

1-1-2016

# How Do We Communicate Who We Are? Examining How Organizational Identity Is Conveyed to Members

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Published version. "How Do We Communicate Who We Are? Examining How Organizational Identity Is Conveyed to Members," in *The Oxford Handbook of Organizational Identity*, edited by Michael G. Pratt, Majken Schultz, Blake E. Ashforth and Davide Ravasi. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016: 219-238. [Publisher link](#). © 2016 Oxford University Press. Used with permission.

## CHAPTER 12

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# HOW DO WE COMMUNICATE WHO WE ARE?

*examining how organizational identity  
is conveyed to members*

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IMAGINE a CEO sending an email with a meaningful message to all members of the organization; a trainer proudly displaying a product that best captures the essence of the company in a new employee orientation; a manager providing an opportunity for subordinates to perform a task that represents the core of “who we are.” Organizational identity (OI)—“those features of an organization that in the eyes of its members are central to the organization’s character ... make the organization distinctive from other similar organizations, and are viewed as having continuity over time” (Gioia, Patvardhan, Hamilton, and Corley, 2013: 125)—is an essential part of organizational life (Albert and Whetten, 1985; Haslam, Postmes, and Ellemers, 2003). While varying perspectives exist on the nature of OI (reviewed in the next section), a rarely discussed assumption across perspectives is that perceptions of organizational identity are more or less shared by members.<sup>1</sup> Despite this widely held notion that individuals, to some degree, share a common sense of “who we are as an organization,” the dynamics of how this shared understanding develops is not well understood. This is particularly surprising given the everyday scenarios, like those described in the opening paragraph, indicating that organizational identity is conveyed all around us.

Convergence of identity-related perceptions among members suggests that identity content may be communicated in ways that facilitate such shared understandings.

<sup>1</sup> Brickson (2005) empirically demonstrated that members hold consistent views of internal and external organizational identity orientation. Recent work has also shown that, in addition to a common understanding, individuals may also hold divergent perspectives of organizational identity depending on members’ attributes, such as the groups to which they belong (Hsu and Elsbach, 2013).

Though scholars have begun to acknowledge that we must further appreciate how collective identity is transmitted (e.g., Ashforth, Rogers, and Corley, 2011), we currently lack a unified understanding of the various ways in which organizational identity is communicated. In particular, we don't fully understand who conveys identity content, and when, why, and how such communication occurs. This chapter is accordingly guided by two primary research questions: "how is organizational identity content communicated to members?" and "what determines the nature of that communication?" To begin answering these questions, we develop a framework of organizational identity communication. We theorize that identity custodians (individuals seen as communicating identity content on behalf of the organization, Howard-Grenville, Metzger, and Meyer, 2013) convey "who we are" through three primary means: saying (i.e., telling members who we are), showing (i.e., modeling behaviors that communicate who we are), and staging (i.e., providing opportunities for members to enact who we are).

We first discuss prototypical forms of saying, showing, and staging in organizational life. Building on this framework, we then present a typology of how the nature of this communication is shaped by two dimensions: the clarity of custodian perceptions of organizational identity content, and the extent to which custodians intentionally communicate identity content to members. This typology reveals four archetypal scenarios that emerge from these two dimensions, ranging from the absence of intentionally saying, showing, or staging to a heavy reliance on intentional communication through all three modes. Finally, we discuss our contributions to the organizational identity literature and implications for future research. To set the stage for the rest of the chapter, we begin with a set of boundary conditions and conceptual clarifications.

## ASSUMPTIONS AND POINTS OF CLARIFICATION

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Scholars with various philosophical beliefs have conceptualized organizational identity differently (see Gioia, 1998). While some view it as a set of claims that belong to the collective and represent who the organization is as a social actor (e.g., King, Felin, and Whetten, 2010; Whetten and Mackey, 2002; Whetten, 2006), others see it as a socially constructed, collectively shared schema that resides within individuals' understandings of the central, distinctive, and more or less enduring aspects of the organization (e.g., Gioia, Schultz, and Corley, 2000). Though traditionally viewed as contradictory, recent scholarship has begun to acknowledge that these two perspectives—social actor and social constructionist, respectively—are indeed complementary, if not mutually recursive (e.g., Ashforth et al., 2011; Gioia, Price, Hamilton, and Thomas, 2010; Howard-Grenville et al., 2013; Ravasi and Schultz, 2006). We agree with these scholars that members see organizations as social actors capable of intentional and self-reflective behavior, but that these same members simultaneously construct their own

