IDENTITY SYMBOLS

Condense some daily experience into a glowing symbol, and an audience is electrified.

Ralph Waldo Emerson,
American essayist
(1803–1882)

Identities are crucial for purpose definition and value creation. A team, business unit, or company has only really achieved an identity when people are eager to associate themselves with its symbols. Management can take an active role inviting groups of workers to create symbols that represent their shared identities.

No matter where I am in the world, I always smile a little when I glimpse the logo of KLM, Philips, ING, or Unilever. I once even took pictures of an airplane circling over the city of Chicago while towing behind it a banner with the slogan of Heineken. Why? I don't even drink beer! It's because these companies are Dutch, and I am Dutch as well.

There's nothing rational about it. I rarely want to hang out with other Dutch people when I'm abroad. I usually find them lacking good taste, manners, humor, and spare change. But beware! Don't ever make the mistake of writing my name with an *umlaut*, thank-you-very-much. My name is Jurgen, not Jürgen. I'm Dutch, not German.

Strangely enough, I seem to be the only Dutch person not participating in Dutch football parties or King's Day celebrations. I really don't care that much about the cheese hats and lion pants. When I'm on the other side of the planet, however, I admit I sometimes proudly wear orange. I even have a t-shirt with "Amsterdam" printed all over it. I only wear it when I'm abroad, not when I'm home because I'm actually from Rotterdam, which is Amsterdam's archrival. As I said, it's not rational.

How about you? Would you proudly wear a t-shirt with the flag of your country or the name of a city? How about the name of your spouse? A drawing by your children? The symbol of your sports club? The colors of your political party?

How about the logo of the company you work for?

Identity Management

Managing identity is about managing belonging. It is very hard to have a sense of belonging to a community when the community doesn't have a clear name and image. Just imagine how hard it would be to manage a family, with its family members, family history, family properties, and family traditions, if there were no family name! It's the same with teams, organizations, and other groups. If we want a person to feel part of a group and balance the needs of the group against her own needs, the group will need a name and image that is at least as strong as hers.

Managing identity is about managing belonging

Identity requires coherence. The coherence of a group is about the consistency of its behaviors. Actions emerge from identity, and identity emerges from actions. The group's identity and actions need coherence, or else they are meaningless.

Coherence is about acting in a manner consistent with who you are. Identity and action need to be consistent and not in conflict. Coherence cannot be summoned on the spot. It cannot be created overnight. However, when an organization, a company, or a team does have coherence, amazing things can happen. Managers cannot be those who make it happen, but they can play a significant role in helping it come into being.

Lissack,
The Interaction of Complexity and Management
loc:106

Identity is a complex thing. Besides having a nationality (or multiple nationalities), you can be a member of a sports club, a political party, a religious community, and many other groups. These are all overlapping (and sometimes conflicting) memberships. People struggle every day with multiple identities. 👥 They want to be on a great team, while at the same time, they want to do things on their own. They want to party all night long with friends (probably not with me), but they also want to participate in a sports match the next morning (definitely not with me).

Multiple levels of identity also occur in organizations. There is individual identity, team identity, department identity, business unit identity, and corporate identity. And, again, these identities overlap. People want to be on the management team while at the same time, they wish to remain "one of the guys" in the production department. They want to be an appreciated designer in a project team, but they also hope to be an active contributor to a community of designers across different projects. This juggling of multiple identities is a fact of life. What's more, I believe management should stimulate and nurture all these different shared identities.

> **Human beings are masters of identity management, negotiating (without integrating) a constantly fluctuating constellation of identities. [Likewise] an organisation is a coherent body (integration) that is divided against itself (differentiation) and always changing (ambiguity). In other words, organisations collectively manage multiple types of coexisting identities.**
>
> **Kurtz and Snowden, "Bramble Bushes in a Thicket"**

An identity is crucial for the emergence of purpose and the creation of value, since these won't be effective without a sense of belonging. [Irons, "Social Learning, Collaboration, and Team Identity"] It can also work to counterbalance sub-optimization, which happens when people only do what's good for them, while ignoring what's good for the group. [Baer, "How a Sense of Community Could Transform Selfish Workers"] A sense of identity helps people to form a community and enables peer pressure to combat selfishness. [Appelo, *How to Change the World* pag:51]

We can only address sub-optimization and selfishness with strong identities at *all* levels, stimulating the human brain to utilize its capability for juggling co-existing identities. Let healthy human minds figure out how to balance the needs of the group against the needs of its members. I do this all the time! I balance the needs of my spouse, friends, and family against my personal brand, and I balance the needs of the Management 3.0 events and community against the needs of Happy Melly, its parent organization, and the other brands in the Happy Melly ecosystem.

