

# LEADERSHIP IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT:

Enhancing the impact of a middle management  
programme through identity work

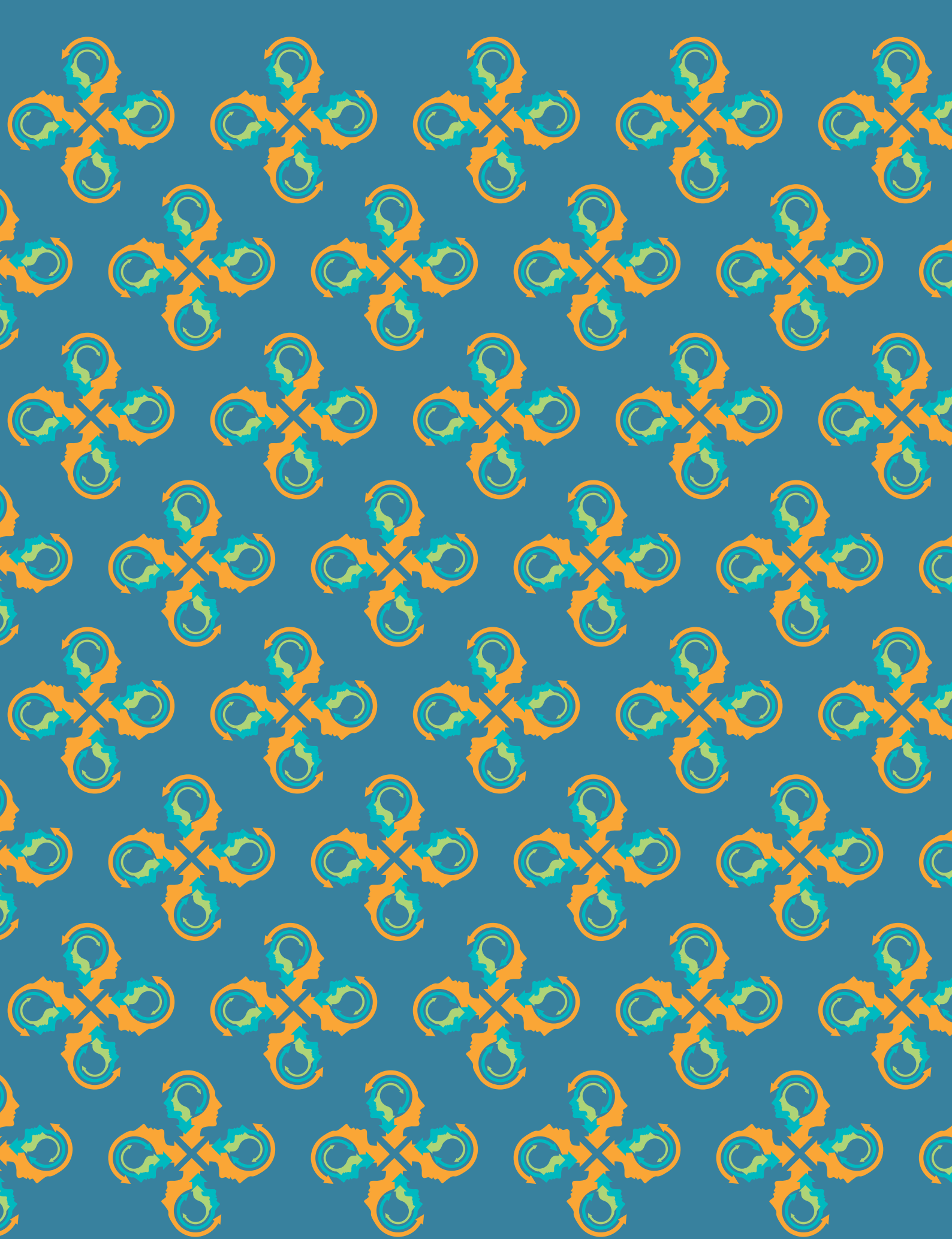
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**Gordon Institute  
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## Contents

