Date: August 30, 2017

OPPORTUNITIES

HUMAN RESOURCES DEVELOPMENT • JOBS • TECHNOLOGY

Do you have a powerful workplace identity?

The good news is that it can be developed through a four-step process

M.V. ANURADHA

The term identity is used in various ways. In one of its more common usages, it refers to the unique characteristics of an individual that distinguish him/her from others in a social context. The essence of the term lies in the fact that identity is the self-definition of an individual in the context of a group. And it is this context that makes the concept interesting to understand, because both the individual and group forces are at work in crafting the identity of the individual.

Three dimensions

Identity is a complex concept. It involves a descriptive dimension (What characteristics do I possess?), an evaluative dimension (How am I valued because of my characteristics?) and a resulting efficacy dimension (Am I confident of my ability to perform a task using my characteristics?). The descriptive dimension helps us develop a self-concept and the evaluative dimension affects the self-esteem of the person. Greater the positive valence associated with the characteristics one possesses, higher is the self-esteem of the individual and vice versa. Lastly, the efficacy dimension is the basis of the confidence that an individual displays in any work situation. If we want to actively engage in developing an identity for ourselves at work we first need to be aware of this structure of identity and then devise a plan to improve the three dimensions.

Identity development

Image refers to the way others view us. Identity is how we view ourselves. Research on how organisations come to develop an identity for themselves suggests that they rely on the feedback they receive about the way others outside the organisation perceive it (its image) to interpret and construct the organisational identity. Identity development therefore is a dialectical process based on feedback from stakeholders in the social context and an active interpretation of this feedback by the organisation.

A similar principle would apply if we were to understand identity development at an individual level. At the workplace, people receive various kinds of information or feedback about their own competence, the contribution they make through their work to society and their personal worth in society because of the work they do. This information acts like a mirror for us to know what we are good at, what we are valued for and what our standing is in a particular organisation. This gets reflected as our sense of identity and personal competence.

If we are known for possessing expertise in a certain domain that expertise becomes our identity within the organisation and is directly linked to our sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy to carry out a task. Being known for a specific characteristic or skill within an organisation (that is, possessing a unique identity within the organisation) also acts as a source of power for the individual possessing it.

Therefore, it's immensely beneficial for each individual to actively work on building a unique identity for oneself within the organisation. However, most of us are at a loss when it comes to actually devising an action plan for doing this. So, here's an action plan for identity development.

Step 1: Self-awareness

Self-awareness is a crucial and indispensable first step for any kind of development activity. Awareness of one's strengths and limitations requires a keen observation of self. The individual should be constantly mindful of what excites him/her, and also what bores him/her? This constant mindfulness can be corroborated by seeking feedback actively or at least by being open to feedback from others about one's competence. Renowned academic Jeffery Pfeffer also suggests that we could have a personal board of consultants (that is, people who will give you frank and honest feedback about your personal capabilities) for increasing our self-awareness and eventually developing a unique identity for ourselves.

Step 2: Consonance

Once this first step has been carried out honestly, the second step of developing a personal identity requires working on creating a consonance between one's image (understood through the feedback received from others) and one's identity. There could be two possible ways to do this.

(i) Self-acceptance: The feedback we seek from others serves multiple purposes. It allows us to change some aspects of ourselves that might be hindering the development of a unique identity for us. However, there are also aspects about ourselves that are natural to our personalities, aspects that if changed might make our behaviour unnatural. In such cases, self-acceptance is the key to development. Self-acceptance combined with self-awareness leads to the development of a quiet confidence in ourselves. This confidence is crucial for identity development.

(ii) Skill development: When we know what we are good at, we need to map our personal abilities with the skills that are important and scarce for the organisation.

Developing skills in activities that are based on our personal interests and abilities ensures that we are good at what we do.

While developing skills that are important and yet scarce to find will increase an individual's visibility and worth in an organisation. For example, if an organisation values skills in data analytics and an individual is good at language and social interactions, then this individual could try and develop skills in qualitative (language-based) or social media analytics.

This skill would be important for an organisation to reach its goal, and it is also probable that relatively fewer people possess this skill making the person indispensable for the organisation. This is how we can map our personal interests with the organisational interest and develop a unique identity for ourselves within the organisation.

Step 3: Managing identity

There could be two kinds of crises within organisations that could be relevant for identity. Firstly, working people could experience a personal crisis – displayed in a feeling of not being valued by the organisation, feeling incompetent, feeling stressed out because of the fear of evaluation. A second kind of crisis for identity could arise when organisations are changing. For example, when the environment changes and organisations decide to downsize to remain competitive, employees face the crisis of retaining their jobs and remaining employable.

Step 4: Crises of Identity

Since an individual's employment and employability are dependent on the unique abilities of that person as recognised by the organisation (one's image), being aware of one's image in the organisation is the first step towards managing personal identity. Simultaneously, one also needs to work on developing an identity based on skills that are important for the organisation as well as mapped to one's personal capabilities and interests. A person who is cognisant of these dialectics of identity dynamics is better equipped to deal with both the kinds of crises – personal or organisational.

Career development of an employee is as much a responsibility of the individual as it is of the organisation. Workplaces today have become extremely fast-paced and therefore, it is more crucial than ever before for an employee to actively work on one's own skill development, nurture one's own natural talent and be well-educated about workplace dynamics. These efforts would enable a win-win situation for the employee as well as the employer.

(M.V. Anuradha is Assistant Professor – Organisational Behaviour & Human Resource Management at Great Lakes Institute of Management, Chennai.)

Photo used for representational purpose only.