

CHAPTER 1: IDENTITY

Who Am I?

“Who am I?”

How would you answer that question? Would you say something like?

“I’m an architect,”

“I’m a tennis player,”

“I’m a mum,” or

“I’m a university student.”

Each of these responses sheds insights into the identity of a person. They are examples of a profession, a hobby or interest, a family role, or a stage in life. However, these labels only give a rough sketch of the identity of a person.

The listener, to further describe a person’s identity, adds assumptions and stereotypes. For example, a person who defines herself as a mother is often seen as someone that looks after a child. However, the word mother can bring up other images that are based on stereotypes, such as, those associated with an unwed mother, a non-working mother, or a mother whose children have left home, in which case that mother would be referred to as ‘an empty nester’. When a person describes, himself or herself, based on a role, it is very possible that this leads to a misrepresentation of a person’s true identity as stereotypical details cloud one’s true identity.

Let’s look at another example. I recently met a young professional, I asked him to describe himself. He said that he was an engineer. Interestingly, as I began to talk with this young man, it became apparent that he did not like being an engineer. In fact, the only reason that he was an engineer was because his parents wanted him to be one. Upon further discussion with this young man, it was clear that his passions and values, that are an integral part of his identity, were not part of the description that he initially gave of himself.

Ask yourself again,

“Who am I?”

This time put more thought into it. Your answer should not be based on expectations or assumptions that people may have of you. Your answer should deliver a true authentic description of who you are.

To know thy self is the beginning of wisdom.

- Socrates –

Now consider this. What happens when people describe you differently than how you see yourself?

Before I became a mother, I described myself as a secondary school mathematics teacher. I had been teaching for 10 years and at that time teaching in the third country, at an international private school in the Seychelles. I then went on to assist in the development of the first private school catering to the local Seychellois. I was respected amongst the education and wider local community for the dedication and expertise I offered to the development of these schools and students. Just before leaving the Seychelles, I had my first child. My husband had been hired as an international pilot with Emirates Airlines based out of Dubai. Upon arriving in Dubai, I heard someone describing who I was to another person. “Lorraine is Wayne’s wife; she is Ashley’s Mum.” That was the first time in my life that I realized that my entire identity changed and without me having any influence on the matter, simply by someone else’s view of who I was.

I was, and still am, happy to be Wayne’s wife and to be Ashley’s mum. However, these are labels that do not give a full explanation as to the true essence of my identity.

Another example of misrepresented identity is the labels that are attached to people who have recently completed secondary school. Many secondary school graduates are faced with an expectation that they should go directly to University. This is an excellent pathway for many, one that education systems encourage, but this is not the pathway that will benefit all.

Many young people today will describe themselves by saying, “I am a university student.” This is often followed with information about what they are studying, for example, “I am studying to be a doctor,” but what happens if a person chooses not to go to university or even drops out of university. I recently heard a young man describe himself at the age of 19 as ‘a university dropout’. That description is a stereotypical negative expression. He referred to himself as ‘a dropout’ instead of simply saying that he was pursuing a different, more passionate career pathway.

Labels and stereotypes when attached to one’s identity can have short and long-term consequences. They shape a person’s own view of themselves. In the case of a ‘university dropout’, people will not only have a negative label attached to their identity, but this will begin to affect their self-esteem and their self-worth.

Your identity is a powerful thing, more powerful than you might realize. Your identity is more than just a convenient way of summing up yourself. It is the essence of who you are and how you perceive the world and your place in it. Your identity is intricately woven with your dreams, your values, and your passion.

You are the most talented, most interesting,
most extraordinary person in the universe,
and you are capable of amazing things
because you are the Special
and so am I and so is everyone else.
- Emmet, Lego Movie –

The most important fact about identity is that you have your own unique personal identity. You have special skills, talents and viewpoints that make you a very valuable person. You may appear to be like other people but, in fact, no two people are exactly the same.

Brand Work

1. Consider the traits, skills, passions, values, experiences and talents that make up your unique identity. In a shoe- sized box, gather items that represent the true essence of your identity. For example, if you have a passion for playing

music you might put a guitar pick into your box. If you are unable to find a specific item, for example, a value that you hold, write this in one or two words on a card and place it in the box. Use the items in the box to describe your true identity, firstly to yourself, then to a friend or family member.

2. Keep this box. In a few months' time, in a few years, open this box again. You might add or take away things in the box to more accurately describe yourself. The ones that remain become the ones that are most associated with your core self.