SCHOLARSHIP

# Leadership Excellence in Interdependent Contexts:

## Self-Validation and Identity Confirmation as Antecedents to and Co-requisites of Leader Effectiveness —Through and Beyond Behavioural Integrity—

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ABSTRACT

A leader's identity related to his or her behavioural integrity (the perceived alignment between one's words, values and actions) is critically important for creating healthy interpersonal and organizational outcomes, especially in contexts of high interdependence. To the extent that this identity can be validated and confirmed (by and for both the leader and subordinates), it can further reinforce and strengthen behavioural integrity in those individuals, their teams and the broader organization. Organizations where there is validated alignment between how leaders and individuals see themselves and each other can foster a culture that promotes behavioural integrity among all of these members. Cultural features (e.g., language, symbols,narratives, practices, etc.) can further enhance a context where identities are validated and confirmed, leading to positive organizational outcomes. Recommendations for future research are discussed.

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*"May you live in the most interesting of times."*

Leadership, interdependent thinking, and interdependent action occupy center stage in the world today. Each is arguably in a state of crisis. Citizens are holding political leaders and the inner circles of these leaders accountable for the social, economic, political, and environmental state of the world today (One World Trust [OWT], 2011). Investors, regulators and the public at large are demanding similar levels of accountability from industry leaders for the financial, social, and environmental state of industry (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2010, 2011; United Nations Global Compact [UNGC], 2010, 2011). Internal constituents within organizations have joined the chorus with calls for leadership accountability from the executive suite to the shop floor (National Association of Corporate Directors [NACD], 2009; Committee for Economic Development [CED], 2010). Cries for accountability thus trickle throughout broader systems like cancer cells heralding illness within otherwise healthy bodies.

Many believe that current leaders have been selling a defunct set of goods—arguing that leaders and the institutions they lead are behaving in ways that are inconsistent with the values and promises that these leaders have made (OWT, 2008). The behavioural integrity of these leaders, and arguably of the systems they lead, has thus been compromised. Even if the leaders themselves believe that their actions and promises are aligned, others do not.

The impact is consequential. In some societies the erosion of trust and hope appears to have become epidemic. News of perceived breaches is plastered across global headlines eroding the trust, hope and confidence that many have in leaders and in the future (International Risk Governance Council [IRGC], 2009; World Economic Forum [WEF], 2012). It follows that the capacity of societies and the organizations within them to think and act interdependently has been, and continues to be, eroded in today's relatively unstable, interdependent, and arguably fearful world.

Even when leaders themselves believe that their own actions and promises are aligned, others may not. The thinking and acting capacity of the systems they lead has been and will continue to be diminished as long as and wherever system leaders behave in ways that are not aligned with their values and promises and others perceive these discrepancies. Before the current state is accepted as it is and a period of suboptimal homeostasis kicks in, action is required.

In this paper, I consider what leaders can do to create a sensible way forward, across contexts and challenges and over time, with focus on four crucial steps: (1) leading in (and creating) contexts which are consistent with and hence validate and possibly confirm their own identities; (2) validating and confirming the identities of colleagues, followers and others with whom they interact or for whom they are responsible, and (3) creating and maintaining work group and organization cultures and contexts within which their own and others' identities are validated and confirmed; and (4) being clear about behaviours that are required and those which are not tolerated in the organization (i.e. establishing, socializing people into, and policing codes of conduct for interpersonal interaction). Research suggests that in these ways leaders will strengthen their own behavioural integrity and embed behavioural integrity within the groups, organizations, and larger systems that they lead (Thomas, Schermerhorn & Dienhar, 2004). Those involved will be more apt to cooperate and engage in effective, timely task-focused interdependent debate than they otherwise would. Interpersonal conflict will be minimal or absent.

Leadership, in any context, can be demanding. Not everyone succeeds in leadership roles. Research suggests, however, that leaders who lead in and create contexts within which their own identities are validated and confirmed, and within which they validate and confirm the identities of others, will be better equipped and more likely to walk their talk and enable others to do the same. These leaders will be more personally able and socially positioned to: (a) keep

the promises they make; (b) act in ways that are consistent with their values; and (c) be perceived by others as doing so even when there are discrepancies among leader promises, values and actions. They will thus display behavioural integrity (Simons, 2002, 2008). Leaders who embed identity validation, identity confirmation, promise keeping, and acting in accordance with one's values into group and organization cultures will be more likely than others to incubate and increase the behavioural integrity of both themselves and others.

Going a step further, it follows that those whose identities are 'validated and valued' will experience a state of identity confirmation (that extends beyond identity validation) to form an even safer psychological and relational bedrock than the identity validation alone would offer. In this state, leaders can extend themselves to more strongly engage effectively in interdependent thinking and action and encourage others to also do so. While the impact occurs across contexts, results may be particularly apparent in difficult or tough circumstances (e.g., those that are described as complex, threatening, turbulent, and/or high speed) (cf. Davis, Eisenhardt, & Bingham, 2009).

