

Editorial

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Ask what constitutes good leadership today and there are no easy answers. One thing is for sure: as performance predictors for top leaders, functional skills and past successes alone no longer suffice. It has become increasingly clear that what really counts is a less easily defined human element comprising character and mindset as well as the ability to engage, inspire, and persuade diverse stakeholders.

Which brings us to the question of our self-perception, or in other words, our identity. Admittedly, we are on tricky ground here. Philosophers, psychologists and sociologists have all attempted to define and describe this elusive beast. They have looked carefully at how the alignment of our outward appearances and our inner make-up takes shape, how consistent this needs to be, and to what extent it can tolerate change.

The common ground in all of their findings is that our identity depends to a critical extent on our values and convictions. At this point, it becomes evident why the identity of a leader is so decisive for their leadership qualities. Marissa Mayer, for example, who took the helm at Internet giant Yahoo in troubled times, never set out to become a CEO but was always driven by a desire to change things for the better.

It is remarkable how large numbers of emerging leaders demonstrate this will to shape events and assume responsibility from a very early stage – in many cases long before they take on a leading role. In THE FOCUS Dialogue, Jillian Ellis, U.S. Women's National Soccer Team head coach and newly crowned World Cup winner, and Mark Thompson, President & CEO of The New York Times Company, talk about delighting in competition and challenges. At the same time, though, they underline the importance of remaining firmly grounded and retaining a capacity for self-examination.

The impact of the woman or man at the top as a role model cascades deep into the organization. Strive Masiyiwa from Zimbabwe, for example, founder of the telecommunications group Econet Wireless, has witnessed how strongly the self-image of the leader at the helm can influence the underlying system of values and culture of a company. “It is amazing how organizations can adopt the persona of the leader,” says this determined opponent of corruption.

When, in search of the essential core of our personality, we ask ourselves “who am I really?” the response is rarely unequivocal. The different roles we play often call for conflicting identities. In response to this dilemma, leadership expert Stewart Friedman advocates the integration of our professional and personal lives as the only way for leaders to “bring varied and complex dimensions into harmony and achieve optimum outcomes.”

Our own identity, though, is of course defined not only by the way we see it but also by our allegiances and the boundaries we choose to draw. In the age of the Internet and globalization, we enjoy greater liberty in this respect than ever before. Essayist Pico Iyer, a U.S. resident who was born in the UK to Indian parents, puts it this way: Our sense of belonging depends “less on our passports than on our passions.”

With this in mind, I wish you inspiring reading.

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