

How intervening on corporate identity can become a means to enhance participation

Defining who you are as an organization puts you in motion.

Developing organizations, just like people, are on a quest to understand who they are and who they want to be. It is difficult to establish a long-term vision and perspective for one's organization, if one doesn't have a clear understanding of one's own identity. Knowing and understanding one's identity is crucial in establishing a bond and in building momentum in the development of a common project. The understanding of one's identity guarantees greater coherence in the internal and external communication of an organization. The identity of an organization is the cornerstone of its future. An organization is in a stronger position to innovate, differentiate and compete when it does so by means of a deeper connection with what it is and wants to be. Increasingly, customers and the public choose organizations (and the brands they put to market) on the basis of the values they stand for, and the identity they project through their brands and activities.

This also touches the essence of participation. The better you discern and comprehend the system to which you belong as a person, the better you can choose and play your own role. We are therefore talking about participation in the true sense of taking part. Participating is taking part, in the sense of more deeply taking your own part, and taking responsibility for your share in the scheme of things. This connection between knowing your identity and participation also applies to the organization. Just like its employees, the organization can better participate in society, play its part and take responsibility for what it has to offer, if an organization knows what it stands for.

This article aims to provide a pragmatic framework and tool kit, that will make it easier to put a corporate identity process in motion within an organization. To this end, we describe both the methodology and the identity model we work with, illustrated with a concrete case. At a deeper level we want this article to be a source of inspiration, by describing from what core premises we are working with identity.

Identity as Organizing principle.

Glasl writes in his book 'conflict, crisis, catharsis' about the different parts of a (human) system. The first is the physical body. The second is the "etheric body, " the total of the life forces and the shaping forces of the living system. These ethereal forces have a flowing character. This is the power of creation and decay that determines the shape of the body: they 'sculpt' as it were, the physical body. This description of the "etheric body" is consistent with what we call the 'organizing principle '. The organizing principle encompasses the uniquely shaping life force of a system.

By 'principle' we mean that every system is based on a number of underlying patterns, stability points on which the system is built and unvarying dynamics from which the system derives its identity. "Organizing" refers to how the system is constantly moving and changing. A system organizes and reorganizes itself continuously to secure the necessary flexibility to survive. Thus each system derives its identity on one hand from constant elements of stability, and on the other from a very personal way of moving and changing. Since identity can be defined as that which remains identical, the description of the identity of an organization boils down to making explicit the organizing principle of the organization in question as a unique system.

What makes a system unique is its organizing principle. It is the deeply ingrained qualities and patterns which – although they are in motion and evolution, always remain the same. An organizing principle - such as ones identity – operates on several levels and through different contexts and variables of time. This means that the thing that makes an organization unique can always be traced back and found at different times in the existence of the organization, can also be traced back on different hierarchical levels and in all the structures of the organization.

The organizing principle is the core pattern from which everything that is present and externalized can be understood.

This is why an organizing principle, and therefore also an identity, are never good or bad. It is the description from which we can understand what is going wrong and what is going well in a system. Failures and successes are expressions of the same core dynamics in the organization.

If you want to describe an organizing principle, it is essential to transcend all judgments. You can evaluate expressions positively or negatively but not the source from which they take root.

The following questions make it easier to identify and touch relevant elements of the organizing principle:

- What is present and wholly undeniable here?
- What underlying factor makes it possible to reveal what is actually present?
- How is the thing that is present, organized?
- How is it possible that the system works the way it does?
- What is necessarily true and valuable for this system to function the way it does?

It goes without saying that the more complexity is taken into consideration, the more accurate and precise the final description of the organizing principle will be. It is nevertheless important to realize that no system (human, organization, company, society) can ever be described in its entirety.

Fortunately, which brings to mind the statement of Carl Jung: "The worst thing that can happen to anyone is to be fully understood".

The Identity model

This identity model was developed by Jan Ardui and Jasper Donker van Heel with the sole purpose of helping to both understand and help shape the identity of an organization. The starting point of this approach is based on the premise that any system that identifies itself as a system and which is regarded by other systems as a separate system, effectively has an identity. As already stated, it is impossible to describe or define an identity in its entirety. The key challenge therefore is not to have a complete description of the identity of an organization, but to ensure what is described accurately represents a relevant part of the identity.

Identity comes from the Latin word 'idem' which means 'same'. We therefore need to look for what fundamentally remains identical over time, in different contexts and expressions of actions, reactions, values and beliefs.

