

“The iMyth™: Does Your Company Have It?”

by Ted Santos

Corporations can form an identity, just as individuals do. This identity can be a source of strength. It becomes the brand by which others recognize you. But too often a strong identity can be a source of weakness. It can constrain us during periods of growth, and adhering too tightly to an idea of ourselves or of our organization can cause us to overlook opportunities.

For instance, an employee may distinguish himself as someone who “gets the job done.” This identity serves him well for a time. Yet, if he clings too tightly to it, his rise through the company may stall as he approaches higher management positions that require the ability to delegate. He will have to grow beyond his identity to meet new demands.

Similarly, a small advertising firm may distinguish itself by creating a series of brash, idiosyncratic spots. As it takes on a greater number of established clients, the firm will not succeed if it fails to portray the clients as they would like to be portrayed, rather than creating the sort of advertisements they see as representing past successes.

An organization, team or individual has arrived at their current level of success because they identified something they do well and matched themselves with customers who expect a set of outcomes. As long as they aim to, and are expected to, arrive at this set of outcomes, they will comfortably continue at a certain level of success. If they are committed to a new set of outcomes, they will have to identify a new set of strategies and actions. If the new goals are significantly greater, they will be required to identify themselves as a person or group with a new set of competencies and way of thinking that is appropriate for these more ambitious achievements. The person or group will have to shed old identities, like a snake sheds skin to grow.

This process of change can look costly or chaotic. At the same time, by defining ourselves and our companies solely through past successes and experiences, we will miss opportunities for growth and innovation. This article was written not just to emphasize that we can grow beyond our often firmly held conceptions of ourselves. It is meant to question whether the idea of identity has any validity or value at all.

Perhaps believing in an identity is analogous to believing in the myth of a flat earth. When people believed in that myth, it effectively cut them off from a large portion of the world. If identity shapes what we believe is possible or impossible, does it cut us off from our greatest potentials? A famous line: I could never be a leader because I don't have that kind of personality.

We say the notion of having one true identity is a myth — the iMyth. When the catalyst is strong enough, you and I will abandon our identity. So is identity merely a justification for staying in our comfort zone?

For example, in 1983 the big three automakers had the technology to make the minivan. However, they were concerned that minivans would cannibalize the station wagon market — a market by which they identified themselves. They saw that shifting focus to the minivan would require a significant investment in a new infrastructure — it would

require shifting to a new identity. Chrysler, on the other hand, was facing the threat of bankruptcy. Instead of bankruptcy, they chose to change their identity from a producer of station wagons to minivans. As a result, they led the market in sales. In fact, they became the number one seller of minivans, generating \$1.5 billion in the first three years of production and reaping greater profits than GM and Ford¹. Ultimately, this shift in identity was pivotal in saving Chrysler.

Needless to say, the other automobile manufacturers introduced minivans, except as followers. When a person or organization is threatened, as was the case for Chrysler, Ford and GM, they will abandon the old identity to survive.

As in the example, being too attached to an identity can be crippling and can constrain actions. For the most part, our identities keep us safe and never lead us toward those groundbreaking leaps where we can make what seemed impossible possible.

When John F. Kennedy declared the United States would put a man on the moon, it appeared impossible. There was nothing in our experience that made the goal plausible. Except, his vision of the future was so inspiring that people committed to new careers to support it. One of the reasons he was able to take that giant leap forward was his ability to *stand* for extraordinary accomplishment. Reaching for the impossible enhanced the identity of the U.S. and created a platform for others to align themselves with and dedicate their energies to achieving. However risky, a powerful stand can create a future that has never existed.

How is identity created?

The identity is formed by knowledge, experience, and feelings. And it has gotten each of us to where we are today. As a result, the way we view the world, the way we approach risks and opportunities, can only be referenced through our individual knowledge and experience.

In other words, if we have been taught or experienced that a task is difficult, our identity will seek evidence to support that presupposition and avoid the task at all costs. Once validated, we have defined reality as well as an identity to deal with that reality. It is not until we take risks to move out of our comfort zone do we see new possibilities.

What can you do about it?

There is no silver bullet. Because everything we have experienced, learned and even heard about has shaped our identity, there are aspects of it that are transparent. Therefore, you will have to develop a new perspective of your life or business and distinguish the experiences that have shaped you and the culture of your enterprise. That way, you are able to dislodge baggage and move forward.

To start, get someone who has an objective view of you or your company. Dr. W. Edwards Deming said “a machine can’t fix itself.” There are companies that specialize in high-level change initiatives. Second, it is key that both individuals and companies be aware of the identity they have created. Third, practice stepping out of the comfort zone. That way, you can respond to new opportunities flexibly, and your identity is less likely to limit your growth. Finally, be very clear about what you and your company stand for — the future. As in the case of President Kennedy, revealing your stand will give you

purpose and prompt you to take new actions to drive innovation.

On a grander scale, the solution may be to give people tools to manage their fears and doubts in the face of change or risk. Furthermore, management can create environments that encourage employees to fully contribute even if they fail.

To identify people by gender, race, religion, titles, and intelligence are all iMyths — invalid ways of assessing a person's value. They presuppose what people are capable and incapable of doing. Global competition has changed the world. The new playing field requires collaboration, growth, and constant innovation, not fixed identities that rely solely on the past.

Footnotes:

1 Blue Ocean Strategy by W. Chan Kim and Renee Mauborgne, page 196-197