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- ▶ Future trends in reputation management

By Rebecca Morris talks with Cees van Riel

- ▶ Honesty presents a challenge in performance reporting

By Marcel van Rinsum

- ▶ Putting servant leadership to the test

By Milton Sousa

- ▶ Identity and identity conflict in the workplace

By Kate E. Horton, P. Saskia Bayerl and Gabriele Jacobs

- ▶ Mapping strategic consensus within and between teams

By Murat Tarakci

- ▶ Trade-offs in the adoption of sustainability standards

By Frank Wijen

- ▶ Making better partner matches in brand alliances

By Bram Van den Bergh



Identity and identity conflict in the workplace

By *Kate E. Horton, P. Saskia Bayerl and Gabriele Jacobs*

As individuals, we define ourselves according to various characteristics that include our values and beliefs. This gives us our identity. As organisations become increasingly complex, understanding the concept of identity conflict may mean the difference between success and failure.



What is identity? Simply put, identity is a collection of values and roles. Identity can be individual, it can be organisational, and it can be national or global. The scope of an identity may change but the psychological mechanisms do not. Wherever there is a person there is identity, and wherever there is identity there are sub-identities and the potential for identity conflict.

The way we define ourselves as individuals and as a collective plays a fundamental role in how we relate to the rest of the world. We all wear many hats: we are our parents' children; we are our children's parents. We are workers, friends, and volunteers. We are religious, agnostic, or atheist. We are women, men, short, tall, extroverted, and introverted. Some of

our identity markers are inescapable: the colour of our skin or our place of birth. Yet other markers are malleable: our clothing style, our hobbies, and our dreams.

The same is true of organisations. A successful organisation has one clear identity, but as with individuals there are many sub-identities. The interplay between these identities is dynamic, creating subtle and overt tensions. Some of these tensions may have negative consequences, but some are a powerful force for positive change.

A classic example of tensions between organisational sub-identities is the interplay between a university faculty focused on research/teaching and the vast administrative body that manages operations. The success of the university (the success of its hybrid identity) depends on both of these bodies yet there are times when the values of each are so disparate that there is disharmony. Enter identity conflict.

The great unstudied field

While there is a wealth of literature that examines workplace conflict, diversity, and other identity-related topics, the different disciplines tends to ignore each other. In our work with large organisations, it became clear that very few researchers are viewing these complex issues through the lens of identity conflict. Identity was a secondary concern, if it was mentioned at all. Our paper *Identity conflicts at work: an integrative framework* set out to create a coherent narrative from disjointed and fragmented research. ▶

Identity and identity conflict in the workplace *(continued)*

By **Kate E. Horton, P. Saskia Bayerl and Gabriele Jacobs**

The effects on the collective

When there is a clash of values, identity conflict is at its core. The values of an individual may clash with the values of the workplace. The values of one department may clash with those of another (faculty vs administration). When this identity conflict occurs, there are two possible methods to deal with it:

1. Suffering by trying to deny one identity in favour of another. A working parent may pretend that they do not really need to leave work to collect a child. A Muslim employee may deny their need for a prayer room and for regular prayer breaks. This denial of a powerful sub-identity is common, and the results are fairly predictable: burnout, stress, low performance, and lack of job satisfaction. Both the employee and the employer suffer from the despondency and lack of productivity brought about by an unresolved identity conflict.

2. Using the identity conflict to reshape an environment. Doing this on an individual level can positively affect the identity of the whole organisation. This process begins with simply acknowledging the conflict and implementing a logical resolution. The working parent may begin leaving at 5pm, without guilt or apology. The Muslim employee may approach their managers with a request for a prayer room and the regular breaks required to use it. Although this may seem counterproductive on the surface,

as time is taken away from work, in practice it benefits the organisation, the individual, and other employees who enjoy the trickle-down effect. Other working parents within the organisation may feel empowered to strike a better work-life balance, which in turn increases their workplace productivity. Other employees who appreciate a dedicated space to meditate or just gather their thoughts may enjoy a prayer room.