understandings of organizational identity. As a result, we view organizational identity as a set of institutionalized identity claims that have achieved continuity over time (i.e., statements of what the organization represents; Ashforth and Mael, 1996) and reside in individuals' beliefs, understandings, and enactments of those claims. Indeed, as Ravasi and Schultz (2006) argued, "the juxtaposition of these perspectives will produce a more accurate representation of organizational identities" (p. 436).

Although scholars make these fine-grained distinctions between perspectives, examples from the organizational communications literature and popular press suggest that practitioners may not. Rather, individuals in organizations take as a given that organizational members craft and deliver identity messages on behalf of the organization (e.g., Cheney and Christensen, 2001; Heyman and Lieberman, 2014). We thus see identity claims as constructed at an individual level and interpreted at an individual level, but often released as if they were a statement made by the collective itself, and regularly perceived as representative of "who we are" (Scott and Lane, 2000). For example, as Bosch migrated its Indian brand, MICO, to the Bosch brand, leaders rolled out a two-phase initiative to intentionally communicate Bosch's identity to MICO employees. The company held a meeting with senior executives of MICO, displayed posters with statements such as "I am Bosch," and encouraged team leaders to verbally communicate to employees about the merged identity (Gupta, 2013). In this case, the identity claims espoused by leaders were perceived as "owned" by Bosch as an organization.

But who are the people conveying organizational identity content? Scholars have proposed various terms for those acting on behalf of the organization, such as "stewards" (Davis, Schoorman, and Donaldson, 1997), "agents" (Brickson and Akinlade, 2016), "member-agents" (King et al., 2010; Whetten and Mackey, 2002), and the term we adopt, "identity custodians" (Howard-Grenville et al., 2013). An identity custodian is perceived by other members of an organization as "an actor who focuses attention, invests time, and exerts energy in an effort to sustain a collective identity" (Howard-Grenville et al., 2013: 119).<sup>2</sup> We apply this concept to individuals occupying any level of the organization, though leaders have access to various communication channels via financial, human, and physical resources that other members do not (Fiol, 2002; Howard-Grenville et al., 2013). Identity custodians are seen as speaking and acting on behalf of the organization (King et al., 2010), as organizational identity infuses their behavior with purpose and meaning (Brickson, 2013). Thus, because organizations are themselves not capable of communicating (Shepherd and Sutcliffe, 2015), identity custodians are a crucial conduit for the propagation of organizational identity.

What exactly do identity custodians convey to organizational members? Like Gioia and colleagues (2000), we believe that the content of organizational identity messages consists of labels used to describe identity (i.e., that which is core and distinctive)

<sup>2</sup> Our conceptualization of the term "identity custodian" differs slightly from Howard-Grenville et al. (2013) in that they applied the term to individuals actively engaging in extra-role efforts to sustain collective identity, whereas we use the term to refer to anyone *perceived* as communicating organizational identity content through in-role and/or extra-role efforts.

and the meanings underlying those labels (i.e., “what it means to be [that label]”—Petriglieri, 2011: 646). As a boundary condition of this chapter, however, our discussion of identity communication, defined as conveying both organizational identity labels and their respective meanings to organizational members, does not directly examine the nature of the content communicated (e.g., whether the labels and meanings are widely accepted institutionalized messages, or reflective of identity custodians’ personal beliefs about the organizational identity content). Relatedly, though scholars have argued that an organization’s internally focused identity and externally focused image are intertwined (e.g., Cheney and Christensen, 2001; Dutton and Dukerich, 1991; Price, Gioia, and Corley, 2008), we focus only on communicating identity to organizational members (i.e., employees). We see concerns of image likely influencing the content of individuals’ understandings of identity messages, rather than the way that content is conveyed (cf. Gioia et al., 2000; Hatch and Schultz, 1997).