In other words, we will search for the 'ego' and 'spirit' of the organization and will consider both as complementary. The "ego" is a reference to everything related to ambition, survival, recognition, competition and performance. The "soul" refers to the deep mission, vision, uniqueness and existential values of the organization.

The following model provides a view of the different categories types of expressions of identity we work with.



The identity model is a resource that facilitates the description of an organization's identity by looking for different relevant expressions of the organization. By crystallizing these different expressions, important patterns are revealed.

These factors are certainly not exhaustive. In fact, every expression of an organization can be used as a source for pattern detection. It goes without saying that the more expressions of an organization are taken into consideration, the more precise and detailed the description of the identity of the system becomes.

A description of the various fields of the model:

History & roots

This is the story of how it started. Here the focus is on the origin, the driving force for the creation of the organization. We identify key moments in the history of the organization, both successes and failures or moments of crisis.

Symbols and rituals

These are characteristics that are identified as very typical for your organization; these can include behaviors, visual characteristics or language that really typifies the organization. A logo is often a symbol that expresses the identity of the organization. Rituals are recurring patterns, solid actions that symbolize something very specific and peculiar to the culture.

Competencies

The core competencies and qualities that really differentiate the organization from other similar organizations.

Emotional needs

These are the emotional needs of the customers which the organization aims to cater to. The feeling you offer as an organization that goes beyond the formal offer. It's about the essential connection with your customers.

Values and beliefs

The values and beliefs which your organization strongly stands for. Unique values or beliefs that are specifically linked to your organization, and which can be seen as distinctive in the market.

The basis of our authority

The characteristic which makes your organization an authority if you so wish, can or want. The core strength that day in day out ensures the credibility of the organization. Your most essential expertise.

Case: leveraging the identity model for a day with a large organization in the field of education. The mandate of the organization was clear and to the point: "We want to get an insight into the identity of our organization. We have grown significantly in recent years and are continuing to do so. But we want to stay true to who we are and what makes us unique and qualitatively strong, so that we may maintain this exponential growth. What is our identity, what is the excellence that belongs to our essence?"

The management of the organization chose to involve the entire educational team in this reflection. All levels of the organization were present, from cleaning lady to director, which amounted to a group of approximately 80 people. The full day session with all employees of the organization around the identity model was carried out as follows:

After a general introduction, groups were formed around each of the six themes of the identity model, so that each group could work together on one of the fields. Each group was given an assignment in four steps:

1. First, the work group is asked to discuss the topic they had chosen. They brainstorm to give meaning to the theme in a way that befits the organization.
2. Next, part of the group was asked to make a visual representation of their findings in the form of a collage of images. The group is challenged to create an ideal expression of what the organization stands for.
3. The other part of the group is asked to make an aural translation of their findings from the brainstorming exercise. This approach differs for each field and is adapted to the theme in question. One group was asked to write a poem, the other drafts scenarios and plays customer, while another group writes a speech or a mission statement.
4. Consequently, the work of the two groups was brought together and consolidated in the subgroups. This is the basis for developing a key question for each theme. The group is challenged to look for something that fascinates them now that they have put all this information together. A key question creates an opening to something that can be further investigated or something that is yet to be discovered. In the presentation to the other groups, these questions promote participation and invite the other participants to join in the voyage of discovery.

The various groups present their work to each other. This is the stage where the filling of the identity model is completed. Information is generated and meaning is brought to the fore by the system itself.

Follows a phase where the facilitators share their views of what has been brought to expression. They serve as an external source of feedback and provide a trigger for reflection, in addition to the internal source, which the employees were for themselves in the first part of the process.

With a more complete view on all the material, the participants continue to look for the core of their identity in the sub-groups. They determine which insights and common threads have become apparent from the first session. They qualify the characteristics that concurrently represent both a strength and weakness, as well as the complementarities that exist within the organization. They also describe how the organization works and flawlessly embraces these complementarities. They identify the tension that is both permanently at work and present in the functioning of the organization, yet at the same time masterfully controlled. This effectively, is where the true excellence of the organization lies.