- 2 Abstract
- 5 Introduction
- 5 Business problem
- 6 The solution: Leader expanded identity
- 7 Leadership development as identity development
- 7 Leader identity development process
- 9 The Managing Managers for Results programme
- 10 Designing the Managing Managers for Results programme for identity change
- 13 Framework for leadership identity development in a management development programme
- 14 Conclusion
- 16 Appendix A – Survey findings
- 18 List of references
- 20 About the author

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## Keywords

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# Abstract

This white paper outlines how the process of leadership identity development reinforces the management development programme and the value it brings to the organisation and individual. “For the most part, the learning doesn’t lead to better organizational performance, because people soon revert to their old ways of doing things” state Beer, Finnstrom, & Schrader (2016, p. 51). Leadership development interventions appear to be something that is “nice to have” when sufficient resources exist, but few organisational leaders seem to know whether it has any true value with respect to return on development investment.

Research indicates that the manager is more able to traverse the challenges of the workplace with newfound leadership capacities when underpinned by a coherent identity shift.<sup>1</sup> Enhanced leader identity equips managers to be nimbler when dealing with daily pressures and organisational changes, which brings greater results.

This white paper offers a framework for designing a management development programme underpinned by a leadership identity development process. It highlights how to design the process, facilitation and coaching to bolster leader development. In this case, the Managing Managers for Results programme is used by way of illustration. The programme evolved out of the Personal and Applied Learning centre of the Gordon Institute of Business Science. The Personal and Applied Learning department has deep capability in coaching, self-discovery processes, applied learning and process facilitation, which are processes used to embed leadership identity development.

This information is useful to those involved with the development and selection of managers within an organisation, including C-suite, executive education and business schools, corporate learning and development managers, human resources and talent managers, and organisational effectiveness managers. The anticipated value-add of this paper is to:

- provide a framework and core constructs for leader identity development;
- describe the design processes that support leadership identity development through coaching and facilitation, as differentiated from pure lecturing;
- explain the rigour of the design of the career development programme, Managing Managers for Results programme; and
- contribute to the literature around leadership identity development.

## References

<sup>1</sup>Current PhD study in Leadership Identity Development, Sarah Babb, 2019.

# Introduction

The paper outlines the business problem and how to better support managers to build an integrated and applied leadership identity. When a management development programme is underpinned by the leadership identity development process, leaders develop a far deeper, wide-ranging capacity to lead across contexts. By using deeper methodologies, such as coaching and process facilitation, at the required points in the programme, a leader's identity evolves. The white paper provides a framework for integrating leader identity development into a management development programme using the example of the Managing Managers for Results (MMR) programme supported by the Personal and Applied Learning (PAL) centre at the Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS) to illustrate the application of this framework.



# Business problem

“One of the biggest challenges facing leaders today is the need to position and to enable organizations and people for adaptability in the face of increasingly dynamic and demanding environments” (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018, p.89). Consequently, leaders are seeking to change their ways of leading in a more dynamic world (Mumford, Zaccaro, Connelly, & Marks, 2000), which requires them to be adaptable and effective. Organisations are grappling with meeting the fast-paced changes demanded by new markets and novel ways of doing business. Workplaces are becoming more globalised, agile and diverse, requiring more malleable and dynamic leadership identities. The managers do not return from development programmes with a shift in how they work over different and challenging circumstances. This table below outlines some of the business problems in leadership development and proposed solutions.

However, middle managers are also expected to play very different roles when moving from one interaction to the next, alternating between relatively high- and low-power interaction styles. By virtue of their structural positions, middle managers are simultaneously the “victims and the carriers of change” within an organisation, receiving strategy prescriptions from their bosses and having to implement those strategies with the people who work beneath them. As a result, middle managers often find themselves stuck between various stakeholder groups, which can produce relentless and conflicting demands (Anicich & Hirsh, 2017a & 2017).

