

Be careful what you wish for

On the alignment of personal identity and professional development

by James Martin and Salvatore De Rienzo

“Be careful what you wish for – you just might get it” – a phrase that, arguably, sums up the perspective we work from when talking to senior executives about their development. Which might seem rather strange at first glance. After all, the people we work with are all highly successful individuals – intelligent, capable, typically with at least 25 years of business experience and a dynamic track record of promotion within their field. When we ask what they’re looking to do next, it’s no surprise that most say they aim to move up to the next level, or into a position of greater scope and responsibility.

Nevertheless, even the simplest follow-up question – “why do you want that?” – can be illuminating. The immediate response is often the obvious one (“it’s the next step forward”) – yet if we keep asking “why is that important for you?” this can prompt the executive to think in ways he or she may find revealing. If we also ask them to reflect on what they’re aiming for – how the position they aspire to will differ from the demands of their current role; what they will have to do in order to succeed in that position; what this will cost in terms of intellectual and emotional effort, as well as impacts on their personal life – we find that very few have thought the matter through in detail.

Taking a deep look at identity

—
Deep understanding is crucial for leaders to explore what really drives them as individuals when embarking on professional development.

All of which highlights how crucial it is for leaders to explore their own identity and develop a **deep understanding** of what really drives them as individuals when embarking on professional development. Otherwise previously successful executives may take the next step forward and find they are deeply unhappy – with the corollary of lackluster performance and disappointing business results.

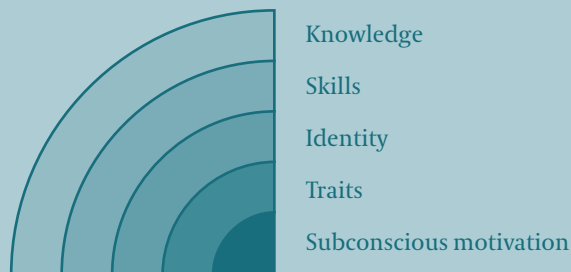
— Motivation

is often subconscious and largely beyond the reach of change or influence.

It also helps to explain why so much of the effort invested in personal development actually yields little fruit. Taking a close look at executives' personal identities, at how they see themselves, is an important part of any leader's role. Yet most personal development meetings between business leaders and the talents under their supervision focus exclusively on the more tangible parameters – past experiences and successes; knowledge, skills and competencies to be developed – while rarely touching upon the aspiring leader's inner identity and **motivation**. These aspects are regarded, more or less, as a private matter. And because they are not talked about openly, the individual's own self-image, and how this image is evaluated externally by their line manager, can sometimes lead to serious misjudgments. An outstanding team player, for example, doesn't automatically make an effective team leader.

How often have we seen a supervisor suggest that a team member work on a particular issue in their personal development plan – and then found that both are still talking about that very same issue several years later? One possible reason here is that neither properly appreciates the individual's true inner identity and the actions proposed are essentially going against the grain.

As a starting point, it is helpful to understand how identity fits into a holistic view of personality. At Egon Zehnder we use a root cause model, described in the following graphic:



- **Subconscious motivation**. The inner core of this five-tier model of personality comprises subconscious motivations that are largely beyond the reach of change or influence. Deep down, we are all motivated by a combination of affiliation (how we like to connect with others), achievement (securing goals) and power (the extent to which we like to influence and impact events). Most of us will have all three motivations, to varying levels.
- **Traits**. These are deep-seated tendencies in the personality, which essentially help to cast a light on how an individual gains energy and responds to events. Most personality models are based on five factors: openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness and neuroticism. These character traits, too, are difficult to alter.
- **Identity**. Compared to subconscious motivation and traits, identity can be more changeable, depending on different experiences and contexts. The development of one's own identity is founded on two fundamental processes: self-knowledge and self-design.
- **Skills**. This refers to the ability to convert new or available knowledge into concrete practical outcomes. Skills increase through training and experience – and are thus readily amenable to influence.
- **Knowledge**. The same is true of knowledge – knowledge both of overarching contexts and specialist, expert detail. Knowledge acquisition is an ongoing leadership responsibility.

Today when we evaluate leadership potential we focus considerable attention on the individual's sense of identity. In order to grow successfully into leadership roles, it is most helpful for executives to have thought deeply about the challenges inherent in the position and to feel a sense of enthusiasm as a result. In short, some see themselves as leaders, and indeed acted as leaders, long before they were appointed to leadership roles. In other words, believing in being a leader is key to becoming a leader. Of course this is just one aspect of a **leader's identity** – although an important one – and has to be seen as part of the overall picture.

— Leader's identity

Believing in being a leader is an important aspect to really becoming a leader.

—
Ambitions
 can stem from a variety of seeds or origins – not always helpful, some even destructive.

A variety of seeds

So why do people in general – and future leaders in particular – need to be careful what they wish for? For many of us, our various **ambitions** and our drive for success in life can stem from a variety of seeds or origins, and we may not always appreciate whether these motivations are helpful or destructive. More money and higher status are obvious drivers, but we can all also be motivated by wanting to please our parents, to show off to friends, or to fill a gap elsewhere in our lives. For the highly competitive and achievement-oriented individual, it might simply be the need to increase a personal “score.” For some, the drive to succeed may simply have become an unhelpful habit that they no longer question.

A number of factors can make discussions about identity problematic in a professional context:

- Many executives may feel there is only one acceptable answer to the question of what they want to do next: further promotion. They may fear that revealing the truth might mean losing status, losing influence within the organization – and perhaps even losing their jobs.
- Second, some may be wary of asking the question in the first place. Quite likely they have already achieved considerable advancement and status. Exploring their inner identity at this point might feel like opening Pandora’s box – something just too risky to contemplate.
- Some individuals, meanwhile, are just not very self-reflective by nature. They may struggle to see the point of asking the question at all.

