

Finding Yourself

How Social Identity Affects Leadership



In today's increasingly volatile and complex organizational environment, it's as important as ever for leaders to understand themselves. But it's no longer enough for them to be aware of their capabilities, motivations, styles, and values. Leaders now must also gain knowledge of their social identities—their membership in certain social groups defined by categories such as gender, race, and religion and the implications of belonging to these groups.

Some three thousand years after they were inscribed, the words carved into the lintel of the temple of Apollo in the Greek city of Delphi—*gnothi seauton*, “know thyself”—hold great relevance for leaders in the twenty-first century. Through experience and research, CCL and others in the field of leadership development have established that self-awareness brought about by focusing inward is a key to generating effective leadership skills such as influencing others, resilience,

adaptability, self-confidence, and planning.

Efforts to develop better leaders have traditionally promoted self-knowledge of individual strengths and weaknesses, motivations, management styles, and deeply held values. Tools and processes to increase self-awareness include 360-degree feedback, personality assessments, value inventories, mentoring, biographical questionnaires, peer feedback, and coaching—all of which have been used with success.

by Marian N. Ruderman and Christopher Ernst

The business world is increasingly volatile and complex, so it is as important as ever for leaders to understand themselves. However, it is no longer enough for them to be aware of their capabilities, motivations, styles, and values. To be as effective as possible, today's leaders must also gain knowledge of their *social identities*—their membership in certain social groups and the implications of belonging to these groups. Social groups are defined by categories such as gender, age, ethnicity, race, religion, nationality, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status.

Why is it so important for leaders to gain awareness of their social identities? First, people's membership in social groups affects how others see them and respond and react to them. For leaders, any quest for self-understanding needs to take into account the way others respond to their social identities. Second, understanding the dynamics of their own social identities helps people to better appreciate the views of others and to see how and why others who have had different life experiences may also have different ideas and assumptions about how to lead or what is right and wrong. This appreciation is essential if leaders are to effectively bridge differences.

Each individual belongs to myriad social groups. Some group categories, such as gender, are obvious to others, whereas other categories, such as religion, nationality, and sexual orientation, are less apparent on the surface.

As an example of how people's memberships in social groups influence how others see them, consider an executive in a meeting, pounding a fist on the table to emphasize a point. If the executive is white and male, others in the meeting may perceive his actions to be appropriately emphatic. If the executive is black and male, others may see him as angry. And if the executive is a

woman, she may be seen as emotional. The executive's fist pounding may also be interpreted in various



ways depending on his or her nationality, be it Nigerian, Argentinean, Japanese, Italian, Australian, or any other nationality. Regardless of whether it is right or wrong, people interpret the expression of emotion differently depending on the background of the actor.

Through the process of understanding the impact of social identity on individual and group behavior and explaining why people tend to favor their own groups and disparage others, psychologists and sociologists have developed social identity theory. The original definition of social identity was formulated in 1972 by Henry Tajfel, a pioneer in the field of social psychology. Tajfel wrote that social identity is "the individual's knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups, together with some emotional and value significance to him of this group membership." Social identity theorists have found that people have a natural tendency to categorize

others into groups on the basis of similarities and differences and that groups of which the individual is a part are likely to be evaluated more positively than groups to which the individual does not belong. In other words, people tend to cluster other people into categories and to favor people who are like themselves.

The dynamics of social identity manifest in many ways in organizations, including stereotyping, discrimination, conflict or solidarity between groups, and decisions about inclusion.

People are motivated to identify with particular groups for two basic reasons. The first is to reduce uncertainty about who they are and how they should behave. A sense of belonging to a certain group allows people to adopt the group's models of behavior and provides clarity about behavioral norms. The second reason is to enhance self-esteem. Identifying with one group as opposed to another can help people feel good about themselves. Consider the example of sports fans—having rooted for the World Series or collegiate basketball champions imparts a strong feeling of pride.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Self-identification with a particular social group may have no influence on how the individual is categorized by others. For example, an American who has lived in France for twenty years may think of herself as French, but the French may still regard her as American. An individual is evaluated by others in ways that make sense to them, not necessarily to the indi-

and associations to belong to. In the workplace, however, this is becoming less and less possible. A variety of factors, including shifts in the demographic makeup of the workforce, globalization, technological advances, and new forms of organization, mean that people increasingly work alongside others whose social identities are different from their own.