> Let healthy human minds figure out how to balance the needs of the group against the needs of its members.

I don't know the outcome of such balancing acts in your organization, but I do know that teams, departments, and companies with weak identities will suffer from a lack of commitment to a shared purpose and shared values.

Selfishness

Interestingly enough, complexity science says that *everything* we do is related to selfishness and sub-optimization. After all, if you act in the best interest of your team, then you are optimizing for the team, and the emergent behavior of the team might not be in the best interests of the organization. Likewise, if you do a good deed for the whole organization, it could be the organization that is then acting in a selfish manner, and its behavior might not be best for the country. And we all know about the terrible things people have done to others on behalf of their countries.

Boundary Issues

For a shared identity to work, it is useful to know who is, and who is not, part of the group. This is sometimes clear, but quite often it isn't. It can happen that people have different definitions of what the group identity is and who belongs to it. This doesn't have to be a problem as long as people know each other's interpretations. Even more, the fuzziness of boundaries, and conflicting ideas of member-ship, can actually help a group be creative. [Irons, "Social Learning, Collaboration, and Team Identity"] As long as people are aware of different perspectives and they know how to deal with it, the fuzzy boundaries can be turned into an advantage.

However, when a person is a member of multiple groups where the identities appear to be of the same scope and on the same level (two teams, or two departments, or two organizations), it is prob-ably smart to choose one primary identity. For example, it is hard to be a fan of two football clubs in equal measure. And people with two nationalities usually lean more towards one than the other. This reminds me of the famous question, "If you have two nationalities, which country will you cheer for when their two national sports teams play against each other?" For people in organizations, it is the same; they prefer to have one team to cheer for. I've heard some coaches suggest a **60% rule**: everyone should spend 60% of their time on the same team, the same department, or the same organiza-tion. The rest of their time they can spend working for others.

Group Symbols

It is hard to simply create an identity; usually it can only emerge. It often can't be forced; it's a natural process. It takes time to grow and nurture a shared feeling of belonging which holds teams, departments, and organizations together. [Magic of Teams, "Constructing a Team Identity"] You don't develop an identity just by making people share a room or a building with each other. However, there is something you can do to help people develop an identity by themselves.