This paper has three objectives. The first is to provide a base perspective that advances our understanding of the identity-based pre- and co-requisites to behavioural integrity and effective leadership in interdependent contexts—especially (but not exclusively) in demanding contexts that have the potential to undermine effective interdependent thinking and action. The second is to suggest directions for research that: (a) addresses important, arguably pivotal, questions and debates within the science of identity, behavioural integrity, interdependent thinking and action, and (b) thereby informs the practice of leadership, cooperation and conflict, and the reality of interdependent excellence. The third is to stimulate action based on informed science so that leaders can thrive and inspire those around them to revitalize their organizations and professional communities and position them to wisely address current and future challenges.

This work will first: (1) define behavioural integrity and link behavioural integrity to effective leadership; (2) define identity and identities; and (3) introduce self-verification and identity confirmation as antecedents to and co-requisites of behavioural integrity and effective leadership.

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It will then set out how leaders can incubate and strengthen their own and others' behavioural integrity by: (a) leading within and creating contexts within which their own identities are validated and ultimately confirmed (validated and valued); (b) confirming others' identities; and (c) embedding identity confirmation within the cultures of the groups and organizations they lead. In each of these ways, leaders can create the conditions that support and advance effective interdependent thinking and action.

This discussion pays particular, but not exclusive, attention to leadership in interdependent contexts that themselves undermine or have the potential to undermine effective thinking and action. Such contexts are common and, as noted previously, are relevant. Unique demands within these contexts can challenge even the best of leaders. While predictive across contexts, research suggests that identity-validation and identity confirmation are especially powerful predictors of success when the need for interdependent thinking and action is high. Success in these contexts hinges on the extent to which individuals think and act in tandem—collaboratively in a cooperative fashion, with candor and discipline—in circumstances that often undermine their willingness and ability to do so (Brown & Eisenhardt,1998; Huber, 2004). Success cannot

be taken for granted. Those involved need to collaborate in order to integrate their perspectives and actions in timely ways. This often involves sharing a point of view that others do not understand or engaging in timely pluralistic debate and problem solving or both. Some individuals, groups and organizations succeed; others fail—and sometimes when they fail, or even suboptimize, the consequences are catastrophic.

## Integrity, Behavioural Integrity and Effective Leadership

> In its fullest sense, integrity is: "absolute wholeness, truthfulness, unblemished, undivided, without imperfection," with "sound moral principles, and trustworthiness" (Abel, 2008: 24).

Adopting a ***structural perspective*** (that reflects Abel's focus on wholeness), to say that a leader has ***integrity*** is to say that, as a person, this leader is unified or whole; the leader's identity, life, social world, actions and promises are aligned.

Narrowing the field of vision, to that of an ***action perspective***, a leader's ***integrity*** is defined by the extent to which his or her words and actions are in fact consistent (Palanski and Yammarino, 2007). Adopting an ethical lens, to say that a leader has ***ethical integrity*** is to say that he or she adheres, in thought and action, to moral and ethical principles (cf., Craig & Gustafson, 1998).

In contrast, ***behavioural integrity*** is a social perception. A leader has behavioural integrity to the extent that others perceive the leader's words, values, and actions to be consistent; regardless of the moral content of these or whether perceptions are accurate (Simons, 2002), and regardless of whether the leader agrees with others' perceptions of him or her. Behavioural integrity is thus subjective. It is influenced by the actor, the perceiver, the nature of their relationships, attributions, biases and a host of other factors (Basik, 2010).

Across circumstances and contingencies, questions about the integrity and behavioural integrity of leaders are crucial. Leader authenticity and behaviour and the quality of relations between leaders and those they lead profoundly affect the performance of those whom they lead (Gerstner & Day, 1997; Kuvaas, Buch, Dysvik & Harem, 2012; Leroy, Palanski, & Simons, 2012; Palanski & Yammarino, 2011) as well as their well-being and the health and effectiveness of their organizations. How individuals perceive their leaders affects how they relate to them, to one another, and to their work; what results they achieve and whether they are likely to stay (Gerstner & Day, 1997). Positive relationships and positive expectations increase the likelihood that positive outcomes will ensue.