In the early years after CCL was founded in 1970, most of the managers who attended its programs were white males. The U.S. Census Bureau predicts that by 2050, minorities will make up nearly half the population—and it can be assumed, an equivalent proportion of the workforce. A number of factors will continue to contribute to this change in the workforce mix, including:

- Civil rights legislation that makes it illegal for organizations to discriminate against prospective or current employees on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, or physical disability
- Changing social norms that make it more acceptable for women to work
- High immigration rates
- Slowing birth rates among whites

This shift in labor force demographics is not limited to the United States. In Europe too, growing numbers of women and immigrants are participating in the workforce. That trend has intensified with the recent addition of ten countries, most of them Eastern European, to the European Union.

Another major trend that is altering the face of the workplace is the globalization of business. For organizations large and small, markets and labor pools are increasingly global. An American sports apparel company, for instance, might obtain its fabric from China, design its clothing in the United States, have the clothing manufactured

in Bangladesh, and sell the products through a chain of stores with locations in North America, Europe, and Asia. Such globalization brings people with diverse cultural backgrounds into contact with one another and creates complex webs of relationships.

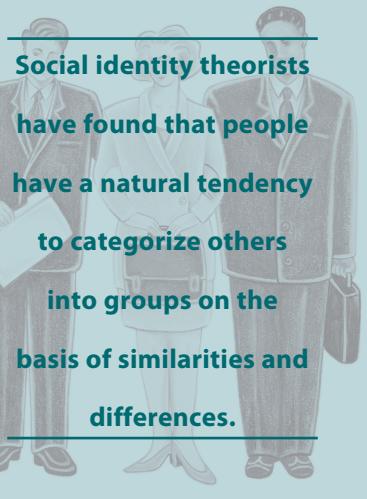
Rapid advances in information and communication technologies are also having an impact on the level of interaction among people with different social identities. These technologies have sped up the pace and reduced the cost of information transmission. Interactions that used to take days to complete can now occur in seconds through the use of the Internet, fax machines, videoconferencing, and satellite phones. Electronic communication systems have overcome the constraints that once were imposed by time and geography. Real-time contact among people spread across the world is now possible.

Finally, the changing nature of organizational forms is also affecting the amount of contact among people with diverse social identities. Organizational structures are evolving from hierarchical and divisional to more decentralized and flexible. To accomplish their work, organizations are increasingly relying on task forces, project teams, and self-managing groups. More and more work teams are geographically dispersed and virtual. As people rely less on the organizational hierarchy to get work done, they find themselves increasingly working across organizational boundaries. The result is that work teams are increasingly heterogeneous.

TAKING ACTION

What can leaders do to develop a greater sense of their social identities? The approach largely depends on whether the social groups with which they are identified are nondominant or dominant groups.

For those who are members of nondominant groups, there are books,



vidual. This is one reason why leaders who are trying to understand how people react to them need to take into account the impact of their own and others' membership in social groups. Increasing their awareness of how their nationality, heritage, gender, race, and other identity categories are viewed by others will ultimately help leaders connect with people who have different life perspectives.

CHANGING WORKPLACE

In a diverse yet increasingly interconnected world, people more than ever find themselves coming into contact with others whose social identities are different from their own. People may still seek out others like themselves when choosing where to live, what religion to practice, or what clubs

networking groups, and leadership development programs that can help them develop a sense of how others react to membership in particular social categories. Networking groups composed of women or people of a particular race or ethnicity can provide a safe setting for sharing experiences related to social identity. There are also leadership development programs devoted to specific identity groups. Through discussions about how people react and respond to leaders who are perceived as “different,” such programs help leaders develop greater self-awareness in the context of their identification with nondominant social groups.

For leaders who are members of dominant social groups, sorting out the ways in which their association with these groups affects how others see them can be more complicated. Typically, members of majority groups are unaware of the impact of their identity on others. In fact, it is not unusual for members of the dominant groups in a society to think they are unaffected by issues such as race, gender, and religion. However, the following techniques have proved effective in enhancing social identity awareness.

Mentoring

Seeking out a mentor from a different social identity group can provide an opportunity to talk about awareness of social identity and help leaders from majority social groups better understand how they are viewed by minority colleagues and how the dimensions of difference interact with perceptions of and reactions to their behavior.