Ask for symbols.
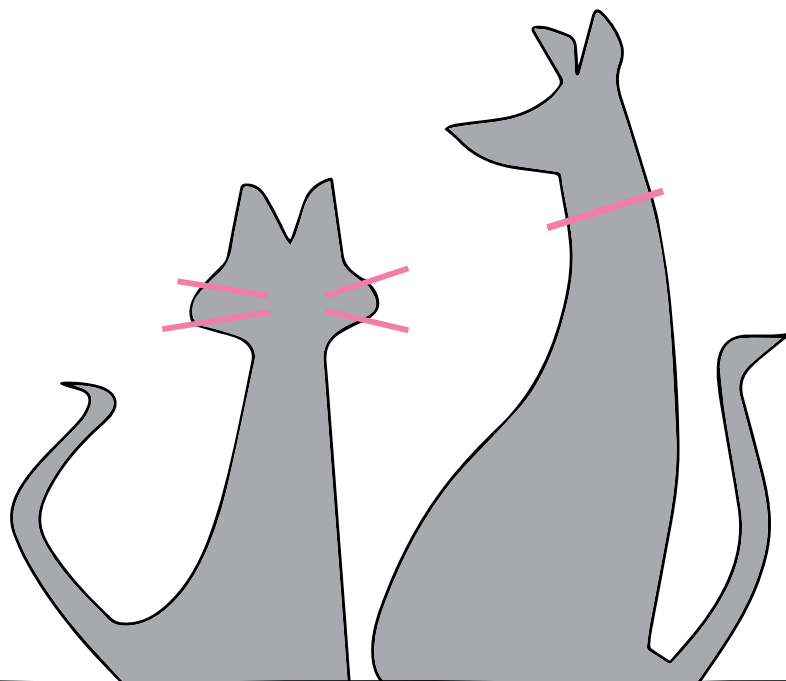
© 2011 Olaf Lewitz

When my partner and I got married, I made a simple website with information for our guests. As a theme for the website, I came up with the idea of a cat and a dog. 🐱 It emerged spontaneously, but we liked this theme so much that the cat and dog were not only prominently displayed on the website but they were also used for buttons that we asked our guests to wear, and balloons and cardboard versions of the happy animals popped up all over the wedding location. ⬤ Our guests loved them. In terms of cohesion and identity, our feline and canine mascots easily beat boring white flowers.

For the same reason, if you want a group of people to feel they are happily married together, suggest the use of names, logos, mascots, etc. For example, I once invited teams in an organization to come up with their own identities because we were building the organization's intranet. I remember one team called themselves "The A-Team" and they used pictures of B.A. Baracus, Hannibal, Face, and Murdock to present themselves as the problem fixers. A student in one of my workshops told me his test team called themselves the "Black Ninjas" and always wore black whenever they were hunting for product defects. At ResearchGate, a company I visited in Berlin, the managers insist that all teams think up a name with an R and a G in it. And so they have teams calling themselves The Gummibears, Vorsprung, SynRG, SuperGlue, and The Borg. As marketing expert Seth Godin wrote in one of his many books, people want to be part of a tribe. It's time to put on the feathers! Identity is developed by sharing names and symbols. [Godin, *Tribes*]

Just like purpose and values, symbols can emerge easily when people remember and share stories. A group can only achieve cohesion when they experience things together. Of course, working together under stress is one possibility, but having a bit of fun would be the better alternative. There's nothing that invites group feelings more than stories such as, "Do you remember Danny's nocturnal scream of terror after the hotel inadvertently swapped the rooms of Carl and Carla?" Identity is developed by sharing stories. If you find the stories, you will find the symbols.

What about bad identities?

I almost hear you thinking, "Having an identity is not enough. There are many examples of bad symbols!" Indeed! Pol Pot, Idi Amin, Mao Zedong, Joseph Stalin, Adolf Hitler, Genghis Khan, Kim Il Sung, Osama bin Laden, history is rife with examples of leaders rallying communities to do terrible things to others, using the power of identities and symbolism.

That doesn't mean that identity symbols are bad. It just means that they are powerful and are devoid of ethics until you add them. Identity must be given meaning with purpose (see the chapter "Work Expo") and values (see the chapter "Value Stories and Culture Books") in order to have the group focus on doing good things. This has been the achievement of Abraham Lincoln, Buddha, Martin Luther King, Winston Churchill, Mother Theresa, Gandhi, and many, many more. It could be your achievement as well.

The T-Shirt Test

I once performed a workshop at a big company where I asked employees for the names of their teams and departments. The names the participants gave me were along the lines of HRK-EK, ERN56, and %$&#!? I think the names were not very interesting and the employees were not very happy. I'm sure there was a correlation there waiting to be discovered.

A team (or department, or division, or company) has only really achieved an identity when people are eager to wear the symbols of that team. It's the same with football clubs, political parties, and religious gatherings. Creative networkers who gladly associate themselves with the identity of a team or organization feel more engaged, are more willing to improve the shared work, and are more empathic toward the needs of clients and stakeholders of that team or organization. Therefore, when you aim to adhere to the principles of Management 3.0, strengthening identities at multiple levels would be a great way to achieve that.

We spend most of our days living with ourselves, our partners, our children, and our organizations. And maybe a cat or a dog. Or a chinchilla. A happy life should include feeling happy about the relationships that you maintain, with yourself, your spouse, your kids... and your colleagues. (And your chinchilla.)

I call it the T-Shirt Test. 👕 An organization passes the t-shirt test when employees will proudly wear a t-shirt with the company logo on it, hoping that other people will notice the name of the organization, hoping that other people will say, "Wow, ~~you have a chinchilla?~~ you work for company X? That's so cool!"