Holding competing roles often results in managers feeling stuck, retreating or floundering on a daily basis as to how to adapt to all these demands. Managers are left feeling exhausted (Anicich & Hirsh, 2017a & 2017b) and overwhelmed, unless they are able to expand their leadership identities.

THE BUSINESS PROBLEM	THE SOLUTION
More nimble and agile leadership required in fast-changing, challenging times.	The focus on identity development of leaders facilitates them to apply leadership across contexts.
Uncertain return on investment from management development programmes over time.	Leader identity development facilitates the application of learning back to the workplace for greater results.
High cost of long management development programmes.	Shorter programmes when underpinned by identity development processes can result in greater shifts over a shorter period.



# The solution: Leader expanded identity

Leader identity evolves as a person internalises and tailors a leader identity, and is recognised by others as a “leader” (Ibarra, Wittman, Petriglieri, & Day, 2014, p. 286). As a leader receives validation for his or her self-view as a leader, self-confidence is bolstered, which increases a motivation to lead and seek new opportunities to practice leadership, creating a positive spiral (Day & Harrison, 2007). Internalising a leader identity helps to sustain the level of interest and fortitude needed to develop and practice complex leadership skills (Lord & Hall, 2005), and to take the risks of experimenting with unfamiliar aspects of identity (Ibarra et al., 2014, p. 296). Positive spirals would result in confidence in enacting leader roles across different social contexts.

When leaders expand their leader identities to encapsulate the multiple and often competing roles, they are able to navigate the demands more seamlessly. Leader development has focused on building personal skills and competencies, yet often neglects the underpinning leader identity development.

Leader identity is a key component of leadership and is imperative to leaders’ development, emergence and behaviour (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Epitropaki, Kark, Mainemelis, & Lord, 2017; Ibarra et al., 2014). A leader identity integrates the new capacities and enables new or enhanced ways of leading.

## Leadership development as identity development

There are three levels of leadership development, and the foundational is identity development. One’s self-view as a leader not only influences proactive attempts to gain leadership experience, but may also be an important cue to access knowledge related to leadership (Lord & Hall, 2005, p. 611). Identity development underpins the capacity to adopt attitudinal and behavioural shifts. Thus, over time, leadership skills and knowledge become inextricably integrated with the development of one’s self-concept as a leader (Lord & Hall, 2005, p. 592).

Leader development is identity development, a process that is unpacked below. The more identity development is understood, the more it can be a deliberate process and content within a leadership development programme, thus bolstering the impact and programme effectiveness.

**Behavioural shifts and application**

**Attitudinal shifts and capacity building**

**Identity development**

Figure 1. Identity underpins attitudinal and behavioural shifts



# Leader identity development process

It has been found that leader development programmes facilitate leader identity changes. Participants engage in discussions that expose them to others' leadership views and meanings. In addition, these programmes encourage participants to engage in guided self-reflection, which also supports leader identity change (Miscenko, Guenter, & Day, 2017).

In an attempt to resolve identity conflict, individuals engage in identity work and generate variations of identity through an iterative process, constructing a modified identity that is more consistent with their leadership role (Yost et al., 1992). Eventually, this new identity becomes stronger, corresponding to the upturn in the leader identity developmental trajectory (Day & Sin, 2011).

A management development process can be more effective if it is underpinned by the leader identity development process. Below is a summary of the key pointers in the leader identity development process to inform the design of a management development programme. The leadership identity development process:

- underpins leadership development;
- is not linear, it follows a curvilinear (J-shape);
- requires an identity workspace and a safe container for learning;
- is enhanced with identity play and identity unlearning;
- is supported by exploring multiple alternate possible selves;
- is supported through the authoring and enactment of select identities;
- is enhanced through affirmation and reinforcement of trusted role players; and
- is supported through the application and experimentation with an expanded leader identity,
- and the continued consolidation and validation of an expanded identity.