Identity conflict isn't always a bad thing. The creation of pearls requires irritation and friction. In the same way, identity conflicts can be a catalyst for positive personal and organisational growth and change. The marginalised gay and lesbian Presbyterian ministers who refused to ignore their sexual identities and instead embraced and

used them as forces of change within the Church are examples of tempered radicals. A tempered radical is someone who is deeply embedded in an institution (a church, a workplace, a university) but rather than simply accepting the structure of the institution, he or she is able to critique it for effectiveness. A tempered radical may say, "I am a science teacher in

a primary school that values flexible learning. This school, like all other schools, groups children according to their birthdates. Does this action support our school's identity? Would we be more true to our values if we grouped children according to their ability in science instead of their age?"

A tempered radical may be seen as a troublemaker. But for organisations unafraid of constructive criticism or change, a tempered radical can be an invaluable asset. Not only can he or she offer innovative insight, but they often care deeply about the organisation in which they are embedded. As the organisation represents one of the tempered radical's own identities, protecting and supporting the organisation is akin to protecting and supporting themselves. A stronger ally is difficult to find.

"...identity conflicts can be a catalyst for positive personal and organisational growth and change."

It is not only tempered radicals who bring about positive change within organisations through the successful balancing of multiple identities. A young newcomer may push her conservative company to embrace the power of social media.

Employees from a variety of cultures, religions, and age groups will offer insight and tips for success that



a homogenous corporate culture is simply incapable of generating. We have worked closely with large and very complex organisations, including police forces. A police force is a perfect example of an organisation that uses diversity to understand and reflect a greater group of collected identities. By recruiting officers from all religions, ethnicities, age groups, genders, sexual orientations, and marital statuses, a good police force is able to communicate quickly and with compassion with all members of the general public.

A perfect fit for every role

There are always roles that must be played that we simply don't like. This is an inevitable part of life. However, during the course of our research we were humbled to find that rather than "discovering" that there are jobs no-one wants, we instead found the opposite to be true: for every professional role,

there is someone who is fulfilled by it – someone who brings purpose, nobility, and strong values to their working identity. This theme was consistent across all the fields we looked at and all socio-economic brackets.

While it would be unwise to dismiss the psychological and physical effects on people working in extreme roles (soldiers on active duty, or people exploited in dangerous working conditions), it is important for managers to understand that there is no need to force a person to work in a role that does not align with their core identity. That energy is better spent ensuring that their employees' core values align with their assigned role.

Embracing identity conflicts

Our message to managers is this: dare to look at identity conflicts. Dare to accept them. This is the reality of people working in your organisation. It is the

reality of intra- and inter-departmental tension. This multi-level perspective is really important. Whether conflict is individual, interpersonal, or international, it's always the same story: on all these levels we have a need for authenticity. The same psychological triggers apply. By knowing these triggers and understanding that the identities they invoke are strong but not dangerous, an organisation has an invaluable advantage over its peers. ■

This article draws its inspiration from the paper *Identity conflict at work: an integrative framework*, written by Kate E. Horton, P. Saskia Bayerl and Gabriele Jacobs. It has been published in the *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 35, S6-S22 (2014). <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/job.1893/full>

Kate Horton is a Visiting Assistant Professor of Organisational Behavior at the Federal University of Pernambuco, Brazil and a Research Associate at Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University. [EMAIL horton@rsm.nl](mailto:horton@rsm.nl)

P. Saskia Bayerl is Assistant Professor of Technology and Organisational Behaviour, Department of Organisation and Personnel Management, Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University. [EMAIL pbayerl@rsm.nl](mailto:pbayerl@rsm.nl)

Gabriel Jacobs is Associate Professor of Social and Organisational Psychology, Department of Organisation and Personnel Management, Rotterdam School of management, Erasmus University. [EMAIL g.jacobs@rsm.nl](mailto:g.jacobs@rsm.nl)