Evidence suggests that a leader's reputation is reflected in the reputation of the organizations that he or she leads. To the degree that leaders have positive reputations, the organizations that they lead similarly do so (e.g., Dutton, Dukerich & Harquail, 1991), and capable people are more likely than they would be otherwise to join or partner with these organizations (Browning, Beyer, & Shelter, 1995; Hall, Blass, Ferris & Masssengale, 2004). Organizations with positive reputations are simultaneously more likely to announce positive surprises, reap greater market rewards, and receive smaller market penalties for negative surprises than other firms are (Pharrer, Pollock, & Rindova, 2010). It follows that leaders who display or are perceived to have behavioural integrity may very well develop strong and positive reputations that then spill over to positively affect the reputations of organizations they lead. Leaders with strong reputations for behavioural integrity may become noticed and accumulate high levels of public recognition for the quality of the firm's capabilities and outputs (King &Whetten, 2008). Positive emotional responses and an increase in the economic opportunities available to the firm may follow (Rindova, Pollock, & Hayward; 2006).

Consequences aside, for multiple reasons, others may perceive the words, values and actions of leaders to be inconsistent even when these words, values and actions are aligned in fact. For example, the context within which promises are made may change in ways that render

previously agreed courses of action suboptimal. Changes in resources levels may affect what a leader is able to promise and deliver. Organization values and images may shift and erode the extent to which leaders and others are attached to an organization (cf., Dutton, Dukerich & Harquail, 1994) and are thus willing and able to make and meet promises on the organization's behalf.

Followers themselves may be overcommitted, or otherwise occupied and/or their perceptions of leaders may be skewed by stereotypes and thus be less accurate than they normally would be [refer to Gilbert & Hixon (1991) for a related discussion of person perception]. Each of these and other factors may erode the leader's socially perceived behavioural integrity. Nonetheless, this behavioural integrity remains a crucial ingredient of effective leadership, and developing and maintaining this behavioural integrity remains a fundamental leadership challenge. Even if fate intervenes or circumstances change in ways that render leaders unable to deliver on their promises, it is important for followers to know that the leaders are people who would have done their very best to deliver on their promises even though they failed to do so. This knowledge would foster interpersonal interaction that is safer and more predictable than it would otherwise be. Thereby it would germinate higher levels of intra- and interpersonal effectiveness and more adept collaboration and timely improvisation than would otherwise be possible. [Refer to Golembiewski (1988) for a related discussion of regenerative interaction].

Research seeking to inform the challenge of developing and maintaining behavioural integrity has already demonstrated the criticality of both authentic leader behaviour and leader political skills in influencing perceptions that drive leader behavioural integrity (Basik, 2010; Leroy, Palanski, & Simons, 2012 ). Research on identity, self-verification, and identity confirmation suggests other antecedents to and co-requisites of behavioural integrity and effective leadership. Drawing on this latter research, I argue that to the extent that leaders work in contexts within which their identities are validated, they will be more likely than they would otherwise be to deliver on their promises and to be perceived as doing so (even when they do not). These leaders will be more resilient, have better and more cooperative relations with others and work more effectively. While this alignment is an important ingredient of effective leadership across situations, it can be especially so in situations or contexts that themselves undermine relationships between leaders and others who need to integrate their perspectives and cooperate in order to be successful. My aim is to magnify awareness of identity dynamics in general and identity confirmation in particular within the literature on leadership and to demonstrate the value of research that investigates the role of confirming self, role, social and other identities that extend beyond self-based attribute anchors.

## Self-Verification, Self-Validation, and Identity Confirmation and the Behavioural Integrity of Leaders

Considered in its entirety, a person's ***identity*** is captured in this person's response to the question: "Who am I?" Broadly conceived, a complete response, would include all of the person's emotionally-laden thoughts about him- or herself (Rosenberg, 1979) as a physical, social and moral being (Gecas, 1982). Together, these thoughts and the emotions attached to them would include each and all of the person's 'identities' which together would comprise this person's all encompassing 'identity'. Considered in its totality as a gestalt [i.e., a unified whole that cannot be derived from the summation of its component parts [(Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language, 1989)], a person's broadly conceptualized 'identity' is thus defined as his or her emotionally-laden definition of self in terms of characteristics and abilities, roles, and group memberships (Rosenberg, 1979). Separate terms are used to differentiate specific identities that arise from each of these bases.

Whereas *personal identities* are based on self-defined characteristics and abilities (Rosenberg, 1979) (e.g., sociable, intelligent, moral, ethical); *role identities*, as the name

suggests, are based on the roles that a person internalizes within his or her self-definition (Ashforth, 2001) (e.g., leader, knowledge worker, coach, wife, husband, parent, daughter, son). In contrast, *social identities* are based on group memberships that a person internalizes within his or her self-conception (Tajfel & Turner, 1985) (e.g., member of a team or professional group; citizen of a specific country or of the world as a whole; member of a particular race, religion, or gender group). Specific identities vary in their importance, relevance and centrality within a person's conception of him- or herself. Individuals are more certain of some identities, be these personal, role or social or anchored otherwise, than they are of others. Validating and confirming those that are important, relevant and central to a leader's self-conception would have a particularly strong and positive impact on his or her behavioural integrity.