A white paper is too short a document to elaborate on these processes and this paper provides a framework of how these identity processes can inform the design of a management programme.

Leader identity change could be positive or negative. In the case of a positive identity development spiral, individuals will exercise their leadership skills, receive confirmation for their leadership claims and further align leadership behaviours with a leadership role. Where there is a negative developmental spiral, at some time, an individual fails to assert effective leadership, which prevents alignment between the leadership role and identity. This further diminishes the motivation to exercise leadership skills, thus weakening leader identity (DeRue, Ashford, & Cotton, 2009). The identity development process needs to balance identity experimentation, undoing and recalibration in a positive spiral.

Identity undoing is a natural part of identity development and should be catered for in the design. Identity changes follow a curvilinear J-shaped developmental trajectory (Day & Sin, 2011; Miscenko, Guenter, & Day, 2017)<sup>1</sup>. There is an initial negative dip in leader identity development followed by an upturn in the developmental experience. Identity work is often sparked by – and always involves – experiences of uncertainty, destabilisation and, in some cases, fragmentation and anxiety (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). The initial decrease in identity indicates when a leader deconstructs, reviews and discards outdated identities. The leader considers and experiments with multiple possible leader identities, which need to be integrated into the overall identity and reinforced by other people to endorse the new ways of leading. The management development process seeks to facilitate and allow for this undoing of identity, and to support the new trajectory of identity development. This can be supported through “identity play”. “Identity play aims to explore possible selves rather than to claim and be granted, desired, optimal or

## References

<sup>1</sup>See White Paper infographic attached and Table 1.



ought selves. Work is conducted in the real world; play's context is the threshold between current reality and future possibilities" (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010, p. 11). Identity play is facilitated by a holding environment that supports the individual in the cognitive, emotional and social process of elaborating, experimenting with, and consolidating the meanings associated with the self (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010).

Petriglieri and Petriglieri (2010) describe identity workspaces as a social context that reduces the disturbing affect, facilitates sensemaking, and eases the transition to a new identity and/or consolidation of an existing one. This involves creating a "transitional space" – an identity laboratory – that allows managers the opportunity to "play" and climb out of their rut,

helping them to pick up the threads of stagnated development. Programme designers' challenge is to help managers restore their mental equilibrium by guiding them to the realisation that they have options, that they can make choices, and that these options and choices are often within close reach (Kets de Vries & Korotov, 2006, p. 4).

The identity development process moves through various stages, ranging from noticing, interpreting and authoring (leadership identity: strength, integration, level and meaning), to enacting (leadership competence depth and breadth) (Beech, 2011; Hammond, Clapp-Smith, & Palanski, 2017; Komives, Owen, Longerbeam, Mainella, & Osteen, 2005). And the learning process is most impactful when it tracks these phases.

# The Managing Managers for Results programme

GIBS's PAL unit designs career development programmes based on the important principles of identity development described above. These career development programmes are specifically aimed at assisting managers to make the transition to more senior executive management roles, and the different levels of leader identity across these roles.

The MMR is one such programme aimed at enabling managers to step into a more complex senior management function. More than 1 000 learners have participated in the MMR programme, at GIBS since 2007. The MMR has consistently been rated as having a 95% positive impact on the participants.<sup>1</sup>

The MMR is designed to run as a three-day programme with an eight-week application period, concluding with a fourth and final contact day. One of its defining features is that it is underpinned by supporting an identity development process. Participants apply and experience the impact of leadership shifts, which are consolidated on the last day. They report enhanced esteem, agency and confidence in their leadership as well as greater capacity to work with self, team and organisational change. The participants often share that they have transformed as leaders,

even over such a short period, and are seeing improved results and relationships with their team.

