

Breaking the Tie That Binds

As a result of the financial crises, many people are leaving their jobs, some having volunteered for severance packages and some not. After years of employment, leaving the organization has multiple impacts, and a significant one is a jolt to the person's identity.

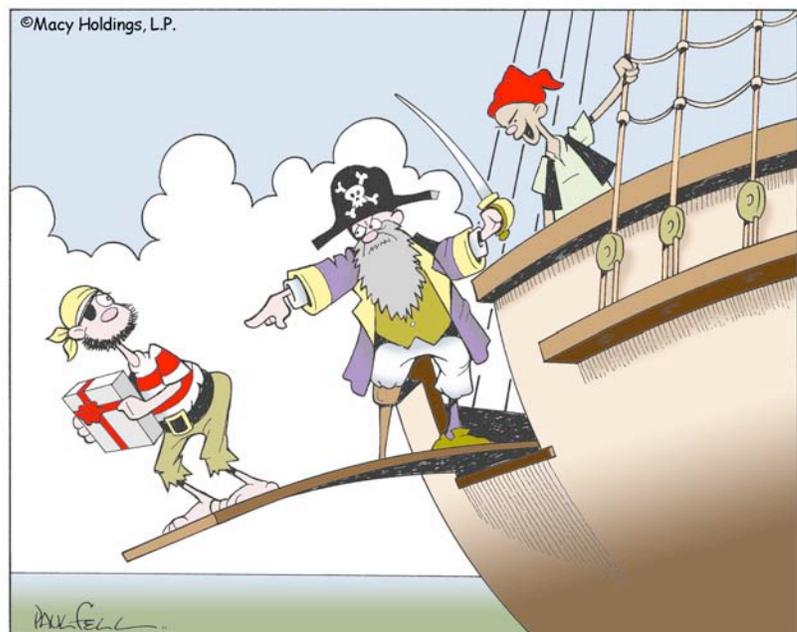
Organizations spend vast amounts of effort in seeking to link our identities with theirs. Those efforts take many forms: new employee orientations, engagement processes, employee participation, annual employee questionnaires, team building, holiday parties, performance bonuses, and stock options to name a few. All of these are intended to help employees feel a sense of belonging to the organization and therefore to help the company be profitable.

After we've been there a while, we do come to feel a part. We start to fit into the routines of our workgroup, huddling around the coffee pot to share the latest gossip. We learn the rules of the road, informal and formal, who to trust and who not. We have a sense of where we fit in the hierarchy, how much status our job has, what our chances of promotion might be.

We carry that sense of our work and how we fit outside as well. Go to a party, and what are the first things someone asks you...what do you do and where do you work? We set a lifestyle based on our income, our sense of what neighborhood we can live in, what kind of car we can drive.

All of that is part of our personal identity. And it all works well until something major changes...like leaving the organization.

What is this thing called *identity*? My definition is that it's our personality's signature. It's those attributes that are with us over a long time that make us recognizable to our selves and others. So, how is it a problem when major changes happen?





Listen to some peers who have recently lost their jobs.

“Suddenly I felt like I had the plague. The people I used to drink coffee with every morning at work suddenly didn’t take my calls and didn’t respond to my e-mails. One day I belonged, the next I didn’t”

“The loan officer I talked to about refinancing my house looked at my application, and when he got to the section on current income, I could see him slump. All my life I have paid my bills on time, I owe nothing except my house payment, and yet after a lifetime of being responsible, this guy considers me to be unworthy.”

“I left with a great severance package. I was happy to go! But, now that I’ve been out a few months, I have to admit I’m a bit bored. I miss the routine and the structure that work gave me before. Now I tend to sleep too late, and some days I just can’t play any more golf. I’ve given up some of what gave me the sense of meaning in my life.”

“I worked there for twenty-six years, and I’m not so sure now what is me and what is the work I did. The boundaries are blurred, and I never thought about the difference before.”

“I just can’t wait! I have no idea what’s to come, and I’m not the slightest bit worried. I’m just curious what I’ll turn out to be after a few months of not being forced to conform. I feel like I just got out of a body cast.”

