

Leadership and group identity

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Resumen

Una de las mayores responsabilidades que tiene un líder es mantener y evolucionar la identidad del grupo en el que interactúa. Para lograrlo, debe conocer diferentes estilos de liderato que le permitan llevar sus ideas al grupo en forma exitosa y realizarlas en trabajo en equipo. En este artículo se discute la importancia de la identidad y como variados estilos de liderato, correctamente alineados, permiten lograr mantenerla y evolucionarla.

Palabras clave: líder, identidades de grupo, grupo de trabajo, equipo, estilos de liderato

Abstract

Preserving and evolving the identity of a group, within its context, is one of the greatest responsibilities of a leader. To accomplish this, the leader has to be able to adapt to various leadership styles which align to the needs of the group and members and contribute to foster an atmosphere of teamwork. The aim of the leader must be to lead the group to the successful realization of their perceived identity.

Key words: Leader, group identity, teamwork, leadership styles

Identity is one of the most important factors in a person's life. It is what defines the ways we react, perspectives in life, and content and processes for decision making which will affect life immediately or in the future. Identity, internal and external perceptions, are constantly framing personal references for living. The progression of actions within these references (internal, external, or combined) will confirm or invalidate perceptions for living as influenced by the evolving identity. If confirmed, identity will be reaffirmed and actions will become repetitive patterns. If action progressions do not confirm perceptions for living, identity will be eroded or related elements will be discarded (Baray, 2009, p. 625). The same applies

to a group up to the point of "[placing] greater value on means that are effective at communicating group identity to other groups" (Ledgerwood & Liviatan, 2010, p. 401). The signals of those *means* will flow within the group keeping identity alive. They state who you are and your role in the group.

The identity of a group is vital for its cohesiveness because it is an interdependent link (Taylor et al, 1983, pp 188-189). Anything against the identity of a group will rupture its social shield, will penetrate, and disturb its unity. This unity is nurtured and protected by the leader. If a leader does not recognize a threat that may come up to break unity, he is failing the group by not fulfilling this expected role. The

leader will have to upkeep his role to prevent this rupture of the protective shield that identity is. It is in the nature of leaders to tune to and pick up threatening ambiguous signals and make interpretations to pass them on to the other members of a group. Thus, the ones who give resolution to ambiguity and take a course of action to solve the ambiguous situation (resolve problems, apply creativity) become leaders. If there is a need in the “tribe”, whoever devises the way to resolve it, will gain higher levels of influence and become leader.

In modern days, when a corporate officer interprets signals in a financial statement and gains access to needed funds to stay in business, he is doing that share; or when a person in the field of quality sticks to and enforces the specifications to prevail over immediate profits to give the benefit to a growing body of customers, he is doing that share; if a member of a group has the right relations to get needed uncommon results, he is doing that share. The group will grant the leader privileges and rank, but he will have the burden of group expectations for making a better identity or at least sustaining the present one.

All leaders who raise *values* and *do what is right* are saving the face for the group and preserving its identity. Values are strongholds of identity which cannot be waxed. Other identity elements may be prone to be reworked, redefined, restructured, and repositioned in their priorities—renewal is constantly needed for the operational elements. These values provide the identity definition which is a continuous need for a group. “[O]rganizations form local cultures of their own that are of significance for their functioning” (Alvesson, 1990, p 31). The “group

identity can be conceptualized as a goal toward which group members strive by seeking out socially recognized symbols of group identity” (Ledgerwood & Liviatan, 2010, p. 402). Then the organization will feel that it is in motion, changing, alive, uncompromised, and able to survive. It will be in a wave of constant learning; it will be an organization of constant transformations mediated by the leadership-followership processes (Wang & Huan, 2009, pp. 380, 383).