A survey was sent to MMR graduates and 36 narratives were received centring around identity change.<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that it was conveyed that the role did not change, but the manager reported being more happy, confident and effective in the role. The managers' identity had developed and they were better able to cope and be more impactful as middle managers. Developing a middle manager leadership identity supports the manager in their everyday roles.



## References

<sup>1</sup>Source: Evaluation forms from MMR programme

<sup>2</sup>Survey findings in Appendix A





# Designing the Managing Managers for Results programme for identity change

The GIBS MMR programme has embedded processes and activities that assist leaders to enhance their leadership identity. Participants are able to apply new practices and achieve greater results and impact in their daily roles.

## **SELECTION AND ENROLMENT FOR LEARNING AND PEER TRUST**

The GIBS PAL unit is particular in the screening and selection of participants for its career development programmes. The intention is to choose participants who match the level of the programme. The strict selection criteria aid in learning, as participants have insight into each other's roles and are able to share peer learning more effectively. The learning is more personal, which enhances motivation and supports goal-oriented learning. The programme supports personal learning against personal goals and aspirations as well as the contextual application of learning. Participants can relate to the existing needs, challenges and opportunities of managers at similar levels.

## **ESTABLISHING AN IDENTITY WORKSPACE**

The room is set up with round tables that are conducive for open conversation and sharing in a flat room. The facilitation processes intentionally create a comfortable and safe space for participants' identity workspace. The facilitator focuses on creating an environment of trust and openness, and the group reaches agreement around confidentiality and how they want to be together. The smaller breakaway groups remain together for the duration of the programme and build a trusting relationship

through sharing, vulnerability and feedback. These smaller groups meet for a large part of the second and fourth days with a focus on peer feedback and one-on-one coaching.

## **IDENTITY WORK**

Identity work commences as participants receive 360-degree feedback customised to middle management competencies and complete an upfront questionnaire prior to attending the programme. The programme begins by exploring the roles of the middle managers and their personal leadership journey in relation to transitions in their lives. All of these processes build self-awareness and an openness to learning on prior and future roles and leader identities.

## **COACHING FOR IDENTITY WORK**

Each of the smaller breakaway groups has an executive coach for the duration of the programme. The coach facilitates feedback and peer coaching, as well as personal exploration of leadership identity and the self – both current and possible future selves.

The coaching assists participants through the dip in the curve of identity work, as they explore undoing, letting go of certain practices and identities, as well as formulating alternate possible future leadership identities. Through activities like video sharing and peer support, the participant is supported through the anguish, challenges, vulnerability and exploration of identity change. Coaches are selected on the basis of their insight and experience, sensitivity of working with transitional professional



coaching – particularly with middle managers – and are briefed as to the particular focus for the group as it emerges. The coaches follow a guideline for the small group processes and one-on-one coaching designed for this programme.

### **LEVEL OF LEADERSHIP**

Managing managers is explored at multiple levels of application: the self in relation to the “other” and in relation to the organisational context. The leader identity considers the identity at different levels, providing an expanded repertoire and identity of self.

### **IDENTITY PLAY**

The manager of managers is responsible for defining the direction and culture of his or her team. Through a modelling activity and customised cases, the leader identifies an alternate future for this team, and commits to a way forward for achieving this. This identity play experience allows managers to work through an alternate identity for themselves around their role and how they wish to lead the team in a different way to be more impactful and to influence and take initiative around this, and by so doing, also practice their leadership identity during the exercise.

As participants become more confident in their leadership identity, their effectiveness improves. Alternatives are explored and enacted, giving the experience of an emerging identity and allowing managers to see the impact and consequences of these choices. This affirms the consequences and provides critical feedback for the manager to further reframe his or her identity in these challenging contexts.

### **ALTERNATE POSSIBLE FUTURE IDENTITY**

Managers are tasked with drawing up a personal development plan for their alternate possible future leadership identity. This is specifically focused on personal development needs in line with a personal leadership vision. The key message is that leadership identity is in an ongoing process of constant evolution and the manager can take responsibility for framing future options by reflecting on, and understanding, past and current patterns. Therefore, the leader agency is further enhanced by taking responsibility for personal trajectories and conscious identity building.