## Self-Verification, Self-Validation and Identity Confirmation

Research finds that individuals prefer and seek situations, relationships, and experiences that are consistent with and otherwise supportive of their identities (see Lecky, 1945; Secord & Backman, 1965 for early work). Whether their identities are personal, social or role-based, people engage in a variety of behavioural and cognitive activities that create—within their minds and social environments—a reality that verifies, validates and sustains their self-definitions (cf. McCall & Simmons, 1966; Secord & Backman, 1965).

The **process** through which they seek consistency, even for their negative self-views, is labeled *self-verification* (Swann, 1983). The **end state** has been labeled *self-validation*. A person's self is said to be *verified to* the degree that, from this person's perspective, others define them as they define themselves.

In contrast to self-verification, a person's identities are confirmed to the extent that his or her mental, social, and physical environments verify, and value these as well as the person's identity considered in its totality. The end state is labeled *identity confirmation*.

While it is possible to imagine multiple reasons why people self-verify, early research that focused on attribute-based self-definitions found that they do so in order to: (1) meet their needs for psychological (epistemic) security, and (2) address practical issues like creating predictable relations and reliable interaction partners who meet previously negotiated agreements (Swann, Stein Seroussi, & Giesler, 1992). The motivation to verify self-views and, I would argue, identities that are core to one's self-definition and overarching identity, and that are contextually salient is particularly strong (refer to Markus & Kunda, 1986, for a related discussion).

The secure, predictable, and reliable base that validation affords provides a taken-for-granted foundation upon which individuals can act alone and in tandem with others—it thereby becomes a foundation that contributes to effective individual and interdependent work (Telford-Milton, 1996; Milton, 1998; Polzer, Milton & Swann, 2002, Milton & Westphal, 2005; Milton, 2008). Based on field research (e.g., Milton, 1998, 2003), I argue that similar motives underwrite the need for identity confirmation; but to the motives which drive self-verification, I add the *need to be valued—to be seen as a person who has worth—and possibly the need to belong*—to be part of a group or a community. Where the two perspectives of self-verification and identity confirmation part company are in the weightings they attach to a person's need to be valued—as a person who has worth and in the latter's specific inclusion of both self-based and social identities. These issues are discussed later in the research and practice commentary section of this paper.

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## Sources of Identity Validation

A person's identity or identities may be validated or violated in multiple ways. Identity validation may arise from multiple sources within and beyond organizations. A person's identity may, for example, be either validated or violated via elements of their work (Pratt, Rockmann & Kaufmann, 2006); via their work groups' and organizations' reputations (Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994, images (Dukerich, Golden & Shortell, 2002), or cultures (Telford-Milton, 1996; Milton, 1998, 2003); and via the character of relationships (Milton, 2009), social networks (Milton, 2003; Milton & Westphal, 2005), interpersonal interactions, and support systems. Identities may be also be validated by the extent to which others see the person the same way the person sees him- or herself (i.e., via interpersonal congruence) (Swann, 1983; Polzer, Milton & Swann, 2002; Milton & Westphal, 2005). It is thus clear that individuals may fit or not fit within their organizations on multiple and varied dimensions. While there are multiple sources of identity validation, in this paper I focus primarily on identity validation that stems from a leader's work and relations with others. Thereafter, I initiate discussion about ways in which leaders may influence identity validation via their impact on work group and organization cultures.

## When Leaders Lead in Contexts within Which Their Identities are Validated

Practically speaking, when leaders work in contexts that are consistent with their identities, they will tend to invest themselves in their work and roles and be more successful than they would be in contexts that are inconsistent with, or even hostile to, their identities (Telford-Milton, 1996; Milton, 2003). They will tend to feel safer and be more psychologically centered. Their interactions with others will tend to be more predictable, reliable and cooperative, and they will develop identity validation-based social networks characterized by high levels of cooperation (cf., Milton & Westphal, 2005). Contexts within which a leader's work and work relationships validate his or her own identities thus provide a foundation for the leader's own behavioural integrity. They can be authentic and succeed.

Sustaining false identities may undermine behavioural integrity. While leaders often have to act on multiple stages, they are likely to be most effective when they can be authentic in their leadership role on every stage. When this is possible, they would be more likely than they would be otherwise to espouse their values, share information about their identities, make promises that are consistent with who they are and what they value, and keep the promises they make.

Their leader role becomes a natural extension of 'who' they are, and may even be a crucial identity that they value and enact. Leaders for whom this is true can 'be' and 'behave' authentically. The consistency between their actual and espoused values and those they make promises in terms of would likely: (a) be more aligned, because of the authenticity involved, and (b) be perceived by others as being more aligned than would be the case if the leaders were in contexts that were less consistent with their identities. To the extent the leader's interaction partners perceive this alignment, one would expect the leader's behavioural integrity to increase.