To make sure that the organization rides in the waves of constant learning, careful interventions (Piotrowski & Vodanovich, 2001, p. 310; Block & Borges, 2002, p. 470) will have to be made, along with keeping its cohesiveness and a strong mutual interdependence among the members of the organization (O’Reilly III & Caldwell, 1985, pp. 193, 194, 196). The members create their group stereotyping and particular biases which give them a specific identity. (Ledgerwood & Liviatan, 2010, p. 402). These interventions will need constant communication flow with the organization’s own symbols, as they are recognized within the organization as part their identity. They affirm identity and strengthen the group’s cohesiveness. The “individuals [will be] motivated to define their group in certain ways in order to fulfill needs for self-esteem, optimal distinctiveness, or epistemic clarity” (Ledgerwood & Liviatan, 2010, p. 402). The role of the leader is to sustain and reaffirm identity. The leader need not be appointed because “whenever a group of people come together a leader-follower relationship naturally develops” (Vugt, 2006, p. 354); “This has led various experts to conclude that leadership is a universal human

behavior” (Vugt quoting Bass 1990 and Hollander 1983, 2006, p. 354) which originates in adaptation (Vugt, 2006, p. 367). The generally higher social intelligence (or disposition to problem resolution, creativity) of the leaders (Vugt, 2006, p. 361) opens the way to identify the elements for keeping it and thus saving unity by considering the identity concerns of the followers.

By perceptive of the identity concerns of the followers, the leaders can modify the approach-style to pursue the satisfaction. The leader can promote collaboration between the various departments (Windischer et al, 2009, p. 89) to promote teamwork and intellectual crossbreeding. This also helps the decision-making process since “decisions that groups make are better than decisions that individuals working alone make” (Nibler & Harris, 2003, pp. 613, 614) and prompts a conciliatory disposition (Nibler & Harris, 2003, p. 615). It will be very important for members ranked as influential (leaders) to tone down to let other members exercise critical thinking (Callaway & Esser, 1984, p. 157) in order to prevent a group thinking environment in which cohesiveness promotes the group to adopt unilateral thinking. This tends to produce deficient decisions (Callaway & Esser, 1984, p. 157, 162). Identity has to flow into all members, directly or indirectly.

The key factor to keeping the identity flowing is power sharing. If power sharing is truncated, manipulated, twisted, unidirectionally formulated, the dignity of the members will be impaired. This will produce reluctance and resistance; these will have to be overcome with acceptance and commonality (Dundon & Ryan, 2010, p.

563-565). Power as a control factor has to be put aside to progress effectively in the leadership-followership process. The use of power will generate a non contributing attitude (Rahim & Afza, 2001, p. 611).

All of these forces—and maybe some more—will be constantly interacting and will complicate the analysis. A simpler way to analyze the group is to examine its outcomes as those of a dynamic system.

When a group is conceptualized as a system, it can be seen as an input-output unit; it is energized to produce. The group has the responsibility of harnessing the energizing factors. This energy procurement makes the group cohesive. The approach that follows in order to get resources and the way those resources are managed give the group an identity. The outcomes show the world the nature of the group’s identity and display the representative symbol of the its accomplishments (Tziner, 2002, pp. 205, 206). These accomplishments have to be constantly measured in order to keep the identity in a check-and-balance monitoring and for constant improvement (Shek, et al, 2008, pp. 162, 164). Otherwise the group could miss its identity references. Identity has to be well established.

Once identity is well established and defined, the leadership-followership process can be matched with it to prevent obsolescence of leadership. Since identity, along with cohesiveness, will be affected by group member dynamics, both will be in constant change in a time continuum. Thus, the leadership-followership process has to be paired appropriately in this continuum.

Cohesiveness and identity will change if external or internal factors change, altering the input-output relationship of the system. The leadership-followership process will be affected in concertedly. Leadership-followership approaches will be adopted, aligned with the corresponding identity. As a dynamic process, then, approaches may change as necessary to prevent obsolescence in the leadership-followership process. Once the right approaches are aligned, management functions can become operative. The resources can be controlled “and provide order and consistency” (Northouse, 2007, p. 10). There are a few leadership-followership approaches to rationally choose from.

A leader could be appointed or could emerge as somebody who fits with the identity of the group (Northouse, 2007, p. 6). Whether a leader was assigned to a formal positions of authority within an organization, or whether he a emerged because of how other group members reacted to him, he will be doing leadership. He can do so because of a leadership-followership process, or because of his traits. These particular *traits* make the leader *unique*; the process happens in the context of the *dynamics in the group and circumstances* (Northouse, 2007, pp. 15-26).

