



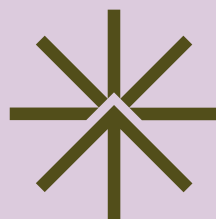
IDENTITY

# THE LAYERS OF IDENTITY (PART I)

A SHORT ARTICLE

“EXISTENTIAL CRISIS, ON THE  
OTHER HAND, IS TYPICAL OF MODERN  
SOCIETIES IN WHICH PEOPLE DO WHAT  
THEY ARE TOLD TO DO, OR WHAT  
OTHERS DO, RATHER THAN WHAT  
THEY WANT TO DO.”

Héctor García and Francesc Miralles





The question ‘who are you?’ is a question that presents the recipient with the opportunity to consider their identity. It’s a question that isn’t asked frequently, particularly in public domains, yet it is a question that, arguably, is important to consider.

‘Finding myself’ isn’t necessarily an exercise that’s complete after the late teenage years, or something that’s wrapped up after a gap year, as identity formation is an ongoing, life-long process that is dynamically responsive to the present environment. Often, however, this question is deprioritised.

To extend the above question further, one might ask, ‘who are you as a leader?’. What is it about who you are that uniquely qualifies you to lead others? Is it something you were simply born with, or have you curated leadership qualities from the mine of experience? Perhaps you think it’s about your IQ, or maybe it’s a personality trait that you express? Regardless of your reflections, as a leader, how important do you think it is to know who you are? And, if you think this question is important to consider, how much intentional time have you given to finding some answers?

During *The Purposeful Leader*, you will have some time to consider this important topic. Knowing who you are will be beneficial for a series of reasons. For example, if you are clear about, and confident of, your identity, it can create a platform of trust for others around you. Furthermore, clarity about your identity as a leader means that you are less likely to be reacting to the environment you are in, and instead, leading from an informed place. And, finally, reflecting upon the question ‘who am I as a leader?’ can open a door to your purpose. Understanding your identity is a data pool that will illuminate your purpose.

Your identity has many layers. Often, in response to the question ‘who are you?’, the first layer is revealed. This is the public and visible layer and often deals with:

- Job titles or functions (“*I am the Founder of...*”, or “*I am the Chief People Officer in...*”, or “*I am a Non-Exec Director in...*”)
- Credentials, like qualifications or memberships (for example “*I am a psychologist*” or “*I am a Professor in...*” or “*I am an auditor*”)
- Relationships (“*I am Jenny’s brother*”, or “*I am married to Manuel*”, or “*I have two children*”)
- Hobbies, interests and past times (“*I am a distance runner*”, or “*I am a Governor in my local school*”, or “*I am an amateur historian*”)

Often this first layer is what we deem to be socially acceptable. It's an edited and censored version of self that we project to the external world in an attempt to generate safety, belonging and/or acceptance. In the world of leadership, this can often be referred to as 'brand'; the projected version of self that we deem will generate approval. None of this is wrong or bad; it's a necessary tradeoff that we participate in, in order to move through the world and conserve energy. However, there is more to identity than this first layer, and if you spend any length of time in another person's company, you may develop an enhanced sense of who they *really* are beyond this first layer. Other layers of identity might start to make themselves heard or visible, because your 'self' can't always be controlled, contained or managed. The true self often has a way of making itself visible.

If you go beyond this layer, beyond the initial, default response, I wonder what other types of responses might begin to emerge when answering the original question, 'who are you?'. These other layers of identity are of interest to us in *The Purposeful Leader*, because we believe that these parts of self will reveal to you what you really care about, and what matters most deeply to you. And if this is revealed to you, it will also be revealed to those around you; your peers and team members. Perhaps, as you dig into this question a little further, other memories might emerge from the distant past, childhood memories. Or, things that feel really important to you...things that you might even consider taking a stand for. Or you may recognise beliefs that you have about the world, or beliefs about self and others. And if you sit with the question for a longer time still, it might be that words begin to fail you as you enter into deeper territory, where identity can't be shaped, defined or contained by language alone.

The discovery and formation of identity is partly about meeting your limitations and boundaries. The Psychologist Erik Erikson's theory of Psychosocial Development talks about a stage of development in the teenage years that he refers to as 'Identity vs Role Confusion', where the young person is testing various roles, pushing boundaries and discovering their limitations and degrees of comfort, and in doing so, they are 'meeting themselves' and engaging in a further form of identity formation.

Beyond the teenage years, identity formation is still active to a greater or lesser extent. As life circumstances emerge, so the identity engages. Changes in relationships, love, loss and grief all can result in a reacquaintance with self, along with changes in family circumstances, for example, the birth or adoption of a child. Similarly, other traumatic experiences can shape identity, like the sudden loss of income, the experience of an accident or illness, a change of leadership, or a difficult breakdown in a friendship or working relationship. Wider environmental changes can also force an opportunity to reevaluate 'self' and can subsequently shape identity, for example, changes in the political mood of the country you live in, the sudden explosion of war or the abuse of a totalitarian regime. All of these experiences will provide windows through which you view self, through which you meet and reacquaint yourself with your identity. They will all ask you to consider the question, 'In the face of all this, who am I?'

Knowing who you are as a leader is important. It equips you with important insights and information and, importantly it provides breadcrumbs on the trail to purpose.

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