

Theory and Application in Organizational Identity and Formation Processes

Identity is currently one of the most popular topics in organizational research. Identity is a central concept and affects the functional aspects of organizations, such as leadership, meaning and commitment, loyalty and belonging, strategy and decision-making and stability vs. change. In addition, identity affects relationships within the group and between groups in the organization.

Like people, organizations deal with questions of defining identity, identity crises, and continually moving - whether conscious or not - on the axes between personal identity, professional/managerial identity, team identity, and organizational identity. Therefore the aim of this paper is to answer the following question:

What are the characteristics of the process used to expose and form the "inner compass" that allows the organization, managers, and employees to serve high organizational effectiveness?

What is organizational identity?

The concept of organizational identity is a relatively new concept, which was first mentioned in a groundbreaking article from 1891 by Albert and Whetten. The researchers defined organizational identity as characteristics that are central and stable to the enterprise, which set it apart from other organizations. Later, other theorists have emphasized precisely the dynamic and changing nature of organizational identity. They re-conceptualized organizational identity as a loose and unstable concept, often re-configured and changed by the organization's members. On the one hand, a strong sense of clear identity provides organizations with a "Compass". Meaning, having confidence to be proactive and avoid or overcome crises. On the other hand, focusing on the dynamic definition of organizational identity refers to the ability of the organization to adapt to the changing contemporary reality.

Guiding principles in the construction of organizational identity

Organizational identity design as part of a process of investigation and crisis:

According to Erik Erikson's Psychosocial Development each one of the stages of psychosocial development is marked by a conflict for which successful resolution will result in a favorable outcome, and by an important event that this conflict resolves itself around. Erickson also notes that the period of "identity crisis" that occurs during adolescence, allows for experimentation and error. This is significant for further human identity development.

James Mercier presents identity development as depending on two basic routes - crisis and commitment. Crisis refers to the search and examination of the question of human identity, the choice between occupations, beliefs and so on. Commitment refers to the degree of active investment in the selected occupation and beliefs in the person's connection to the cohesive self-identity. Both Ericsson and Mercier center their theories on the topic of crisis which the person must go through in order to form his or her identity.

The process of organizational identity formation can be referred to as an analogy to the process that a person goes through. Like people, organizations and employees are required to go through crises involving inquiry, trial, and undermining and re-crystallization of commitment, in order to form and shape their unique identity. A golden opportunity to engage on organizational identity is during crisis situations, changes, or significant crossroads during the organizational life including natural changes in the organization.

Especially at this time and routinely, the role of the Human Resource Manager is to generate and facilitate this dialogue. This is done through questioning and dialogue among members of the organization up and down.

Shaping organizational identity using a dialogue between people and identities in the organizational space

Organizational identity is actually a product of collective construction. In other words, a joint investigation by members of the organization examining the organization's core characteristics (major, unique and stable) with which its members identify or are identified with at different levels. Organizational identity formation is created in a bridging between individual identity construction and collective identity in the organization. Thus, the process of organizational identity formation is created through the merging between identities in the organization.

Creating a coherent, stable, and sustained identity requires a joint investigation and dialectic processes. This is necessary to observe and sometimes even crack the concept of identity and reform it.

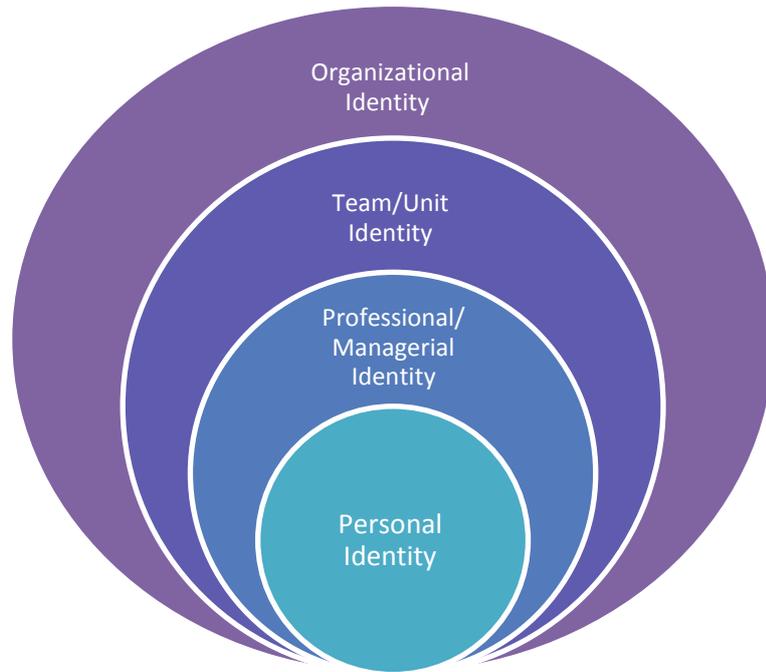
The identity construction process is usually based on the group membership of individuals, and serves the investigation around questions such as: "Who are we as an organization?" This is discussed among members of the organization. Joint organizational investigative processes refer to identity orientation, which allows for the connection and transformation of identity processes from a conscious, influential stance.

