

Avatar Resources, Inc



# Leadership's Identity Crisis

*Passion leading to  
performance.*



---

Avatar Resources, Inc

3011—263rd Place SE  
Sammamish, WA 98075-9101  
USA

Phone: +1.425.557.5800  
Fax: +1.425.557.5529  
E-mail: [info@avatar-resources.com](mailto:info@avatar-resources.com)  
[www.avatar-resources.com](http://www.avatar-resources.com)



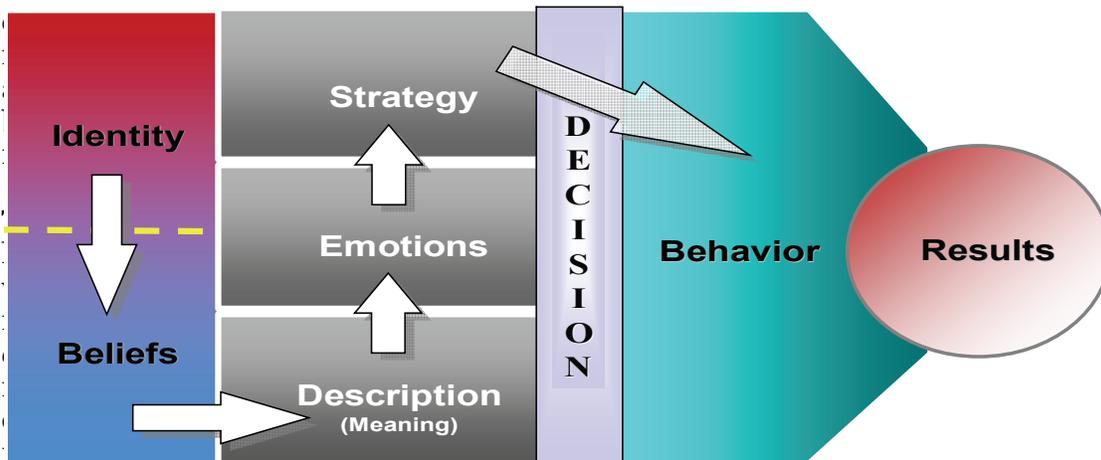
This article was written by Blaine Bartlett in 1996. It was first published in *Leader* magazine in 1997. In the article Blaine explores the impact and consequences to an organization when the role of the leader is viewed through the lens of traditional command and control models. He suggests that the success of today's organizations requires an awareness on the part of the leader of the impact of identity on an individual's attempts to make meaningful the many changes occurring today.

In past years I've worked with organizations in Finland, Sweden, Germany, Denmark, Korea, Japan, New Zealand, Venezuela, Africa, and the United States. These organizations span industries as varied as a chain of sushi restaurants to the most high tech of telecommunications companies; from oil companies to pharmaceuticals; from the private sector to the public sector. The one thing they all have in common is the dramatic and jarring impact of change on the organization. As a consequence of this change, the management of all are confronting the need to redefine what it means to be a leader within the organization – both in terms of the job's "requirements" as well as in the competencies required from an effective leader.

It has become all too apparent that the historical models we have used to define leaders within our organizations have to change. The "old" command and control model of leadership worked well when the rate of change our organizations faced was relatively stable and predictable. In those times an organization could afford to wait while its leaders mastered the new learning needed to keep the company competitive. Today's rapid rate of change doesn't allow for that luxury. The incredible amount of new information generated daily means that an individual leader can't assimilate the information needed to learn fast enough. Today, organizational change can't wait for the formal leadership group to interpret huge amounts of information in order to decide on a course of action. In order to assimilate information effectively and turn it into competitive knowledge learning must come from within the organization. Change must be allowed to be initiated from any level in the organization that is appropriate. This represents a huge threat to most leaders today. Adding to the problem is the fact that most members of our organizations have not been prepared to take on the responsibility of learning for the organization. Tomorrow, the survival of the organization cannot depend on a model that says that the leader is the person at the top of the hierarchy. It cannot wait for information to be sent up the chain of command in order for decisions to be made. The definition of whom is a leader and the very context of leadership itself has to shift if today's organizations are going to survive.

In the final analysis leadership is concerned with movement. Specifically, organizational leadership is the activity of *aligning* the behavior of an organization's members with the intention of causing the kind of movement that produces a specific result – often the solving of a problem that ultimately threatens the very survival of the organization. Success in achieving this behavioral alignment is a significant measure of a leader's effectiveness. It's an achievement that requires that the leader knows how to deal with **context** as well as content. Because context generates meaning, it is the ability to work with context that begins to define the effective leader of tomorrow's successful organizations.

As organizations (and their people) face ever-increasing rates and complexity of change the identities of the individual and the organization are often called into question. "*Who Am I/Who Are We*" and "*Where Do I/Where Do We Belong*" are the primary context questions that must be effectively addressed by tomorrow's leaders. In the work we do with client firms we hold that the answers to these questions are the generators of all organizational and personal behavior. To be effective, tomorrow's leaders need to understand the relationship between these questions and the results they must have from their people. We have developed the following model to help illustrate both this relationship and the trap into which traditional leader's most often fall:



©1995 by Blaine Bartlett

***able to change a person's internal description of the event – I need to change their meaning making process. If I can change their description I will change their behavior.***

The second set of inter-connected relationship is the set with the greatest leverage potential. The internal description process is most heavily influenced by the core *identity* questions “*who am I / who are we*” and “*where do I / where do we belong*”. These identity questions in turn impact the development of *beliefs* that are held to be true about the world and the individual's subsequent place in it. It's important to note that beliefs function, in part, to define what is possible.

***Taken together, the two dimensions of identity and belief define the internal description process and, consequently, what an individual recognizes as being possible. Leaders make new things possible! The way to change description is to shift beliefs and / or identity.***

Just as individuals have identities and beliefs, the same is true for organizations. For leaders of tomorrow's organizations, this creates a compelling challenge. How to effectively work with the dimensions of identity and belief? When it comes to producing a lasting change in an organization's results these are the areas of greatest leverage. These are the areas that most dramatically influence individual and organizational behavior. A change in these areas is always long lasting. It is here that the importance of defining Purpose / Mission (*Identity*) becomes self-evident. The crisis facing today's leaders is that few have developed the ability to effectively work with their organizations and their people in defining and shaping these dimensions.

I am not suggesting that the leader of tomorrow needs to become a psychologist or psychiatrist. However, I do suggest that a leader's effectiveness (as well as a manager's) is directly related to his or her ability to create and maintain high quality relationships – relationships in which it is possible to do work that impacts the meaning making process. Tomorrow's effective leaders will be masters at managing the meaning making

process. They will have the ability to lead a discovery process that makes the operating belief structures within the organization visible for all to see. They will recognize that limitations are indeed limits of belief and identity. They will use this recognition to enable the organization and its members to embrace new opportunities. They will foster and encourage learning within the organization at all levels. Above all else they will be masters at encouraging and enabling the organization and its people to seek out new possibilities. To do so, they will have to become masters of the art of relating.

*Reprinted by permission of the author.  
Originally published in: Leader, No. 1, June 1997, Coral Gables.*