A complicating factor can be that in many organizations the only way of offering personal validation and/or growth is through compensation or promotion. To use a military analogy, companies are able to offer promotion through the ranks but they rarely have the ability to award **medals**.

—
Medals
 Instead of offering personal validation and/or growth through compensation or promotion only, it can be helpful for organizations to offer some “medals.”

As a result, various factors need to be in place in order to explore this topic effectively with executives. First, there needs to be a degree of trust and reassurance in the company’s commitment to the executive’s future. Being able to offer some “medals” is helpful. Second, it is often more effective to have these conversations with an external coach and trusted advisor – someone who can provide an objective standpoint and some distance from the standard supervisor-subordinate relationship. Third, it takes time. This conversation is unlikely to be done and dusted in half an hour: it may take a number of discussions over many months to help an individual understand their true sense of identity.

Yet such conversations can have a huge impact on the executive concerned: being fully aware of how they view themselves – in terms of personal values, appropriate actions and role behaviors – is the key to a centered feeling of personal stability and authenticity. How persuasive and credible they are, how effectively they perform and their personal sense of fulfillment all depend on the **close alignment** of their role and their personality. Assessing this alignment is by no means an easy journey, but it can be a very fruitful one when it addresses deeply personal questions such as:

—
Close alignment
 of the role and the personality of an executive is key for personal fulfillment and effective performance.

- What makes my role exciting for me? What energizes me and what drains my personal energy?
- What enhances my self-esteem – and what undermines it? How do I feel in my role, from an emotional perspective? Is anything/anybody making me feel angry, fearful, unbalanced? What can I learn from this? When do I find myself feeling hurt? Why? When do I feel appreciated or nurtured? To what extent am I able to express my feelings? What stops me doing that?
- What would my personal “balance sheet” currently look like? What regrets do I have? What should I have been doing differently?
- What is there in my current role that I dislike, but put up with? Will that also feature in my next role? Am I willing to pay that price?
- What personal motivations have brought me to my current role and what drives the aspiration toward my next position?

—
Dynamic phenomenon
 Identity is not an immutable constant.



James Martin
 joined Egon Zehnder in 2000. Based in London, he focuses on search for the HR function as well as broader talent management consulting across all business sectors.

james.martin@egonzehnder.com



Salvatore de Rienzo
 joined Egon Zehnder in 2002. Based in Milan and Rome, he is a trusted advisor in CEO succession, board performance, leadership development and executive team effectiveness.

salvatore.derienzo@egonzehnder.com

Answering these questions can be a psychologically challenging process – sometimes even a painful one – requiring professional, confidential support. It takes courage for an individual to step out of the “video game” of life – to make themselves the focus of discussion and – abandoning received wisdom – to lower their guard, in order to really understand if they want to move up to the next level.

Dynamic, not immutable

Identity, as we have noted, though, is a **dynamic phenomenon**, not an immutable constant. As people gain experiences and insights over the course of their life they come to see themselves, their priorities and their personal sense of identity – both private and professional – in new ways. For young high-potentials at an early point in their career, for example, their whole identity may be anchored around work, performance and career progression. In their middle years executives may still define themselves to a large extent in terms of their professional responsibilities – but many are now also fulfilling private roles, as spouses and parents, for example. Psychologists have identified three key inner developments characteristic of this life phase: a re-assessment of formerly fulfilling behaviors no longer in tune with the current lifestyle; a re-evaluation of personal goals; and a re-visioning of the future – with the emphasis on finally turning vague plans into concrete realities.

In their mature years, individuals may find that their attitude to extrinsic incentives can change. Sometimes the legacy we leave behind can become the most important consideration. Both for the individual executive and for the supervisor interviewing them, it makes sense to anchor career and development considerations within wider reflections relating to the relevant phase of life.

However, it is easy to make mistaken assumptions about others’ sense of identity and their fit for a role, even when presented with an apparently rigid self-image. For example, a potential promotion should not automatically be discounted merely because the future role and responsibilities initially appear to present a mis-match with an executive’s view of themselves. They may be more adaptive than they appear to be at first.

Indeed, the renowned organizational behavior specialist Herminia Ibarra advises executives to see themselves as “work in progress” and to be “adaptively authentic” – constantly gaining new insights, not just about external matters, but also about themselves. Which brings with it the permission to be inconsistent now and then. “Action changes us,” says Ibarra. Executives shouldn’t cling to their past identity but should ask themselves: How do I want to be? What’s important to me in the future? and allow themselves to develop accordingly. And their supervisors and/or organizations should grant them the necessary time and scope to do precisely this.

Far-reaching effects

The way people see themselves, their sense of identity, is not something that changes from one day to the next. This is a process that involves making mindful adjustments – trying out different roles, for example, with an open mind, in order to explore a different aspect of one’s identity. Both direct line managers and the relevant members of the leadership team have a responsibility to ensure that they support their high potentials effectively through this process.

The prize for getting it right is considerable. An executive who undertakes this journey will very likely be a more effective leader: a deep sense of personal alignment with the role will most probably make them more effective. It’s more likely, too, that the most appropriate executives will be promoted into those key, challenging roles – positively impacting the bottom line. Development initiatives can be focused on appropriate interventions, leading to cost and resource savings while also being more likely to yield meaningful improvements. Above all, companies are likely to have senior executives who are quite simply happier and more content in their roles – in turn yielding a multiplier effect in terms of employee engagement and wider organizational morale.

Ultimately this can be liberating for all concerned. Instead of feeling stuck in a cycle of disappointing dialogues and erroneous expectations, executives can end up feeling better understood and less stressed, while their supervisors may feel a profound sense of relief at having got to the heart of the matter.