### **IDENTITY EXPERIMENTATION AND ENACTMENT**

A workplace application assignment has to be completed over the eight-week period ahead of the programme’s fourth day. This requires each participant to apply one new leadership practice gained during the programme, so that each person has the chance to experiment in identity work. It is imperative that the managers each select an application that is relevant and timeous to their context and personal needs. Examples of these practices include stepping more fully into a senior management role through focused delegation, strategy communication and execution, and leading a team more effectively. Through focused behavioural applications, the manager explores a shift in management identity. Part of the assignment requires the manager to receive feedback on this practice, which is a part of identity work, to be affirmed by others.

The framework in the next sections outlines the identity development processes with the design of a management development programme.



# Framework for leadership identity development in a management development programme

This framework serves as a summary matching the leader identity processes as outlined above with the design of the management development programme, the MMR.

The design and delivery of leadership identity development on the MMR programme is embedded using the following practices, which PAL has deep capability and experience in: small group and one-on-one coaching, peer coaching,

self-awareness and impact processes, process design and facilitation, and applied learning aimed at supporting an expanded and integrated refreshed identity of what it takes to be a leader and manager. Two key findings are that the practices are designed and reinforce the phases of the identity development phase, impacting identity development. This sustains the capacity building, attitudinal shift and behavioural changes.

<h2>SET UP</h2> <p>Selection and 360-degree feedback online survey, motivation</p>	<h2>MANAGEMENT DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME</h2> <p>Days one to three</p> <p>Classroom and small-group coaching, process facilitation and team modelling, multimedia tools, video reflection, customised case and case study, leadership journey reflection and personal visioning, 90-day action plan and personal development plan</p>	<h2>FOLLOW-UP DAY</h2> <p>Day four</p> <p>Eight-week assignment application period and individual coaching ahead of the fourth day's classroom and peer coaching contact session</p>
<h2>LEADER IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT PROCESS</h2>		

Table 1. Underpinning management development programme with leadership identity development processes

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# Conclusion

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Middle managers in corporations currently carry the burden of managing multiple responsibilities and roles. The pressure and stress are mounting as expectations rise for managers to deliver more with less. In response, managers often retreat to tried-and-tested modes of managing. Many of these perpetuate a dependency on managers, retaining current modes of operating. Consequently, the organisation does not achieve the rates of change nor the results anticipated through organisational change and restructuring initiatives, and perceives the managers as resistant to change or obstructing progress.

A manager develops in a variety of ways. Listed below are some of the results from undergoing a management development programme underpinned by the leadership identity development processes.

## **EXPANDED IDENTITY**

- The manager has an expanded leadership identity and repertoire of dealing across contexts.
- The manager understands what is required to work across levels and boundaries with different competing demands on identity.
- The manager has greater self-awareness and understanding of who he or she is – in other words, their identity is affirmed.
- The team and managers below the middle manager respond well to the expanded role and repertoire, as the leader has a greater ease and self-assurance.

## **EXPANDED AGENCY**

- The manager has greater self-confidence to transition between contexts.
- The manager has greater agency in crafting his or her own leadership identity and taking responsibility for doing so in the future.
- The manager is no longer a victim of circumstance, subjected to the whimsy of the moment. Instead, there is a framework against which to choose leadership practices that meet the demands of the situation without losing a sense of self and contribution.
- The manager has a safe space and tools to work with the uncertainty, anxiety and fears often associated with identity work and transitions.
- The manager experiences reduced stress and feels overwhelmed, as the role switching does not conflict with the internal leadership identity. The leadership identity remains expanded and coherent within the individual, even if behaviours switch across contexts. The leader does not feel inner turmoil about possible conflict, but moves more smoothly between roles and demands.
- Business leaders have greater trust and confidence in the leadership of the middle manager, as he or she displays enhanced influence across contexts through identity development.