"How to do it?" - Stages in formulating organizational identity

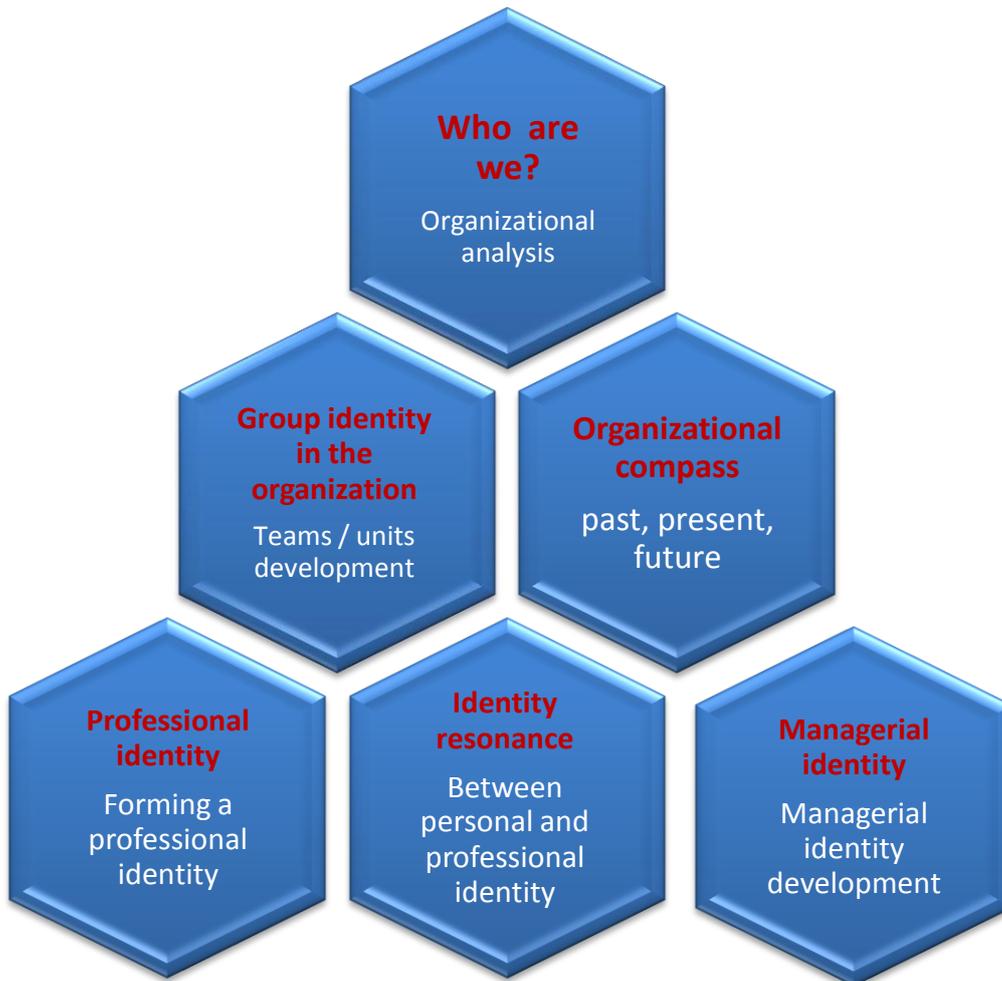
A central premise is that the process of constructing an organizational identity is formed as part of the discourse between individuals in the organization. The process is formed in the following organizational discourse circuits:

- ❖ **Individual identity in the organization:** the establishment of dialogue between the personal, professional and organizational identities of individuals in the organization, professions in the different professions and occupations within the organization.
- ❖ **Managerial identity:** An examination of the unique personal and managerial identity in the organization.
- ❖ **Team identity:** forming an understanding of "who we are as a team in the organization", while engaging in a dialogue between team identity and the organizational identity.
- ❖ **Groups identity:** examining the unique group (department / unit / region) as a key element in the organization and what components are in common with the whole organization.
- ❖ **Organization as a whole:** Practice answering the question "Who are we as an organization?" both as a separate component of a discourse and as a product of the different discourses at various levels in the organization.

As mentioned, the process of identity formation is an ongoing one. As discussed below, it can be dealt with through existing platforms of organizational development, as the basis for the process.



An organizing model for forming an organizational identity



How can identity formation in the organization be promoted?

The process of the formation of organizational identity and the identity of the members of the organization is a process built through observation, internal investigation and dialogue between members of the organization. It is a comprehensive process which combines multiple layers of modular structures. The process requires authentic and deep dialogue.

Structure of organizational identity formation process

The process of organizational identity formation and development is a Top-down process, together with feedback from employees to create a sense of partnership and involvement, as well as validation of the process. A diagnostic process in the organization is performed as a preliminary step in order to collect feedback from the organization's members during the process. Organizational diagnosis includes focus groups, interviews with suppliers / customers / units and more.

