
SELF AND LEADERSHIP

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A wise Greek guy called Socrates once recommended: “know thy self”. And a scribbler called Shakespeare chimed in: “to thine own self be true”. This is really good advice for leaders, but what happens when “thine own self” is your own worst enemy?

Have you ever met someone new and they asked you: “tell me about yourself”? What do you answer? After sharing your favourite footy team or music, maybe you talk about your job, your profession, or your career. Maybe you share about your relationship status or your kids. Maybe you tell them about where you were born or where you were educated. If you want to come across as a really serious young insect, you may share about your politics, religion or aspirations – that should put an end to the conversation! This is the self you might share – characteristics about you, your life, and your history. We might call this your **Self-Image** or **Identity**. It is part of the image that you have of yourself, or at least the surface part of it. It is valid and important. But who are you really, and why does it matter for your leadership?

There is another part of our Identity that we may not explore or share as readily. This consists of the **Meaning** that you have given to events that have occurred during your life - especially what they mean about you. Stuff has been happening and you have been weaving the story of

you from it. I think of it as a process of conditioning and construction of the Identity and Self Image. For a leader, your Self Image can then have a big influence on how effective you are, the impact you have on others, and how fulfilled you are – more on that later. My experience exploring this process is with lots of successful senior managers who are feeling good about themselves. Examining yourself and the past can be fun and rewarding, but it can also stir up emotions, which you need to keep in mind in reading about it. My colleague and long-time Professor, Amanda Sinclair from Melbourne Business School, is an expert on the issue of Identity and Leadership, and has a very simple exercise which helps leaders begin to get to know it and I will draw on that next – as they say in the classics, any flaws in my brief telling are my own. Throughout this article, I focus primarily on your own contribution to your Self Image. Of course, society has also been offering lots of suggestions, prescriptions and roles to shape you.

Whatever you ate for breakfast this morning probably doesn't signify to you a great deal of meaning about yourself. But some events do. I will share some examples of what successful senior managers have shared about their personal and professional lives, and how it relates to their Identity and leadership. I wonder what your picture is? Early years are a good place to start but the creation of the identity is an on-going process. If you just reflect on growing up in your own family – whatever shape that took – you may start to see dynamics that you made mean something about you. Maybe you are trying really hard to be like one or other of your parents – or maybe you are trying desperately not to be like them. Maybe you are trying still to be worthy of some parental

expectation – this can even be inferred from an absent parent. Maybe you were the first born with expectations of being more responsible than your siblings, and you still consider yourself to be the responsible or conservative one. You would make good management material! Maybe your family was traditional or deeply religious, and you see yourself as a “good girl”. Maybe you were the younger rebel in the family and you still see yourself to this day as a bit of a risk taker or an innovator. I am not making up these examples – all of them are typical things that are shared with us by senior managers on our courses.

You can reflect on important events during your life – maybe you moved schools or countries often because of a parent’s job and you now see yourself as someone who is flexible and adaptive, or you continue to see yourself as an outsider. The same events seem to be capable of multiple interpretations – what matters is the one you give it. Maybe your older brother made you look hopeless at sport but you shone in the debating team, and now you have a reputation for being quite argumentative and you just passed your bar exam. Remember, I am quoting typical examples here. Maybe you struggled to keep a boyfriend or a girlfriend, or it is a divorce later, and you conclude that you are hopeless at intimacy. Maybe you roared up the promotion ladder, and you now see yourself as an undeniable winner. Enough with the examples – you get the picture. I am giving you punchlines here as a form of invitation. Do you know your own picture?