With these capacities, the manager does not feel overwhelmed and lost. Through the positive spiral of identity and leadership development, as leaders expand their leadership identity, their openness and motivation to learn also expands further, which bodes well for leading in a changing environment. The middle manager is no longer confounded by competing demands, but is now released to perform with greater impact.

Those involved with leadership development and human resources, learning specialists and talent managers, as well as organisational development professionals could build these principles into their processes and programmes for leadership development and change management. It is imperative to support the identity development to reinforce and bolster the leader development to take the organisation forward into the future and to confront the changes and challenges with greater confidence and a deeper capacity.

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# Appendix A – Survey findings

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Source: Sarah Babb<sup>1</sup>

An electronic survey was sent to 520 participants who completed the GIBS MMR in March 2017 with Ms Sonja Blignaut (Cognitive Edge and More Beyond). The survey was devised to track narratives and experiences of management development and role change. As outlined below, the findings reinforce the identity development process and the positive impact experienced personally and by others of this personal transformation. A total of 38 stories were submitted.

## RAISED SELF-AWARENESS AND PERSONAL GROWTH

- This course greatly changed respondents' views of leadership.
- Respondents mostly feel that the course effected personal transformation.
- In 76% of the stories, the respondents felt that personal reflection has had the biggest impact on their development.
- Being self-aware facilitates leadership identity development, as the person can make choices around which leadership practices to implement and how to behave as a leader in their own contexts.
- Twenty respondents (52%) indicated lack of feedback has the most negative impact on their development. Identity development does require social affirmation.
- In nine (23%) of the stories, most changes came from learning through trial and error.
- This finding reinforces the importance of having the opportunity to experiment and apply new practices and leadership identities.
- In 31 of the stories, respondents indicated that as a result of their personal growth, they are viewed more favourably by their teams.
- This finding is noticeable as external affirmation received by the managers would have positively reinforced and consolidated identity shifts.

## ROLE AND IDENTITY GROWTH

Eighteen respondents (50%) indicated that change mostly happened “now and again”, while 16 (42%) indicated that this kind of event happens “all the time”. In 68% of the stories, the respondents explained they felt that they have grown their roles to have more impact. Nine respondents (23%) indicated that they now fill their roles confidently.

- This finding is noticeable as it highlights the agency that managers have to influence their own roles, too, and that they are not merely recipients of role change. They adjusted their identity as leaders to craft their own roles and contributions, and this experience was positive.
- Respondents felt that personal changes were positive, and changes in their role as managers were positive.
- The majority of the respondents (20 people as 52%) indicated that they are still in the same job as a manager of managers.
- Although hard to compare to overall trends, this is striking as leaders find a leader identity, so their sense of personal agency expands. This allows them to reframe and alter their own roles and teams, which results in greater satisfaction and affirmation. This would lead to a proclivity to remain in the same role and business. It is by no means a sign of stagnation or resignation.
- Of the respondents who submitted stories, 76% indicated that to develop as managers, they must change themselves.
- The leadership identity journey underpins the internal journey of identity change, of connecting with and reframing the internal narrative of one's own leadership. By undergoing identity work, leaders change themselves to be more effective and impactful with their teams and organisations.
- The majority of the respondents (14 people as 36%) indicated that change is like using the past as building blocks to the future.
- This finding is interesting as the identity narratives become coherent and are seen to build on the past; an internal coherence is built on the narrative, allowing for the connections to be plotted.
- Respondents also feel very positive about the fact that they see opportunities for innovation or new initiatives.
- The major theme from most of the stories, as well as the metaphors used, was that of the manager being a coach.