These folks demonstrate some of the ongoing qualities of self that we get so used to that we don’t notice them. They come through the give and take between our environment and ourselves. When those relationships change, the other isn’t there to provide their part of the equation.

If we are leaving a job, our sense of identity with our former work is the tie that can bind us to the past and keeps us from moving fully into our future.

Knowing where identity comes from and how it is formed give the clues for how to help it adapt when we’re in times of significant change.

Where does identity come from? Psychologists say that a person’s identity is formed early in childhood, perhaps in the first months of life. A baby comes into the world with some predilections that relate to its senses of physical wellbeing, comfort, security, relationship, pain and pleasure, etc. As the baby interacts with its early caregivers, it forms patterns of expectation and response that give the structure to its emerging self concept.

As adults, those same patterns continue to serve us. Of course, we have matured and grown in our independence. But, we still have needs for stable relationships, security, social interaction, challenge, entertainment, etc. Our self evaluations – what kind of work do I do, how much

money do I make, what role do I play in my work team, what kind of authority do I have, where do I fit in the status hierarchy of the organization – all these come from our involvement in our work world and follow the same general pattern that was carved into our psyches when we were young.

These patterns are strong and resilient, carved out to give a stable sense of self as we progress through life. They are what gives us the continuity over time, that steady set of wants, needs, ways of reacting that we're so used to that we rarely think about it. We just take them as givens.

When we hit those pot holes in life in which the pattern and its quid pro quo stop working (whether by choice or not), it's a wakeup call. It may be a time of confusion and emotion, a time when nostalgically we'd just like to forget the dilemmas and go back to the way things were. Or, it may be a time of experimentation and adventure, a time to re-enter the dreams of our youth, or a time to find interests never before considered. Either way, our identity is up for renewal!

How does one update one's identity? If it's something that developed so early in life and was meant to be stable through time, how does one change it? Luckily, nature gave us the keys to change at the same time it set our original identity.



What built the patterns of our identity in the first place was the moment-to-moment interaction with our caregivers about what we wanted and needed from them. The give and take of that interaction forged the pattern of our identity.

So, to update one's identity, work the process in reverse. Specifically, what are the small wants, needs, and expectations that you and your workplace exchanged? *Identify those, then call them back!*

Here are some examples:

- A workgroup to whom I belong
- A clear set of expectations of what I am to do in my job
- A fair review of my performance
- An opportunity to learn new skills
- A fair pay for the work I perform
- A chance to have some social time with my peers

In making this list, be exhaustive. Your identity was formed from very small evaluations of your self and your experience, and the more of those minute interactions in your former workplace that you can articulate, the greater the ease with which you can adapt yourself now. Go for at least 100 ways in which your identity was formed and satisfied by your work.

Next, think about what it is you really want to do next. Where is your passion for investing your effort and your energy. We had such dreams when we were young, those things we might accomplish in life...the star basketball player we hoped to be, the author of best-selling science fiction novels, the astronaut, the musician, the surf bum.

Years ago we put those dreams out in front of our families and friends. And we got feedback, not all of it positive. Perhaps that feedback and the desire for practicality talked us into putting those dreams in the closet in order to find a profession that would pay us well enough to have a family, buy a house, a car, etc.

But now's the time to pull those forgotten dreams out of the closet, dust them off, and let them roll around in your imagination. What do you really want to do now?

That's a significant question. *What do you really want to do now?* And, it's the question around which you have the opportunity to re-consolidate your identity. Look back at that list of 100 or so ways in which your former work place supported your identity. Which of them still fit you at this point in your life? Which no longer serve and can be released? Which of them will support that dream of what you really want to do now? How many ways can you link them together?

The clearer a person's vision about what s/he wants and the greater the linkages with these little aspects of self, the stronger and more powerful the individual's identity. And the more likely s/he is to be the conductor of his/her own life. The more s/he will draw in the resources and opportunities for achieving that dream.



These breaks that happen between us and our world – breaks such as leaving one's long-term job – are big life events. Whether we have chosen them or not, they demand the investment of energy to rebuild. Of course, the good news is that, as we encounter more of such life events and use wise tools to engage them, nature returns the favor in the form of higher levels of life order and satisfaction.

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