An organization passes the t-shirt test when employees will proudly wear a t-shirt with the company logo on it.

When your colleagues aren't willing to associate themselves with the symbol of the group they belong to, this could be the symptom of a big problem.

When have you last worn the symbol of your team or company?

Collaboration Superpowers

There's an authenticity behind the Collaboration Superpowers branding that we're very proud of. We found that everyone at work must bridge some form of remoteness, even when they work at the same address. This struck us with a sense of purpose, long before we had a name. Next came wanting to help, serve, and transform this problem with our stories and solutions.

We repurposed the name Collaboration Superpowers from another project. The audacity of our name is certainly something big, and it's what we want to live up to! As for the logo, we were looking for something badass, elegant, sexy, gender-neutral, and powerful. After some brainstorming, we discovered that we all had a mutual love for maps—and a subway map of Tokyo became our source of inspiration. Elinor added the brilliance of neon—and voila! A logo that we all loved exploded into being. As a team, we are contributing to a story that's bigger than us. Our name and our logo reflect that.

Lisette Sutherland, *The Netherlands* and Elinor Slomba, *United States*

What Now?

If you want to strengthen a sense of belonging among the people in a group, try the following management workout exercise:

1. Find an excuse to ask teams, departments, or divisions about a symbol of their identity. Maybe because you need icons on the intranet, or on the website; maybe because you're creating a brochure for new employees; maybe because each will be presented at the company's annual event.

2. Don't let them get away with a name such as "QA Department" in 12-point Times New Roman. It might be useful to collect some good (and bad) examples and distribute them for inspiration.

3. Verify that all group members are willing to associate themselves with the chosen symbols. Otherwise, reject them. (The symbols, not the people.)

4. Start using the symbols in all internal communication.

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"If knowledge is indeed power, knowledge shared is a superpower."

- Emi Kolawole

Everyone who collaborates faces the problem of how to bridge the distance between two or more minds, whether you're in the same building - or on the other side of the world. Rising to the challenges, remote work promotes some of the very things global business is seeking today including high levels of engagement and self-organization.

Collaboration Superpowers collects stories, tips and lessons learned for setting up effective distributed teams.

Collaboration Superpowers

The Field Guide

Lisette Sutherland & Elinor Slomba
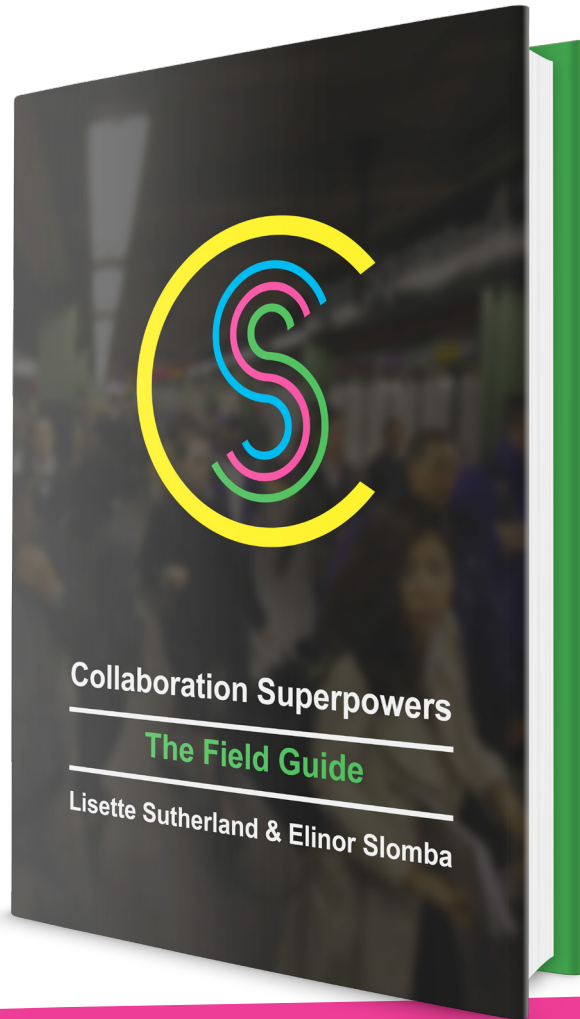
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