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Abstract

This article describes a university administrator and her academic unit's professional journey through a first-time accreditation process. Drawing upon her professional background as an educational psychologist, the author uses the lens of identity to draw parallels between a young organization experiencing change and an individual undergoing the developmental issues and challenges we commonly associate with adolescent identity development. The article details multiple ways that identity can be a useful lens for studying the development and growth of an organization, and offers practical suggestions that might benefit leaders whose units are undergoing similar external accountability processes.

When our teacher education unit was undergoing accreditation for the first time, my colleagues asked if I would be willing to provide leadership as our new accreditation coordinator. Our Department of Education had mandated that all teacher education units in Michigan had to be accredited within a specific time frame or they were at risk of being shut down. I decided to embrace the professional challenge and quickly learned that accreditation work is intense and constantly evolving, as we were striving to redefine who we were amidst numerous changes in our leadership structure. I started to gain valuable skills and knowledge but given the frantic pace and scope of the work, I was not able to pursue any external opportunities to further my own professional development as a new leader. However, as an educational psychologist, I knew that identity is an important lens through which we make sense of the world around us. I started thinking about how I might draw upon my professional expertise to draw parallels to my new leadership experience. I did not realize it at the time, that I was engaging in self-leadership in order to reach our unit's goal of successful accreditation (Neck & Manz, 2010).

University faculty are typically groomed to teach, conduct scholarly research, and participate in service. Leadership development is often lacking in higher education institutions (Gmelch, 2004; Morris & Laipple, 2015). Pathways into leadership roles are rarely made explicit, so faculty might not have a clear understanding of the skills needed to be successful (DeZure, Shaw, & Rojewski, 2014). Also, focused mentorship and professional development is necessary for leaders to cultivate the mindset of an effective higher education administrator (Bateh & Heyliger, 2014). With the absence of specialized leadership training, I found myself

naturally drawing upon the primary lens of my teaching and scholarship, the construct of

identity, to make sense of the relatively unfamiliar territory of first-time accreditation.

The concept of identity resonated with our accreditation experiences because as Gioia

(2008) so aptly states:

> Identity is about *us* – as individuals and as organization members – and it enquires into the deepest level of our sense making and understanding. When you study identity you are delving into the inner reaches of yourself and your subject of study. (pp. 62-63)

Identity seemed fitting given our focus on engaging in self-study and continuous improvement.

Identity questions such as "Who am I?" and "Who do I want to become?" are typically asked

within the context of adolescence (Marcia, 1980; Negru-Subtirica, Pop, Luyckx, Dezutter, &

Steger, 2016). but one could easily argue that these questions apply to growing organizations as

well. The accreditation process helped us think deeply about our original ways of defining who

we were. We embarked on a four year journey in which we began to cultivate a conscious

awareness of ourselves, our strengths, and our weaknesses. In psychological research on identity

development, identity is often described as being enduring or dynamic (Whetten, 2006).

Similarly, we found ways to redefine our unit in ways that deeply enhanced some of our original

purposes but also paved the way for substantive change and transformation.

An individual's sense of identity is socially constructed through roles and relationships

(Cote & Levine, 2002; Ragelienė, 2016). Participation in our accreditation process strengthened

cooperation between various individuals and departments who worked collaboratively to meet

unit and program level standards. The solidification of these relationships motivated individuals to think collectively and take greater ownership in preparing our education candidates.

Issues of identity also come to the forefront when organizations face fork-in-the-road choices that might alter the understanding of how the organization identifies itself (Whetten, 2006). Identity plays a critical role in how organizations address the pressures and expectations of change (Fox-Wolfgramm, Boal, & Hunt, 1998; Kovoor-Misra, 2009; van Dick, Ciampa, & Liang, 2018), as well as how an organization sees itself and its "identity aspirations." (Kodeih & Greenwood, 2014). In what follows, I will describe the specific context of our unit and university, ways that identity has served as a useful lens for self-study, and offer some suggestions that might benefit other leaders whose units are undergoing similar external accountability processes.

Background

Our university's Education Unit was initially created in response to accreditation guidelines in 2009. We offer undergraduate and graduate programs related to elementary and secondary teacher certification and graduate and doctoral related programs in the areas of Educational Technology, Inclusive Education, Literacy, Elementary Mathematics Education, Early Childhood Education, and Educational Leadership within *the School of Education and Human Services and the College of Arts and Sciences*. Through purposeful discussion, our approximately 25 tenure track faculty, select lecturers, and staff have been working collaboratively on training and preparing education candidates. In bringing the School and

College together, the Education Unit has faced developmental issues and challenges similar to what an adolescent might face in forming a sense of self.