In one organization with which the Leadership Across Differences team worked, a young male manager was dismayed by the negative reactions his mostly female staff members were having to his behaviors. He asked a female colleague to mentor him, and together they worked through the dynamics of the situation and helped

him understand how his behaviors were perceived as overly macho and were hurting staff morale.

Role Reversal

In the role reversal technique, developed by Stacy Blake-Beard when she was a professor in the Graduate School of Education at Harvard University, leaders from dominant social groups place themselves in situations in which they are in the minority and the traditions they encounter are unfamiliar. They might, for example, travel to a foreign country they view as exotic, attend the services of a religious group vastly different from their own, or attend a conference or other event sponsored by a nondominant social group.

It's important for leaders using this technique to select situations that are of interest to them and in which they won't be seen as intruders. After their experiences leaders should think about how they reacted to being the ones who were different and how others reacted to them. Such experiences can be disquieting but can also go a long way toward helping leaders learn about the ways others react to members of their majority social group and about their own assumptions about others.

Journaling

It's often helpful for leaders to record in a journal their observations about how others react to them. Reviewing these entries over time helps leaders make sense of how others perceive and respond to them and how people from different backgrounds and heritages may see the world differently.

The journal entries should identify situations where the leader thinks social identity entered into the social equation. One American, white, male manager experiencing difficulty working in a globally diverse organization made a weekly journal entry in which he noted instances when he felt his social identity influenced interactions with his co-workers, who

were an extremely diverse group. At first he found it hard to identify such instances, but over time it became much easier. He came to feel that the journal helped him better understand the responses of others to his behavior and made him more open to ideas and values that weren't part of his upbringing, organizational training, or home life. He realized that he held assumptions that others might view as being based in a U.S. or male perspective, and that these assumptions

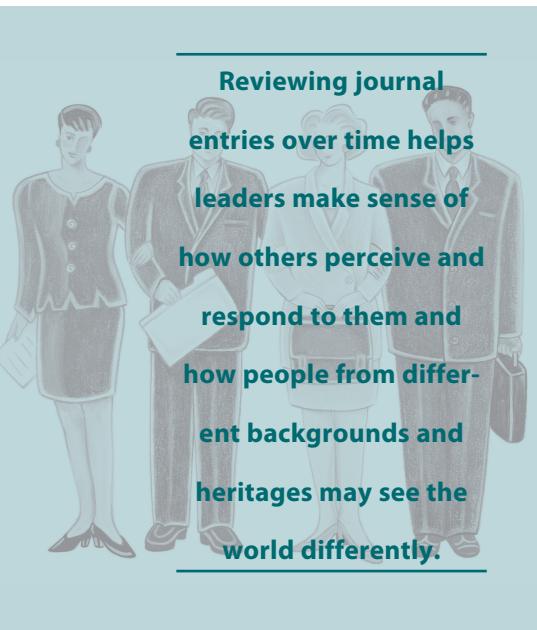
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were preventing him from working as effectively as possible with others. In short, he felt that paying attention to his own identity enhanced his ability to build bridges with his diverse group of colleagues and made him a more effective leader.

For leaders, the main point of these techniques is to foster personal learning about how others perceive them.

Understanding the dynamics of social identity is not easily done by attending



a single workshop or using a single learning tool—it should be part of an

ongoing process. It requires keeping one's eyes and ears open to the perceptions of others and taking advantage of the opportunities built into organizational life, such as regular appraisals, 360-degree feedback, and informal conversations with colleagues.

OPEN CLIMATE

Organizations can promote self-awareness by establishing and maintaining a climate in which it is safe to discuss issues of social identity. One organization with which CCL has worked has a workers council and a diversity council that consistently raise questions about how people from different backgrounds see organizational events. The two councils have become forums in which the sharing of feelings about social identity is encouraged and employees can ask difficult questions about how others see them in light of their memberships in particular social groups. Employees have been known to ask whether others would have

responded to them differently if they were from a different social group and to question whether opportunities and benefits were being distributed without regard to social group. The organization's leaders feel that as a result of this open climate, people from diverse social identity groups can flourish and make the maximum contribution to the organization's overall performance.

COMMON GROUND

Demographic shifts coupled with globalization, advanced communication technology, and changing organizational structures have created a global workforce that brings people from different traditions and with different outlooks into close proximity. This has made it increasingly important for leaders to develop the skills needed to bridge these differences and find common ground. Developing a heightened sense of their social identities and those of others is a critical step along this path. 