



*Helping leaders and organizations live up to their promise*

## Who Are We?

"Identity" has been on my mind lately. Not long ago I learned that France's President Nicolas Sarkozy initiated a national dialogue on French identity. Soon afterward the New York Times ran an article on the importance of organizational identity and how a company's response to significant changes in the marketplace is largely a function of how it defines itself. ("*When Names Change To Protect The Future*" - NYT, November 29, 2009.) I just completed an engagement where much of the conversation was about the client's "*Hedgehog Concept*" - as described by Jim Collins in Good To Great\*, the intersection of our passions, what drives our economic engine and what we can be best at - that should be central to decisions about what products and services to offer. Maybe it's the start of a new year and new decade, but many of my friends and associates also seem to be asking questions about who they are - including their values, what they really want to do, their plans and what may be holding them back.

Surviving and thriving in the years ahead will require "triple-e" leaders and organizations: leaders and organizations that are simultaneously *effective, ethical and engaging*; none of these is possible without being clear about who we are. Much of the latest economic meltdown seems due to institutions that forgot they were banks and investment firms and instead operated more like casinos. Many ethical and legal transgressions are functions of leaders and organizations that never really define their values or seem to forget what they are; sometimes leaders succumb to "shadow" aspects of their personalities that they are unaware of and organizations fall prey to "dark sides" of their cultures that they are blind to. Real engagement requires that all parties be clear about their passions, values and goals, and that those be aligned. We are drawn to authentic encounters and authentic leaders, and seek to be authentic ourselves; before we can be who we are, however, we need to know who we are. I always liked the Hasidic parable about Rabbi Zusya, who on his deathbed shared his revelation that God would likely not ask him why he hadn't been more like Moses, but instead why he hadn't been more like Rabbi Zusya.

Organizations and individuals alike who seek to master the identity challenge will benefit from:

***Knowing their stories.*** What formative experiences or "moments of truth" contributed to who or what we are today? Who played significant roles shaping our values, choices and character (or culture?) How did we become the organization or person that we are today? As Karen Blixen, author of Out of Africa, said: "To be a person, you have to have a story to tell." Organizations also have stories that account for what they have become.

**Knowing their character (or culture.)** I agree with the famed Chicago journalist Sydney Harris, who stated that "ninety percent of the world's woes come from people not knowing themselves, their abilities, their frailties and even their real virtues." Organizations and individuals alike benefit by learning more about their strengths, "shadows," vulnerabilities, motivations, interests, blind spots and unique characteristics. Opportunities for expanding self-awareness include valid instruments and surveys, any kind of feedback (if we're paying attention,) coaching, trying new experiences and combinations of all of these. You can learn about some of the instruments that inTEgro clients use to strengthen understanding of their character and culture at <http://www.integro-inc.com/surveys.htm>

**Knowing their values.** Without knowing our real values, we are a ship at sea without a compass - at a loss determining what port to steer for or what course adjustments to make. Alexander Hamilton was right: "Those who stand for nothing will fall for anything."

**Knowing their aims.** I use the word "aims" broadly here, to include the combination of what's typically described as purpose, mission, vision, goals, strategies, objectives and plans. As Jim Collins demonstrated in his Built To Last\* research, an organization's *core ideology* - the combination of a meaningful purpose and its core values - is a potent combination. Collins found that organizations with unwavering core ideologies coupled with powerful adaptive mechanisms achieved returns that were nearly twelve times the returns of comparison companies. I think of aims as who we are in the "future perfect tense" - what we promise or aspire to be and accomplish that's consistent with our values and who we are. As Seneca, the legendary Roman general counseled: "If we do not know what port to steer for, any wind is favorable."

Still today, hanging over the gate to Delphi in Greece - where travelers, military and civic leaders in ancient times sought counsel from Delphi's oracles - is the inscription: "Know thyself." (Socrates) At the beginning of a new year and new decade, surrounded by many challenges as well as opportunities, perhaps we and our organizations could do no better than to follow that advice.

To request a complimentary copy of the chapter *Identity* from my upcoming book - Living Up To Our Promise . . . The Integrity Imperative - go to <http://www.integro-inc.com/contact.htm>

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"The most difficult thing in life is to know yourself."

*Thales*

"I now know myself to be a person of weakness and strength, liability and giftedness, darkness and light. I now know that to be whole means to reject none of it but to embrace all of it."

*Parker Palmer*

"It's not hard to make decisions when you know what your values are."

*Roy Disney*

\*\* Find hundreds more quotations at <http://www.integro-inc.com/quotes.htm>

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