Engaging in Active Identity Exploration

As we know from traditional psychological perspectives on identity, one of the main goals of identity formation is to develop a coherent sense of self that provides one with a sense of inner assuredness, continuity, and direction for the future. All adolescents also require safe places to actively explore their newly emerging selves. This process might involve exploring one's beliefs, commitments, and values and carefully identifying one's "actual, ideal, and ought" selves in order to motivate action (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Similarly, for a leader in higher education, one might have to implement a variety of different strategies in the process of working towards a collective goal (Neck & Manz, 2010), in our particular case, achieving accreditation.

Our accrediting body used to require that each institution develop a conceptual framework document to provide an articulated rationale and conceptual meaning to the unit's operations and reflect the identity of the unit. How was one to bring together two historically separate units with their own respective governance structures to discuss and write about having a shared identity? Various colleagues confronted me with strong personal theories about how we could best tackle the step of developing a conceptual framework. "We need to involve an outside consultant immediately!" said one colleague repeatedly. Many of our faculty were not happy

with our progress and were starting to get concerned that we were delaying (and possibly jeopardizing) our path towards accreditation.

To keep the process inclusive, our dean and I launched a focused series of brown bag sessions to explore who we were and who we wanted to become as a unit. We discussed our personal philosophies related to teaching and learning. We talked about the professional dispositions we wished to see in our education candidates and whether or not we were modeling them ourselves. These sessions were widely attended and often led to productive conversations about our unit's identity formation. It became obvious that our unit was characterized by multiple and sometimes conflicting individual narratives that were central to the formation of its identity (Humphreys & Brown, 2002).

Our dean, field director, and I worked closely to incorporate the feedback from the brown bag sessions into a new draft of the conceptual framework. We shared the document with our colleagues and engaged in an open and respectful dialogue over our shared beliefs and self-chosen principles of effective teaching and learning. Most of us left the meeting with the agreement that the conceptual framework was a breathable document that would evolve as our collective sense of identity developed over time. It was a heartfelt identity conversation and I felt hopeful.

The conversations that occurred during this critical meeting signaled what Reger, Gustafson, Demarie, and Mullane (1994) once proposed, that a discrepancy between perceptions of *who we are* and *who we want to be* can motivate organizational members to initiate and

embrace change. Also, it was clear to me that the members within our organization were starting to experience feelings of social cohesion which were having a positive impact on their sense of organizational identification (Gonzalez & Chakraborty, 2013). We were definitely moving in the right direction.

Navigating Change and Transition

As an adolescent, one's identity is constantly changing due to new experiences, relationships, and information acquired in daily interactions with others. As one is navigating the many social, emotional, and physical changes of adolescence, one might experience what is commonly known as an *identity crisis* (Erikson, 1968), a period of intensive analysis and self-exploration. In some, an identity crisis can trigger emotional and moral conflicts as every major growth change creates some new source of uncertainty or insecurity (Kaplan, 1995). Similarly, organizations might experience identity crises as well (Stensaker, 2015; Tracey & Phillips, 2015), when there is a pronounced gap between the identity of an organization and its external environment, or if a leader promotes organizational change inauthentically under the guise of innovation (Hughes & Harris, 2015).

In order to fully embark on the accreditation process, our Education Unit was required to pass an essential set of requirements which was known as "preconditions." These requirements included, but were not limited to, the earlier mentioned conceptual framework, policy handbooks, description of the unit's assessment system, and education candidate performance data. When we initially experienced some challenges in passing our preconditions, we enlisted

the guidance of an external consultant. Our progress in addressing the accrediting body's concerns was well underway when I received a visit from a faculty member in the department's reception area. He anxiously asked me if we were going to get shut down. On a few other occasions, I was approached by staff members who were upset that two senior faculty members had advised them to look for other places of employment because we were not going to be successful with the accreditation process. Naturally, these individuals felt unsure and tense about the circumstances. I was starting to realize that now that the stakes were getting higher, my response as a leader was becoming even more critical.

Leadership Lessons Learned

As we were navigating this new territory collectively as a unit, I learned many valuable lessons as the leader coordinating this effort:

Create ample opportunity for inclusive, open ended conversations about core beliefs, values and principles.

Inclusive and open ended conversations can occur through the creation of intentional spaces, such as informal brown bag sessions, to authentically seek input from faculty and staff. In these conversations, a leader should not only strive to identify commonalities between diverse perspectives but simultaneously honor differences in philosophical approach. I have found that members of the unit should feel valued and respected and have similar opportunities to contribute their feedback and expertise. The leader should also engage in active listening and strive to experience the organizational context through the eyes of others.

Be open and adaptable to unpredictable circumstances

Regardless of one's innate disposition, an effective leader must learn to be flexible in his or her approach to people and situations. For example, when working on a collaborative endeavor such as the writing of our conceptual framework, it was important for me to allow a theme to emerge organically. It was challenging, at first, but over time, we discovered a creative way of pulling ideas together: creating a visual motif. We chose a thumbprint logo which symbolized our sense of identity as an Education Unit, marking where we had been and where we would be in the future. The thumbprint also served as a symbol of an education candidate's potential to make a distinctive mark on schools and society.