The leader working with a trait process approach gains followership with his personal attributes. Based on the composition and needs of the group, the traits become functionally effective. Other leaders satisfy their groups with skills. The skills make them competent to handle the tasks whereas the traits make them personable. The skills-leaders handle his tasks with technical,

human, and conceptual (planning and organizing) skills (Northouse, 2007, pp. 39-56).

Other leaders will have a strong emphasis in realizing the task while others put their emphasis on the human factor: the first will emphasize the goal; the second emphasis on the comfort of group members. Based on fluctuating changes in the situations of the group, the leader may adapt the style to situation demands —may direct (imparting orders) or provide support (facilitate) in order to accomplish goals. If more mature in handling the situations, his processes may flow in delegation, supporting, coaching, and directing (Northouse, 2007, pp. 91-101). The situations may demand different styles. The leader will, then, match the situation with the style to process the situation within the context of three contingencies: relations with the group members, tasks to accomplish the goal(s), and power to grant recognition or demote the status of the followers (Northouse, 2007, pp. 113-120). A contrasting-leadership style will go away from the leader to the followers’ performance, guided by the leader.

On this contrasting style, the leader gives the follower a path to accomplish a rewarding goal, expecting good performance from them. The leader is the one with expectations to be satisfied by the follower. It will be the role of the leader to adapt to the style that will best enable the followers to accomplish expected results. The leader has to be careful in matching the skills of the follower with the task requirements. (Northouse, 2007, pp. 127-138).

On the context in which followers are mature and can interact

freely with the leaders, an exchange happens in which both gain new insights to what each has to do. Both come out more developed from the exchange and become better leaders and better followers—like mutual mentoring. It's a symbiotic relationship that becomes synergistic in its outcome (Northouse, 2007, pp. 151-162). A deeper and more transcendental outcome may be necessary than what is accomplished with the exchanges borne from mutual mentoring. Then the leader has to resort to motivation schemes, charismatic moves, and developing followers. The end result wanted by the leader is to *transform*. On this leadership process, the leader has to take holistic steps in a visionary way. Any leadership delivery can be chosen as appropriate to make the *transformation*. Within the schemes of this leadership role, some transactions (exchanges) may be necessary, as the way to reward the doers or sponsors. The key note in this process is to nurture members in the dimensions convenient to the system—leader, cause, and follower (Northouse, 2007, pp. 175-195).

Once the group has solidified as a group, the leader has to keep it orchestrating in the right tune. The leader has to make members aware of their interdependence, their commonalities, their goals, and their identity as an organization. The leader has to be alert to group deficiencies and to threatening changes surrounding them. Every member has to be alert to internal and external matters that may affect the group and have feedback as a style of life to take remedial actions (Northouse, 2007, pp. 207- 227).

Despite of all the theories types, classes, styles, and kinds of processes,

all leaders display cognitive ability, capacity to solve problems, creativity, initiative, and a functional knowledge of human nature for effective relations. These are essential to tune identity problems, use processes and traits successfully and prevent obsolescence. Pairing the type of leadership so that it satisfies identity needs required by the group will make the leader prevent him becoming obsolete, and provoke organizational changes.

Leaders have to be careful to develop an organizational culture able to assimilate functional changes easily so that it can comfortably grow in positive directions. Centralizing the flow of cultural factors into one person can be too limiting. Filling it with bureaucracy will stifle talents, although it will simplify performance and eliminate judgmental risks. Personalizing the culture in the interests of personal execution will be too micro in its effects. The way to go should be to centralize the culture of the organization in its social role and express it with transcendence, with sensibility, and with a spirit beyond material gains:

“Profit is not the proper end and aim of management—it is what makes all of the proper ends and aims possible. The real reason for our existence is that we provide something which is unique [that makes a contribution to society]” (Collins & Porras, 2004, p. 56).

Johnson and Johnson Corporation follow a line of investigation out of the commercial framework it does research in “with a view to aiding the progress of the art of healing.” (Collins & Porras, 2004, p. 58).