What matters is not just the impact of an event, but what we made it mean about us, and a subsequent tendency to forget our own authorship. Another tendency is to believe absolutely that these

interpretations are the immutable truth, which can then influence for good or bad our leadership and lives. If you believe you are a born winner, and you stuff-up badly, that could rattle your equilibrium. Does everyone do this? I don't know. I am just reporting what several thousand senior managers have told us on our courses. *If you start to understand your own authorship, and realize you are not dealing with immutable truths about yourself, then it frees you to acknowledge or accentuate even more valuable and powerful dimensions of you.*

Robert Kegan is a Professor of Developmental Psychology in the Education Faculty at Harvard University, and he has studied how this process can really interfere in our practical achievements, particularly some of our individual and organizational attempts to change things for the better. He has written a book titled *Immunity to Change* where he explores why some of the practical changes which are important to us, but not all of them, can be so hard to progress even when we are honestly committed to achieving them. He argues that we make core **Assumptions** about ourselves while growing up and these can act as a strong influence or limitation on our growth as a person and a leader.

Robert Kegan has developed a simple, very powerful and illuminating exercise about our assumptions which he describes in detail in his book. I did the exercise myself some time ago with Kegan on a course for leadership educators at Harvard, and we use it on our workshops for senior managers. His exercise has the deceptive ability to get behind personal defences to help leaders uncover the sometimes-unflattering or embarrassing assumptions we have made about ourselves, and which are actively thwarting a number of genuine commitments.

Kegan's key insight is that we have formed other personal commitments shaped by these assumptions, and they are successfully competing with important changes we are seeking. These other commitments may no longer be obvious to us. Exploring our own assumptions and **Competing Commitments** can be enlightening, but confronting, so senior managers are always informed in advance and encouraged to make their own choice about participating. I engage in the exercise with them too, and share my own unflattering results.

Here are some real and typical examples of assumptions from leaders on our courses, with a few changes to protect confidentiality. A management consultant was committed to celebrating her brilliant successes, but made herself miserable by constantly criticizing her own results – she had an assumption that she was “special”, and she needed to show superior outcomes compared to her colleagues. A wealthy entrepreneur was committed to finding greater fulfilment from his projects, but kept starting new, stressful ventures which burnt-up his time - he had an assumption that he was a “failure”, and had to keep disproving it. The CEO of an international corporation who had a prestigious education was committed to writing an influential business book but could never get started – he had an assumption that he was “unintelligent”, and wanted to avoid ridicule by peers. A Deputy Vice Chancellor of a University was committed to a better work-life balance, but was always the last person to turn the lights out – she assumed she “wasn't needed” and didn't want her staff to realize it.

It is useful to recall that folks began this exercise simply by nominating an important work commitment or change initiative which was not

progressing well. These are very effective people – clearly, we have not stumbled on a “theory of everything” about them, or about every stalled commitment. Assumptions are just assumptions – they are not the truth, despite their strong undertow. I am providing the punchlines, without describing the process or people, but you may see the irony of a Self-protection mechanism which is more like an Achilles’ Heel.

The senior leaders on our courses are lovely, normal people who are also bright and high achievers. A lot of these assumptions involve an historical doubt or questioning of worth, and often managers can identify the early origins. The past events can be dramatic, sad or even banal. It seems to be quite common and a surprising aspect of being human. The assumptions form a less visible part of the Self Image. Even an apparently positive assumption can cause you trouble at times, and rob you of satisfaction. Assumptions might also drive your success as a leader, but your satisfaction and peace of mind will suffer if your secret motive is to prove or disprove your assumptions about yourself. It is much more powerful and liberating to be engaging in activities for their own sakes. The bottom line is that you can sometimes get in your own way as a leader, and it may be possible to do something about it.

After getting to know your Self-Image well, it can be very helpful for a leader to move beyond the superficial, meaning-making, or assumption-prone Identity, to appreciate your true worth. Robert Kegan has some specific advice about how to approach any long-held assumptions, and we explore methods on our courses too. Having a cold shower and giving yourself a stern talking to, is not one of the successful methods. Secrecy doesn’t help. Compassion and understanding are key. Then

action works. Carry out a series of small, safe **Experiments** to test the veracity and limits of assumptions. If the experiments go OK, expand the testing. The point is to make solid progress with your important professional or personal commitments and change initiatives – those that are languishing, or others not even making it to the drawing board.