It would do so in part because the leaders themselves would tend to behave more predictably and function more effectively than they would in contexts within which their identities were not validated (cf., Zaharna, 1979). Leaders would also be more resilient (Caza and Milton, 2011). Increases in the perceived alignment between a leader`s actions, promises, and values would also reflect the ways in which people process information about others. Having once categorized a leader as a person with integrity, others may not notice minor (or at times, even major) behavioural integrity transgressions when the leader does not meet his or her promises or act according to his or her values. [A related discussion of person perception is shared in Gilbert & Hixon (1991).]

Pragmatically, beyond social perception, behaving in ways that are consistent with one's own identity requires the

least effort (Gilbert, Krull, & Pelham, 1988; Sutton, 1991). Again, leaders whose identities are validated are likely to also be more resilient, i.e. able to demonstrate competence during and professional growth after they experience adversity, than they otherwise would be (Caza & Milton, 2011). In so far as they not only rebound but are also authentic, they should behave in more predictable ways, and their resilience should be noticeable. Their identities and actions should be more closely aligned. The behavioural and cognitive inconsistencies that may accompany "faking" identities should be avoided or, at least, minimized. Leaders would thus be better equipped to act in ways that are consistent with their promises and values, and to be perceived as doing so. Followers and others may anchor themselves to the leader's stability and become more resilient themselves.

In as much as it is crucial for followers and colleagues to take leaders seriously, it may be particularly important for leaders to *enact* their authentic 'leader' identities. When leaders fake their identities, especially their leader identity, they may inadvertently undermine the extent to which others perceive them as behaving consistently and as meeting their promises. Such perceptions may erode the leader's ability to influence subordinates, peers, and superiors, and thereby erode the extent to which others would voluntarily cooperate with him or her. The leader's work may also become a form of emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983; Milton, 1992, Rafaeli & Sutton, 1997) that itself undermines leader performance.

Hampering a leader's ability to maintain his or her identities may also result in identity disintegration. Leaders who act in ways that are strongly misaligned with their values and identities may generate self-shock—a state that may accompany moments when one's self and one's actions are not aligned. When in the state of self-shock, leaders would generally be less able to maintain a consistent sense of themselves and to accurately read the reactions of others. As a result, they may experience a loss of self-confidence, feelings of self-doubt, discomfort, confusion, and anxiety (Zaharna, 1989). Each would erode their capacity to lead.

The benefits of being validated and being authentic may be especially strong and positive when leaders work in contexts that challenge them and others for whom they are responsible. In these contexts, as previously conveyed, these others may tend to anchor their expectations to leaders and to become more resilient themselves when they consider their leaders to have behavioural integrity.

## Impact of Leaders Whose Own Identities are Validated on Others

Beyond improving their own performance, the performance of others with whom a leader works should also increase to the extent that the leader's identities are validated. As noted, leaders whose own identities are validated would tend to be more personally centered, socially adept, and effectively positioned in organizations than they would otherwise be. They would thus be able to lead more effectively and be able to embed identity validation more widely within the groups and organizations that they lead. They could, for example, create mechanisms through which group members would get to know one another and learn how to relate to one another in identity consistent ways. They would also be better able to set limits on behaviour and discourage or ban unacceptable group member behaviour that erodes the capacity of groups and organizations. [A related argument about the impact of 'bad' behaviour appears in Sutton (2007).] In these ways and others, leaders who are themselves centered and predictable will be more effective in creating organizations that are similarly so. In as much as their identities are effectively stabilized and concerns about validating identities recede, the group members and groups that these leaders lead should be able to work with one another and together more effectively than they otherwise would. To the extent that a leader's identities are not only validated but also valued (and thereby confirmed), the leader should be centered and resilient.

## When Leaders Validate the Identities of Others and Encourage Others to Also Do So

By extending themselves and validating the identities of others (e.g., followers, colleagues, other leaders, stakeholders) and encouraging others to also do so, leaders may simultaneously strengthen their own and the others' behavioural integrity and effectiveness.

Groups within which members validate one another's identities tend to outperform other groups. While this is true across groups, the impact of validation on the performance of diverse groups and groups that depend on cooperation is particularly notable. The multiple perspectives and connections that members of diverse groups have are often an asset (e.g., Ely & Thomas, 2001) that is undermined as group members stereotype one another and relate suboptimally in other ways (Williams & O'Reilly, 1998). Diversity thus becomes a double-edged sword (e.g., Pelled, Eisenhardt, & Xin, 1999). Groups within which members get to know one another and validate one another's identities may be able to minimize or sidestep the negative effects of social categorization. Members of such groups may be able to simultaneously individuate and be contributing group members (see Brewer, 1991).

