are far harder to change. Alison agreed, adding that it is as much a problem for the candidate as the recruiter. Angela also agreed and thought that asking questions that explore values should be a part of the recruitment process.

We went on to explore what happens when it is necessary for people to behave "out of character". For call centres overseas, we can see how "virtual selves" have been artificially created to suit corporate requirements - in India call centre workers are employed by international organisations to answer phone queries from callers living in Europe and the US. Management attempts to disguise the nationality of the call centre workers include giving the employees Anglicised names, training them in the appropriate accent, and having them read local papers so that they can chat about the weather and news. In short, they are required to deny their sense of self and take on a whole new identity defined by the organisation. Keith and Angela wondered how they balance being an actor with trust and integrity. Keith also found the whole notion quite distasteful - almost a modern form of slavery - whilst Gary found it bizarre that any organisation would think that an offshore call centre could give a good service to customers of geographically-based services, such as The Trainline. Keith agreed, adding that Cable & Wireless have had bad feedback and have brought their call centres onshore.

Collinson's research showed that offshore workers frequently restricted the reporting of accident-related information in an environment that prioritised

safety above all other considerations. Oil rig workers felt compelled to conceal information about safety and/or downplay the definition of accidents and near misses, as a defensive survival strategy in the face of the platform blame culture. Precisely because such practices constituted a sacking offence, workers also disguised their opposition and their concealment strategies. In this sense, performance assessment systems can be seen to create employee "performances" - paradoxically, in their concern to survive asymmetrical power relations, blame culture and institutionalised inequalities, platform workers' defensive systems could threaten their own physical safety. Angela thought this was very disturbing as some UK industrial health and safety processes are based on learning from the North Sea rig operators. Vanessa responded by saying that in recent times, operators have changed their processes to include near misses in a way that focuses attention on recognising the issue and investigating it more collaboratively.

A really interesting study by Clarke et al (2009) focused on a plant in an engineering organisation called BCP. Although the organisation had 38,000 workers in more than 30 countries, the case study data was collected from the aerospace division which employed 1500 workers on a small island a few miles from the British mainland. It therefore had many of the characteristics of a small, single-site business - a strong sense of community, high social cohesion, a blurring of boundaries between home and work and "arguably, a sense of "cloistered complacency"". This was all shattered by an announcement that the workforce was to be, made on 14 Feb 2002 and referred to by employees as the St Valentine's Day massacre.

This study looked at what happens to managers' identities when they are forced to make redundancies. As the study noted, the managers have an identity in line with the "rational-economic corporate discourse"; the often taken for granted "market" meta-narrative which legitimises their actions, simultaneously confronts them with the immorality of taking away the jobs of friends and neighbours. Emotionally, this is impossible to deal with and the integrity of self would only be preserved by abandoning this managerial identity. To resolve the contradiction in their self identity, managers developed an "alternative" meta-narrative which enables them to re-author themselves as moral beings - people keeping the company alive for other workers on the site; drawing on competing identities of professionalism/unprofessionalism; of emotion and dispassion; or being people and business orientated. "It was not that their identities had ever lacked saliency, but that what counted as moral agency was not fixed, but dynamic and - with constraints - discursively negotiable."

Finally we turned to the question of whether public and private sector identities are different. Karen introduced the question. She pointed out that many public sector reforms are seen by some commentators as an attempt to install or reinforce features of identity in the public service - including making

it "special" - with certain characteristics or combinations of characteristics that are different from those of others.

Not only is the public sector possibly different in approach and in purpose from private sector organisations, but in any case, people will see their workplace differently, even within the same organisation - there is a core assumption among some authors (e.g. Ashforth and Mael, Dutton and Dukerich) that people's sense of memberships in the social group "the organisation" shapes their self concepts - which would mean that different environments would shape people's self concepts differently.

However, Karen was unable to find any study that specifically answers this question. However, what might be the case is that although public sector workers and private sector workers create different identities for themselves, the process by which identification happens may be the same - the comparison of individual values and perceived organisational values, the need to belong to the social group and the context which supports, reshapes and may occasionally disagree with the sense of self of the individual - identification as defined by Dutton and Dukerich doesn't necessarily mean PRIDE in an affiliation with the organisation - it may also mean a sense of shame, disgrace or embarrassment

Paul thought that people go into public sector roles for three main reasons:

- To have a realistic prospect of lifelong employment
- Because they see it as a relatively cushy number, fits with their requirement for work-life balance
- Because they want to serve society (he thought this was a minority)

Debbie agreed with this in general, but thought there may be a little more motivation towards giving service in the NHS. Keith strongly agreed, adding that there is the added benefit of rapid promotion for the ambitious.

Summing up, Karen concluded that there are differences, but not the ones to which people tend to point. More important and significant differences can probably be found by comparing large and small organisations - the bigger the organisation, the more diverse are likely to be perceptions of its identity.