Another valuable approach is to be very clear about your **Purpose**, and to keep your purpose really close. We use a simple exercise to help leaders discover or invent their purpose. There is a very obvious and inspiring thread that runs through the purposes that tend to emerge and that our participants share: to love family and friends, to contribute to others, to do valuable work, and to be happy. Bossing people around, getting heaps of money, being a winner, or making lots of widgets, are not regularly offered up as the underlying purpose guiding their leadership and lives – although we avoid judgement either way. The trick for a leader seems to be to keep that purpose close and foremost, because it provides energy not only in the face of inevitable challenges and workload, but in dealing powerfully and constructively with your Identity. A good starting point can be to stop keeping your purpose private or secret. Our values are an important companion of our purpose too. But there can be a dark side to values, involving rigidity, dogmatism and attachment to our old friend identity.

Another way to sidestep your Identity is to develop your **Presence** as a leader. In my article “How Can Leaders Develop Greater Presence?” I suggested three ways to do that. One of them does involve Presentation, which would seem to be right up the alley of your Identity. However, the focus of leadership presentation is to gain or

maintain the formal and informal authorization of others to allow you to lead them. This is a complex business says Harvard's Ron Heifetz, which goes way beyond Image, and I explain it in detail in my article. The second aspect of leadership presence is to actually be present and attentive. This can take a lot of Practice. I recommend the practices of listening, mindfulness and meditation to build your muscle in this arena. The third dimension of leadership presence is what you make present for others. If you are all tied up with your Identity you will struggle to provide value to others. Being present can be so powerful and liberating for you the leader, as well as others, because your focus is on them and not on your Self. One reason I love teaching interactively, is that it forces me to focus on others, which silences all that noisy chatter in my head about myself, my thoughts or my agenda.

For a long time, I have puzzled over the relationship between Identity and **Ego**. We don't need too much introduction to the Ego – we are greeted every morning when we wake up by Me, My and Mine. Ego is often thought to be useful for leaders by providing drive and helping develop a thick skin to deal with “the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune” which come your way in a leadership role. I think there is some truth in this, but it is regularly exaggerated. Ego can also be dangerous for leadership, either because of its excessive arrogance and attention-seeking, or its overwrought neediness. Did someone mention Donald Trump? Lots of leadership experts advise that less ego is the way to go for effective and fulfilled leaders – although, it needs to be acknowledged that many corporate titans in their business books recommend the opposite for success. Ego does score a lot of victories

in business and politics. But is it leadership? Does it satisfy those underlying purposes many of us have? You will make your own choice.

I regularly advise leaders to be themselves in the role, which obviously involves your Identity. But identities also can be the different forms that our Ego takes. And identity can fuel dangerous tribalism in modern societies. The recommendation about less Ego may apply equally to Identity-based leadership and lives. Perhaps Socrates' advice to know yourself is really only very wise if a leader then remembers to leave it behind. And which self is Shakespeare urging us to be true to? Now I am starting to debate Socrates and Shakespeare, so I think it definitely is time for me to retreat gracefully before my ego gets bruised.

Who are you really? Philosopher Jean Paul Sartre claims: "Man is the sum of his **Actions**". Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh writes: "Without floating, there is no cloud. Just as we find the flower in the blooming, we find a human being in the energy of action". His view on Self can be tricky to grasp. But both assert that you occur in action, which is not simply saying "just do it". These actions are an expression of choices you make. Everything else is a story - and humans love stories.

Shakespeare's grumpy Macbeth was quite disparaging about it all. He concluded that life itself was: "a tale/ told by an idiot/ full of sound and fury/signifying nothing". Let's hope that your leadership does not resemble that! It is quite possible, though, that the famous Scot was having a ghostly premonition of Elon Musk's Twitter Account.