It is not our intention to share a full report on the results of this reflection day. To illustrate what the process unveiled at the time and even today, we share here some of the essential findings: The core complementarity of the organization was defined by the group as:

FACILITATING

Which encompasses notions of REACTIVITY - CARE – the creation of OPPORTUNITIES
TOGETHER - WE

And:

INDIVIDUALITY - I
PROACTIVE - CHALLENGING - DEMANDING - HEADSTRONG
DISRUPTIVE

We have also identified a few core beliefs that run through every part of the identity model as a common thread. Core Beliefs that are part of the organizing principle and that encompass both the excellence of the organization and the major pitfalls.

ALL BOUNDARIES ARE THERE TO BE TRESPASSED
WE ARE TRESPASSERS
WE IMPOSE LIMITS - WE CREATE BRIDGES
IT IS NEVER ENOUGH - WE WINOVER EVERYTHING

As facilitators of this process, we primarily listened and helped to articulate more precisely the core patterns and generative complementarities by asking questions and reflecting. Following this, we formulated a question which simultaneously acknowledges what is present in the organization and represents a possible next step, and gave this to the organization:

HOW CAN YOU LEARN TO HANDLE BOUNDARIES WITHIN YOUR OWN ORGANIZATION?

A year later, a senior person within the organization told us the following about the effects of the process:

"By using the model together to look for and formulate our identity created a stronger sense of togetherness. It was a moment that later often popped-up in conversations, and which was referred to as very valuable.

The results of our quest resulted in a number of complementarities that were very recognizable to our staff. The core complementarity we ended-up with gave us insight into the problems we were facing at that time and continued to be confronted with. Our complementarities determined both our strengths and our weaknesses.

The key question we have since been working with is: where does our expansion end and how can we learn to handle boundaries within our own organization?

One year after our team day, our organization imploded. The aforementioned key question already pointed to this, but it took us another year before we fully believed this and could start working with it.

Our expansion hasn't stopped, meaning new colleagues continue to join our organization, not at the pace of the first year but nevertheless we are growing in number. We continue to work with interns and students to attract enough new blood. In contrast to this, our unquenched thirst for always new and different domains has been put on the back burner and we are now focusing on one big theme.

We are now learning to cope with our internal borders. This is not an easy task and has also caused some suffering. The head and founder of our department decided to go work elsewhere a year ago. We are learning to live with the idea that we cannot accept "everything", and that we can't "all" be busy innovating and breaking grounds all the time. We have now developed a clearer structure in which employees increasingly know what is expected of them. We continue to be groundbreaking but want to do this from an organization that isn't first and foremost concerned by the outside world, but considers the talent of and care for its employees as the starting point."

Basic assumptions in order to effectively operate at the level of the core identity of an organization

To describe the identity as an organizing principle is a subtle process. Each system has deep-seated processes that allow the identity of the system to be preserved and safeguarded. If a system has even the slightest sense that its identity is threatened, it will invariably respond. This survival reflex is expressed in various forms: the system can close itself in, can counterattack, may end up in chaos, etc.

A system that is too busy or concerned with defending itself from attacks on its integrity is in danger of losing the connection with its own core. A strong identity has a strong connection with itself and a strong connection with what is outside the system. Allergies are sometimes called a mistake of the immune system. A system that has lost the connection with its own core, has a risk of creating allergies. Extreme sensitivity requires much energy from the system without being able to focus this energy on further growth.

Working effectively with the identity of a system requires to be present without judgment in a first instance. The identity is not to be judged. There is no such thing as a bad or prodigious identity. Each identity is an organizing principle at the heart of which all the qualities and capabilities, but also the limitations, shortcomings and mistakes of a system are to be found. This means that the description of an organizing principle must reflect both the potential failure and the potential excellence of a system.

Working on identity cannot happen if the intention is present to change the system. Notably because such change is based on a judgment: it is not good as it is or it should be better. When we work on identity change is not the goal, but considered a possible effect. We want to get to know and recognize the identity of a system in its fullness. Nothing more, nothing less.

To stimulate this basic posture, we will now develop three principles we consider essential in our practice as support and inspiration in working with the identity of a system.

Principle 1:

A sort of freedom comes from recognizing what is necessarily so; after that recognition comes the knowledge of how to act, Gregory Bateson.

Recognizing what is necessarily so, is a wonderful way to describe what someone is trying to achieve when he seeks the organizing principle of a system. Recognizing what is necessarily present in a

system, provides a certain degree of freedom according to Bateson. To gain insight in, become aware of your own identity out of recognition (and not judgment) is liberating. Based on this recognition and the accompanying effect of freedom, that we are enlightened about the next (development) stage.