Eli Lilly claims to “make medicines as if life depended on it” and sustains that “values are, quite simply, the core of both [people] and institutions”. They hold the position that “Lilly produces medicines to meet patients' health care needs, and we believe that it is critical for patients to have access to our products, which save and improve lives” (Lilly's website, 2010).

After getting the people to adopt similar ways of thinking and making these popular among all members, some further steps are necessary to affirm the organization's identity. All the statements above make a frame of reference, like theories that help us to understand the world around us. They define a social role within the context of the social group in which the organization sits in. But “The best theories are at their core solidly grounded in action” (Fullan, 2008, p. 1). To prevent discontinuity due to changes in the succession of leaders, the organization has to build “a robust set of interrelated management practices and philosophies that provide advantage above and beyond the ideas or inspirations of single individuals” (Fullan, 2008, p. 109). The culture of the organization has to link with a transcendent operational concept lived and used by the leaders at all levels of the organization (Fullan, 2008, pp. 109-110). The interdependent factors of the organization have to be considered as parts of a working system (Fullan, 2008, 110). All the members have to feel that

- they are valued,
- their interaction produces knowledge and generates commitment,

- their collective and individual capacities build up,
- they are constantly learning in the job,
- their relationships are transparent and progressive.

All these conditions are dynamically active and make the group members learn and teach to new colleagues (Fullan, 2008, p. 110). But transparency is not to be taken lightly and looked into only as “measures of results reported”. Transparency goes into “[learning] the processes and practices to achieve those desired results” (Fullan, 2008, p. 93). The results are shared openly. If a weakness is found, it is investigated; the cause is determined and corrected to make a stronger system (Fullan, 2008, pp. 94-99). Thinking *system* makes a difference in learning perspectives.

When the organization thinks *system*, the members see wholeness in motion, motored by the motivation to keep its identity. This can be illustrated with the bolts of a car's motor: If three different engineers design each one of the three bolts that hold the motor of a car, each one of them will do a design independent of each other. If one engineer does the bolt design, it will be a single design for the three holding points (Senge, 2006, p. 19). The single design gives identity and unity: one wrench size will do the work, and it will be more efficient. Identity, unity, and efficiency are good attributes for an organization. The simpler it is, the more expeditious it can operate and the more flexible it will be for changes.

In any organization changes happen constantly. Paradigms, mission, purpose, slogans, metaphor, strategies— to name some—are revised (Amir &

Merry, 1986, p. 289). Adaptation is the rule for survival, and this means change. For all those changes to, and happen in survival, keeping identity is necessary. The leader has to anticipate all this to plan effectively and save face with the right identity. Accordingly, the leader has to adapt to guide the organization within the right paths to be successful. The leader cannot allow a bureaucratic set up that may provoke organizational atrophy. The leader has to be attentive to have the right organizational structure (Daft, 2010, pp. 356-359) and takes appropriate steps to prevent atrophy.

To avoid failure the leader has to:

- keep an appropriate attitude in relations held with followers,
- keep an environment of trust,
- respect their dignity,
- be open to followers participation in change processes,
- believe in their capacity to reason,
- be inclusive of the followers in all matters (O'Toole, 1996, p. 37).

But under neither of these circumstances will the leader act amorally, nor will he yield to relativism; on the contrary, he will keep respect for others as an absolute in their relations. As an example of this, when President Mandela was asked what he had learned after years of imprisonment, his reply was: "People respond to how you treat them. If you treat them with respect, and ignore the negatives, you get a positive reaction" (O'Toole, 1996, p. 98). O'Toole adds to Mandela's reply: "this is a restatement of the fundamental... principle that trust derives from the

respect a leader displays for follower. Respect for follower is made manifest by listening to them, faithfully representing them, pursuing their noblest aspirations, keeping promises made to them, and never doing harm to them or to their cause" (O'Toole, 1996, pp. 98-99). As quoted by O'Toole, Mandela rounds up saying: "I am your servant. I don't come to you as a leader, as one above others. We are a great team. Leaders come and go, but the organization and the collective leadership that has looked after the fortunes and reversals of this organization will always be there. And the ideas I express are not ideas invented in my own mind" (O'Toole, 1996, p. 99). Leaders know they are so because they gained followers. Their responsibility is to keep fresh the values of identity.

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