Milton and Westphal (2005) found identity confirmation based social networks to form via interpersonal congruence, and to predict high levels of cooperation and performance in diverse emergency response teams, within which high speed, heedful and reliable interdependent interaction is required; and in diverse construction crews, within which success is predicated on effective interdependent work. Members of both types of groups cooperated and worked effectively with others to the extent that these others saw them as they saw themselves, i.e., validated their identities by way of interpersonal congruence (Milton, 1998)..

In their longitudinal research on identity dynamics within diverse MBA study teams, Polzer, Milton, & Swann, 2002 found that interpersonal congruence moderated the relationship between diversity, based on sex, ethnicity, country of origin, job experience (including function and industry) and proposed functional concentration in the MBA program and group effectiveness. More specifically, diversity tended to improve creative task performance and social integration and to lower relationship conflict in groups that were characterized by high levels of interpersonal congruence. In contrast, diversity tended to undermine performance and social integration and to heighten relationship conflict in groups within which levels of interpersonal congruence were low.

## When Leaders Embed Identity Validation and Identity Confirmation in Group and Organization Cultures

As evidenced by experiences at Semiconductor Manufacturing Technology (SEMATECH), a consortium of competitors (e.g., Motorola, Intel, IBM) that formed in order to revitalize the U.S. semiconductor industry, effective leadership is a critical component of effective interdependent work (Browning, Beyer & Shelter, 1995). SEMATECH succeeded in large part because leaders expected and created interpersonal relations and an organization culture that supported cooperation, which then became normalized. Key individuals at SEMATECH appeared to understand, respect and value one another.

Research suggests that to the extent that leaders create the conditions within which group members validate and value and thereby confirm one another's identities, relations in the group strengthen and become particularly cooperative. As discussed, congruence between how individual group members define themselves and how others in their immediate work group define them strengthens interpersonal relations and group dynamics and performance (Milton, 2008, 2009). Congruence has also been found to moderate relations between diversity and group performance on creative tasks (Polzer, Milton, & Swann, 2002). Mutual (or reciprocated) self- validation of positive and negative identities increases cooperation between members of work group dyads and results in the formation of identity -validation based networks within

which advantageous positions enhance performance through greater cooperation (Milton & Westphal, 2005).

Research finds also that not only actual, but anticipated identity validation and identity confirmation predict whether individuals join groups and organizations. High tech-workers are more likely to unionize when doing so, validates values and thereby confirms their identities, when they believe that unions will successfully resolve important issues efficiently, and when their opportunity structure supports collective action. They will not, however, volitionally join these or other collectives that are inconsistent with or even hostile to their self-defined identities even if they may benefit materially by doing so (Milton, 2003).

A leader whose own identities are confirmed may be particularly well poised to create the conditions within which their followers (and others): (a) See them as a leader who has behavioural integrity, and (b) Themselves act in accordance with their own values and promises. These leaders may, for example, be able to use their credibility and skill to create group and organization cultures within which group members behave authentically, come to know and confirm one another's identities, fulfill the promises they and the group make, and ensure that others perceive them to be doing so. From a cultural perspective, to the extent that ideology, symbols, language, narratives, and practices all support intelligent identity validation and foster identity confirmation, then effective interdependent work should follow (Milton, 1998).

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Leaders must, however, keep in mind that a call for identity validation and confirmation is not a call for unfettered individualism. It is important to recruit and retain individuals whose identities are aligned with a group or organization's work and to encourage individuals to simultaneously be themselves as individuals and effective members of a group. Leaders are responsible for socializing those they lead. Some identities and the behaviours associated with these (e.g., abusive person) are not acceptable (Sutton, 1991) and should neither be validated nor confirmed. Leaders are responsible for ensuring that the identity agreements of the organizations and groups that they lead support ethical and effective behaviour.

## Research and Practice Commentary

Research supports that behavioural integrity is an important ingredient of effective leadership. I believe it is crucial, however, to recognize two limits of this perspective. First, I question whether this view applies to situations in which leaders behave unethically. Second, I recommend that caution be exercised when assigning benefits to leaders who behave in ways that are not consistent with their values and promises and yet are being perceived as acting in accordance with these. The first is unacceptable and the second is an illusion.

With respect to the first point, from my perspective, unethical leadership is by definition not effective. With respect to the second point, I would anticipate that to the extent that leader actions, promises and values are not actually aligned, the leader would exhibit some signs of the identity disintegration (e.g. be less certain, more tentative, make mistakes in processing information). I would also expect followers and other perceivers to, at least sometimes, be aware of the discrepancies and consequently become disillusioned with, untrusting of, or feel betrayed by the leader unless they themselves understand and can agree with or rationalize or for other reasons accept these discrepancies. Leadership involves actually behaving ethically and with integrity. Being seen as a leader whose actions, values and promises are positively aligned is clearly important but the reality of whether the leader actually does so cannot be ignored. Effective action is thus both real and socially perceived.