- The process begins in a workshop of the organization's management to investigate organizational identity, organizational image and the desirable organizational identity formation.
- During the second stage management members lead the investigation process on division level with their managers. This step allows exploration of the unique group identity as well as examining and receiving feedback from the organization's managers regarding the organizational identity formed by the management team.

- The third stage is the investigation of the encounter between the organizational identity and the personal identities of all the organization's members. This step allows for an inter-organizational comprehensive dialogue to formulate an organizational identity and allows obtaining of feedback on the formulated organizational identity characteristics.
- Another step is the investigation of managerial and professional identities of organization's members and an examination of the relationship between this identity and the personal and organizational identities. This step can be parallel or instead of the third stage, depending on the population match in the organization.
- After the above mentioned steps, an additional management meeting will examine the organizational identity through feedback received from the organization's members and formulation of organizational identity as will be presented to the organization's members.
- The process is finished through communicating the organizational identity to the organization's members via a general conference or via the managers.
- The process consists of different modules, which can be **implemented individually** and not just as part of a comprehensive process. For example, work on identity with a particular organizational unit or with a specific team. As well as with specific populations such as managers or professionals. This is according to the needs identified by the organization. Also, the above-proposed process is tailored for each organization, according to its business characteristics unique needs in partnerships with the organization.

Following is a description of the different modules.

Who are we? Analysis of organizational identity

This step of analyzing organizational identity is used to create an infrastructure for the organization identity formation process, or alternatively, as a stand-alone process and as a model for theoretical and practical organizational analysis.

Such a process is a thorough analysis of overt and covert features in organizational identity, as expressed in the core organizational processes. To allow for the high validity of the organizational identity diagnostic process, which reliably analyzes the identity of the organization, we believe in Co-Inquiry. This is where functionaries used as organizational seismographs - such as a Human Resources Manager, other managers, and other functionaries at the core of the organization take part in the investigation of the organizational DNA.

Gathering and analyzing the information includes, among others, the use of focus groups both in individual and group interviews with core populations. This also includes the organizational units' members, suppliers, customers, and content analysis and analysis of the products of advertising and public relations of the organization.

Organizational Compass: Past, Present, Future

A management workshop which purpose is investigating, refining and formulating the desired organizational identity. This investigation includes several stages.

- ❖ **Step 1:** "Who are we?" - Refining the existing organizational identity through observation and an internal investigation, learning existing organizational narratives and investigating "archaeological" formative stories of the organization's history.
- ❖ **Step 2:** "Who are we to others?" - Examination of the organizational identity of the image viewed from the outside: How we are perceived by the community within which we operate?
- ❖ **Desired identity investigation** - examining the organizational characteristics that we want to maintain, preserve, develop, change and those whom we wish to extricate. This is a proactive process of selection and design of organizational identity and organizational image that correspond it.

Group identity in the organization: teams/units development

As mentioned, the process of team/unit identity formulation can follow the management's organizational identity formation process. Alternatively it can function as a separate process for the team/unit level and lead by the team/unit manager. The purpose of the developmental process at the unit level is:

1. Allow the team / unit to investigate the group identity and learn about the encounter between the participants' personal identity to their mutual group identity.
2. Identify how the group is perceived by other groups in the organization

3. Formulate from this inquiry and observation process the unique and desired group identity

This process allows the manager of the unit/ team to:

- Analyze the situation of members of the unit in terms of identity and identification with the unit
- Present his/her vision of the unit's identity
- increase the sense of belonging and commitment of the team/unit's members

Identity development processes for the unit / team are meant for quality "working" teams as well as for teams that have gone through significant changes or a crisis.

The identity development process in the advanced stage of formulating organizational identity enables:

- exploration of the properties of the unit's unique identity in the face of organizational identity
- Validation of the organizational identity as formulated at the executive level in the face of others.

Identity resonance: between personal identity and organizational identity

This is a process of observing and contemplating the encounter between the personal and organizational identity.

A workshop in which participants will experience the process of investigation in two of their identity circles: personal identity and organizational identity.

Then examine the relationship between them.

This is another step in the process of formulating organizational identity. During this stage the identity discourse takes place among all members of the organization. Objectives of this phase are:

1. Formulate the organizational identity of employees and increase their identification with the organization
2. Validate the work done with the management and get feedback from organization's members.

This investigative process in the organization refines identity questions: Who am I? What is important to me? And an examination of the way that the response to these questions meets with answering questions also pertaining to organizational identity: Who are we as an organization? What is important to our organization?

The process enables constructive dialogue at all levels of the organization which ultimately leads to understanding and internalizing of the desired organizational identity, as formulated by the management of the organization validated by members of the organization.

Managerial and professional identities development and formulation

Investigating the encounter between personal and organizational identity tailored to specific populations in the organization: managers or members of a specific profession. During this stage, the encounter between three identity circles is investigated: personal, organizational and managerial / professional. This investigation allows a dialogue to formulate and develop managerial and professional identities. Furthermore, it can be a part of the organizational identity formation or be used independently in a managerial/professional development process.

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