As a leader, one must also strive to provide clear and factual information to all relevant parties using a variety of different means and be mentally prepared for the sometimes unintended consequences of being transparent. Leadership certainly has its uncomfortable moments, particularly when one's faculty colleagues share challenging feedback. One must openly acknowledge one's colleagues' anxieties but also learn to cope with lack of confidence from them during times of organizational uncertainty and change. Taking the time to be reflective about challenging workplace scenarios and giving oneself time and space to make thoughtful decisions is important.

Maintain emotional self-control as a leader

Leaders must cultivate the ability to keep unproductive emotional responses in check and maintain control over their actions and behaviors. I found that I had to be consciously aware

of my emotional triggers to publicly maintain my patience and composure. I also learned that it is possible to care deeply for one's colleagues and organizational context but also maintain a healthy distance from those individuals who behave in sabotaging ways. I found that this approach helped me maintain my sense of focus and restraint in emotionally charged professional situations. Lastly, consistently maintaining elements of self-care, such as taking breaks, eating regular meals, and getting enough sleep are critical to keep one's emotions in check.

Concluding Thoughts

In the end, we successfully met all accreditation standards with some identified areas for improvement. Interestingly, those faculty who were the most vocal naysayers either retired or left our institution before the site visit. Our sense of identity as a unit has evolved in promising ways. We now have a formalized organizational chart that incorporates key Education Unit roles across our two separate academic units. We have monthly Education Unit meetings which involve rich discussions about unit goals and identity. We have also developed a *Center for Educator Preparation* which serves as a physical and symbolic space for our unit's identity making endeavors and have hired a capable director to lead our unit's efforts.

The challenges inherent in forming a coherent sense of identity still remain, although we have learned to be more proactive in creating unit wide systems and less reactive to perceived challenges and threats. Because we were able to work steadily towards our goal of accreditation,

I feel that we achieved a rich soil for self-leadership in our organization (Manz & Sims, 1991). I have learned that as a leader, one must keep an open mind and implement a variety of strategies towards achieving a significant professional goal. One should also strive to honor faculty members' individuality while simultaneously keeping the collective's interests at heart. Ideally, one should aspire to impact faculty on an intrinsic level so they are truly motivated to accomplish the tasks that needed to be accomplished (Woods, 2007). It is not always easy to do when the stakes are high. Also, leadership must be regarded as a process rather than as a reflection of an individual's personal capabilities (Heifetz, Kania, & Kramer, 2004). Leaders must be reflective and willing to adapt to evolving circumstances. The single biggest lesson that I learned from our past experience, though, is that the process of going through uncertainty and change is a powerful means by which one can learn about oneself – at the individual, program, and unit levels. As a leader, one can act as a unifying force between different individuals and programs, particularly if together, you can identify goals and initiatives in which you can truly see yourselves.

It is not likely that a faculty member would choose to pursue a high stakes leadership position because it is something that he or she intrinsically enjoys; but as going through a change process can help a unit develop, it can also help a leader grow tremendously as a professional and learn to lead from his or her own set of strengths. The lessons I learned might be helpful to consider but always realize that the ultimate goal is to authentically engage in

continuous improvement and thoughtful reflection so your unit (and you) can strive to be the best.

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Identity seemed fitting given our focus on engaging in self-study and continuous improvement. Identity questions such as "Who am I?" and "Who do I want to become?" are typically asked within the context of adolescence (Marcia, 1980; Negru-Subtirica, Pop, Luyckx, Dezutter, & Steger, 2016). but one could easily argue that these questions apply to growing organizations as well. The accreditation process helped us think deeply about our original ways of defining who we were. We embarked on a four year journey in which we began to cultivate a conscious awareness of ourselves, our strengths, and our weaknesses. In psychological research on identity development, identity is often described as being enduring or dynamic (Whetten, 2006). Similarly, we found ways to redefine our unit in ways that deeply enhanced some of our original purposes but also paved the way for substantive change and transformation.

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Inclusive and open ended conversations can occur through the creation of intentional spaces, such as informal brown bag sessions, to authentically seek input from faculty and staff. In these conversations, a leader should not only strive to identify commonalities between diverse perspectives but simultaneously honor differences in philosophical approach. I have found that members of the unit should feel valued and respected and have similar opportunities to

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Identity is about us: Leadership lessons learned during an accreditation journey

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Abstract: This article describes a university administrator and her academic unit's professional journey through a first time accreditation process. Drawing upon her professional background as an educational psychologist, the author uses the lens of identity to draw parallels between the experience of a young organization undergoing processes of change in response to accreditation and an individual undergoing the typical developmental issues and challenges we commonly associate with adolescent identity development. The article details multiple ways that identity can serve as a useful lens for studying the development and growth of an organization, and offers practical suggestions that might benefit individuals in leadership roles whose units are undergoing similar external accountability processes.

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