## Recommendations for Future Research

This examination suggests there is a distinct need for more research that: (a) extends beyond self-verification/validation to consider identity confirmation; (b) considers the impact of verifying and confirming the identities of groups and other collective entities, including regulatory bodies and organizations; and (c) investigates other bases for identity validation and confirmation (e.g., via ideology, cultural forms, organization practices).

As noted previously, in contrast to self-verification/validation, a person's identities are confirmed to the extent that these identities are simultaneously validated and valued (Milton, 1998). It is important to note that the only two identity bases that did not pass the Edward's difference score constraints that Milton & Westphal (2005) employed in their analysis of self-validation and identity confirmation in emergency response groups and construction groups were those related to global self-esteem, specifically, "likeable in general" and "competent in most things". The authors noted that in separate models which included these dimensions of self, the results of their study were substantively unchanged. As they suggested, however, this observation may serve as a takeoff point for research that tests the boundaries between self-verification and self-enhancement theories. Those who pursue this could in so doing, test and specify the conditions under which self-verification, self-enhancement, and identity-confirmation are most and least predictive. Pitting the need for consistency and stability against the need for self-esteem may provide an interesting and useful takeoff point. Considering attribute-based, social, role and other identities in tandem may help to achieve an overarching understanding of when and where different motivations drive self-anchored feelings and behavior Contextualized research that investigates the impact of validating and of confirming value based individual and collective identities on interdependent relations may be especially timely. In some circumstances individuals and collectives (including societies) may perceive themselves to violate their own identities by confirming the identities of others who also feel this tension. Research on identity validation and confirmation and on identity enhancement--in these contexts requires attention.

I would argue that identity confirmation forms even safer psychological and relational bedrock than the identity validation alone offers. This bedrock is especially relevant in contexts that challenge individuals and groups—perhaps especially when they need to trust one another and one another's expertise. Effects may be particularly pronounced in situations within which individuals or groups need to share or develop contextualized or deep knowledge or to improvise or debate. In these challenging contexts, I suggest that "to be known and to be valued" trumps "to simply be known" as an antecedent and co-requisite of leader effectiveness. Research that investigates the identity dynamics within these and other tough contexts could be very helpful in our 'present' world.

I believe that there are advantages to expanding and contextualizing identity research even more finely than we do. It would be conceptually and practically helpful to simultaneously encompass personal, role and social identities in our research designs and conceptual arguments. Research that explores subtle differences between over- and underestimation of a person's identities and other ways identities may be confirmed in work groups (e.g., via organization culture, interpersonal behavior) seems timely.

Research examining verification, and confirmation effects associated with role and social identities has the potential to tease out the unique and common effects of self-validation and identity confirmation. Doing so may create bridges between social identity- and self-attribute-based research streams. Research that simultaneously considers outcomes associated with self-enhancement (e.g., defining people in more positive ways than they themselves do) would result in a more completely specified understanding of individual and interdependent excellence.

It seems to me that verification and enhancement perspectives on the self and identity have been at war for years. It is time to bury old hatchets and integrate these

points of view into an overarching perspective that applauds the strengths and recognizes the weakness of each and in so doing illuminates when and where each is most and least predictive of important positive and negative outcomes within and among individuals, groups, organizations, and other collectives. Research that investigates identity confirmation processes and states could provide a bridge to reconcile questions of when and where validating, valuing and confirming elements of an individual's emotionally laden definition of self (in terms of attribute, role and social identities) are activated and thereby affect interdependent thinking and action.

## Contributions

As Pfarrer, Pollock and Rindova (2010) remark, "the intangible assets of firms have attracted considerable interest in organization and strategy research (e.g., Barney, 1991; Deephouse, 2000; Diericks & Cool, 1989; Fobrun, 1996; Greenwood, Li, Prakesh, & Deephouse, 2005; Itami & Roehl, 1987; Rindova, Pollock, & Hayward, 2006)", and the subclass of assets called "social approval assets," have received particular attention. They note that much of this research has concentrated on establishing general effects. To contribute to this general body of work that warrants more specificity, I have made a particular argument positing identity confirmation as a catalyst that unleashes the behavioural integrity of leaders and through these leaders unleashes the behavioural integrity of others and high performance within organizations. Although I would expect these effects to apply to other contexts, I have focused on those within which interdependent thinking and action is mission critical to performance and especially, but not exclusively, on contexts that tend to undermine interdependent excellence. Inasmuch as the behavioural integrity of leaders is positively affected by the extent to which their own identities are validated and confirmed and they validate and confirm the identities of those they lead and influence, the organizations they lead should excel.