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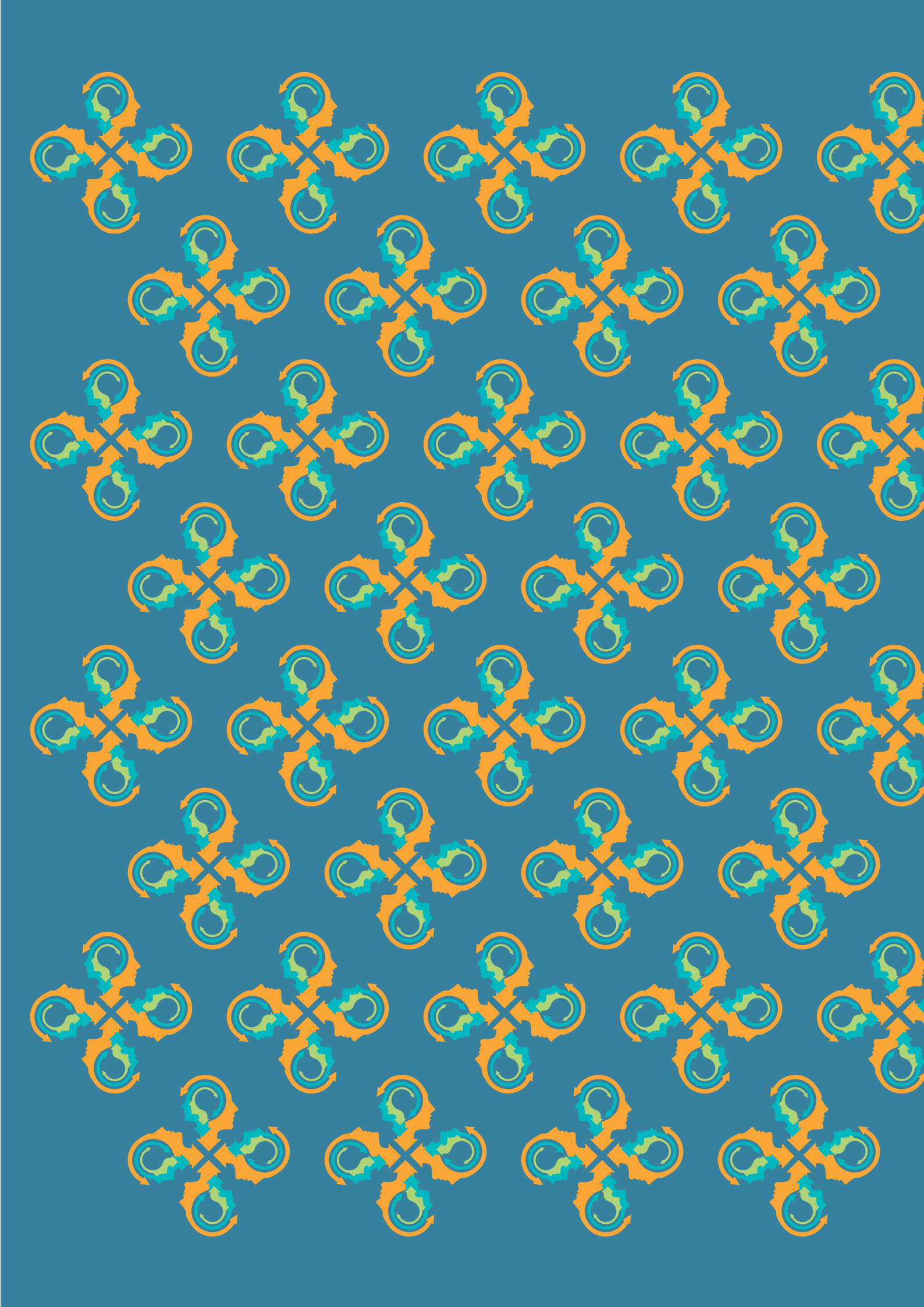
<sup>1</sup> A special thanks to Sonja Blignaut for her support with Sarah Babb in the design, distribution and assembly of findings using the Sensemaker tool (© Cognitive Edge)

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