And this is exactly what we want to achieve with the description of a corporate identity: recognition and show appreciation for what is present as an organizing principle of the organization, thanks to which we can before all maintain what is valuable. You do not even have to look for new ways or other forms of expression for the current organizing principle. What Bateson specifies here is that when we give adequate recognition to what is, knowing what the next step needs to be will come naturally. The next step in the growth of an organization can in this way always happen organically. How often we see organizations invest effort, time and energy in establishing change that isn't permanent because it is based on the non-recognition and a lack of freedom with respect to what is present. Changes from the connection with the identity of a system, are always natural, organic changes.

Principle 2:

Each part of the system makes a difference, yet is simultaneously also an expression of the whole.

Not everyone is able or has the expertise to shape an organization, but everyone is an expression of the Corporate identity.

The whole is not a part and the part is not the whole, but in some respects they resemble each other. Each part brings something unique within the relationship and contributes to the whole. The similarities make you choose for each other, the difference makes you work together and put something in the world that both (all) dream about, but you couldn't achieve alone. Associating yourself with the system and engaging your complementarity gives the relationship creative force.

Organizations should regularly go on a quest for their essence and their identity, because it allows collaborators to relate to the system they belong to. The effect for the individual is that you see what you're contributing to the whole in terms of complementarity. And where necessary, how you can be released from a paralyzing identification, because when you identify yourself too much, you have nothing to add.

This principle also means that with EACH expression of a system (whether it concerns an individual with a particular behavior within the organization, a tactical decision by the organization, a marketing strategy or someone's appointment) a glimpse of the identity of the system can light up. The assurance over the relevance of this expression in relation to the identity arises when this singular expression can be connected with other expressions and binding patterns are brought to light.

Principle 3:

There are great truths and trivial truths. The opposite of a trivial truth is completely false; the opposite of a great truth is also true, Niels Bohr.

With identity, the organizing principle always contains a generative tension. This tension stems from the presence of forces that coexist and are connected with each other. There probably are some forces we can regard as universal when we talk about living systems. One of these is definitely the tension between stability and movement or change. Every living system has the need in its organizing principle to combine flexibility and rigidity. The rigidity provides the necessary internal stability so the system remains recognizable to itself and the outside world. Movement and change provide the necessary flexibility to withstand external influences and to provide direction for itself for its own evolution within the greater whole.

It is a great truth that every system is both flexible and rigid. These two forces together form what we call a generative complementarity. The two forces are complementary. They are not mutually exclusive as black and white, but are connected together and thus create a potential for growth.

Feminine and masculine energy are complementary and can as we know be generative: their relationship creates something that transcends the initial elements.

When we talk about the identity of an organization, we need to hit the level where we find great rather than trivial truths. When we are transfixed by the tremendous growth of a company and solely observe this, we only grasp a trivial truth. However, when we can also look for the incredible torpor and inertia that ALSO exists in this company, we come closer to a complementary reality. Especially when we can indicate for example that the inertia actually feeds the rapid growth, and the rapid growth in effect feeds the inertia. By searching with curiosity and without judgment, we get the opportunity to discover the generative complementarities that make up the identity of the system. Without falling into trivialities, we can name tensions and define the occurring dynamic.

An organizing principle is always composed of two or more complementary forces, of which one is often considered more positive and the other as rather negative. To recognize the identity of an organization, we need a perspective, a description that goes beyond the superficial division between positive and negative.

T.S. Eliot once wrote the following sentence, which highlights a beautiful generative complementary while stressing the importance of an artistic, sophisticated approach if we want to say something meaningful about the identity of a system.

“Only the artist looks with his two eyes and only to him the centre appears; that still point where the dance is.” Great truths probably aren't judgments; they are silent cores in which the movement shows itself flawlessly.

To conclude

Consistent with what we write, we would like to end with the following question. We chose the title "How intervening on corporate identity can become a means to enhance participation"; assuming that interventions are targeted, is "promoting participation" then the ultimate goal we seek in working on corporate identity? Because perhaps participation is also something like change? A natural effect that occurs from recognizing what is there. You could also say that participation is simply a given in any system. Just like a system requires change and movement to remain flexible and survive, so to the system requires the participation of its parts.

We assume that systems, and therefore organizations, require participation to survive both qualitatively and durably. The introspection process at the identity level is at least one path that sets this participation in motion, while enabling the organization to move forward via this participation.