While Davis, Eisenhardt, and Bigham (2009) specifically address turbulent, dynamic environments, they do not speak to the value of psychological safety in such environments. Building on the work of Rinova, Pollock and Hayward (2006) one could expect the organizations that these leaders lead to develop high reputations and consequently enjoy positive reactions to their positive surprises and less negative reactions to their negative surprises than firms devoid of such reputations.

I suggest that identity confirmation, then, is one element of the bedrock upon which psychological safety and risk taking emerge; it thereby enhances interdependent thinking and action especially, but not exclusively, in contexts that could undermine each.

## Concluding Reflection

> The saying: "May you live in interesting times," is often referred to as the Chinese curse.
> The Chinese curse on steroids, however, may be: "May you *lead* in interesting times."

Jim Collins and Morten Hansen (2011) would argue that great leaders choose to be great. They distinguish themselves by being fanatically disciplined, productively paranoid, empirically creative and notable because they channel their energy into something larger than themselves. James March (2005) would argue that great leaders know who they are, understand the situations within which they are, and regularly ask the fundamental question of leadership: "What does a person such as me do in a situation such as this?"

*Inasmuch as the behavioural integrity of leaders is positively affected by the extent to which their own identities are validated and confirmed and they validate and confirm the identities of those they lead and influence, the organizations they lead should excel.*

Alone and together these perspectives are powerful. To each I would add the observation that leaders are most likely to chose to be great and to act in accordance with who they are, when they lead in contexts that are consistent with the person they see themselves as being, and within which their identity is validated and valued—hence confirmed.

It is clear that leadership is a deeply personal and relational engagement. As an illustrative counter-example, I recently stopped for petrol across the street from a restaurant that was a hive of police, media and personal activity. A person from the scene came over in a very excited state. When I inquired about what had happened, he told me that there was "a body" in front of the restaurant and asked whether I had been over to see "it." Details other than the fact that there was a body were not forthcoming. He excitedly kept focusing on it being worthwhile to see this "body."

I sometimes think that people enter leadership roles as people and over time often become bodies as they fulfill their task roles and deal with the stress and 'performance' accountabilities of leadership. A key lesson to take from this deliberately essay-style research paper is that leaders are people who must take care of themselves as people and who serve best when valuing others and relating to these others as people in individuated validating ways. When leaders begin to see the people they lead akin to 'bodies' or 'person years' or 'factors of production' or 'costs' or 'overtime,' they distance themselves from the people whom they lead. In so doing, they depersonalize their leadership roles and abandon the human side of leadership. In making that mental transition, they risk losing all that personal relationships mean and unleash.

Because leadership is a deeply personal and relational engagement, leaders themselves are people who tend to be engaged with others with whom they try to create or accomplish something that none of them could achieve alone. When as a leader "I" send a person into battle—I really do send "a person". When I send people rather than impersonal bodies into action, I assume (hope) that they will each and together think and act--figure out what to do, work collaboratively to fulfill their roles, improvise where necessary and optimize whatever realities they face. Their training and experience will help them to competently perform their work. Their relationships will serve as a catalyst. Embedding valued and individuated highly interdependent relations within teams and organizations is an act of enlightened leadership.

Hopefully intact and thriving people and functioning teams and organizations, rather than depersonalized bodies or emaciated entities, return. And hopefully as they lead in and across tough, deeply personal situations, leaders remain as persons. Leadership is demanding. Those whose identities are validated and confirmed and hence, who are more likely than others to be personally and socially centered and resilient, will be positioned to succeed. They will, as argued, be more likely than they otherwise would be to act in ways that are consistent with their values and promises and to be seen as doing so (even when they act inconsistently). They will thus behave with integrity and hopefully be perceived as people who do so, and in over time become and be more effective leaders than they would otherwise be.

Going a step farther, leaders are most likely to have behavioural integrity when they clearly communicate their values and promises, act in accordance with these, and ensure that others understand how their values, promises and actions are aligned. Leadership involves both 'being' and 'acting'. In order for a leader to have behavioural integrity others must perceive the leader's values, actions and promises to be aligned. Just as beauty is said to be in the eye of the beholder, so is behavioural integrity. Being an authentic leader is important but is not itself sufficient. Others' perceptions that leaders act in ways that are consistent with these leaders' values and promises become the foundation upon which these others can act.

Leaders must take charge of their reputations—of how people perceive them—of the stories about them on their street. When they lead in contexts , that is, on streets that are consistent with their identities and on which these identities are validated and confirmed—they themselves

will be more likely to succeed. When they embed identity confirmation and healthy identity relations within the organizations they lead, they position their organizations to succeed. The organizations that excel in today's world and that will excel in the world of tomorrow will be those within which people think, act and learn in real time (Huber, 2004) alone and interdependently in and across contexts. Identity confirmation (validating and valuing the identities of others), behavioural integrity and effective leadership provide a foundation for each.

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