With these clarifications and boundary conditions in mind, we articulate our framework for understanding identity communication. We first examine the primary modes of communicating organizational identity to members: saying, showing, and staging. Following this, we present our typology of when organizational identity custodians employ these particular modes of communicating.

## COMMUNICATING ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTITY: SAYING, SHOWING, AND STAGING IDENTITY CONTENT

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The literature on organizational identity presents many paths through which identity content is transmitted, such as organizational dress (Pratt and Rafaeli, 1997) and forms of value (Brickson and Akinlade, 2016). Scholars have also examined broader categories like identity media and symbols (Pratt, 2003), and textual, material, and oral forms (Schultz and Hernes, 2013). Our goal is to build on this work by presenting an organizing framework for thinking about how identity custodians communicate all types of identity content: by *saying*, *showing*, and *staging* “who we are.” Each of these three ways provides the wherewithal for individuals to self-reflexively and publicly communicate “‘who-am-I-as-an-individual?’/‘who-are-we-as-an-organization?’” (Gioia et al., 2013: 127), and, when undertaken intentionally, signal a collective investment in organizational identity as an “irreversible commitment” (Selznick, 1957; Whetten, 2006).

### SAYING WHO WE ARE

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The first type of identity communication in our framework is “saying” who we are. By saying, we mean sending a verbal or written message containing identity content

to one or more members of the organization. This may happen through a variety of means, such as one-on-one exchanges or messages that are mass-communicated to members. Identity custodians likely engage in "saying" because it is a direct form of communicating labels and meanings that is low-cost, easy for custodians to control, and provides the potential to deliver an unambiguous message that requires little effortful interpretation.

We believe that saying primarily occurs through conversations, including narratives and stories (Kärreman and Alvesson, 2001). Indeed, Pratt (2003) observed that, "verbal language is the most obvious means of transmitting identity throughout a collective" (p. 176). For example, in a study of how organizational character was regenerated each year at a summer camp, Birnholtz, Cohen, and Hoch (2007) described how members of Camp Poplar Grove met around the flagpole before each meal for announcements, which became occasions to build a shared sense of "who we are" by "providing everyone with identical information" (p. 325). Additionally, scholars argue that collective identities are comprised of a string of narratives that are told and retold over time (e.g., Brown, 2006; Dailey and Browning, 2014). Narratives indicate not only the present, but also the future and past notions of organizational identity (Czarniawski, 1997; Schultz and Hernes, 2013). Narratives may also reflect individuals' interpretations and/or crafting of the identity content (Kärreman and Alvesson, 2001). Thus, they represent real, idealized, or fantastical representations of who the organization was, currently is, or may become, and serve an integral function in maintaining collective self-esteem and a sense of continuity in identity (Brown and Starkey, 2000).

In addition to narratives, stories, and conversations, identity content communicated by saying also includes widely disseminated information (i.e., mass communications) relevant to "who we are" as an organization. Mass communications are formal espousals of identity that provide members with general exposure to an organization's identity-related content (Alessandri, 2001). Likely forms include emails or letters, white papers, press releases, media articles (e.g., newspapers or magazines), the company's website, and formal corporate espousals of mission or vision statements (such as in annual reports). Most mass communications are spread via identity custodians (e.g., an email on behalf of the CEO to all employees of a company), who lend credence to perceptions of validity and authenticity of the identity content being conveyed (Tyler, 1997). Additionally, unlike conversations, mass communications are often retained in an organization's archives, thus allowing past or desired identity-related information to inform the transmission of current identity-related content. To be sure, Schultz and Hernes (2013) found that corporate (i.e., mass) communications serve as a way of linking an organization's historical memory to its current identity.

## SHOWING WHO WE ARE

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The second key type of identity communication is "showing" who we are. By showing, we refer to modeled behaviors or displayed artifacts that communicate identity

content to one or more members of the organization. Similar to saying, showing may occur through one-on-one interactions and displays of identity-related behaviors or artifacts that identity custodians expect members will observe. We posit that custodians engage in “showing” because it provides grounded examples of identity enactment that convey meaning when identity content is difficult to verbalize.

One primary way that identity content is “shown” is through organizationally sanctioned mentoring programs and informal mentoring relationships, as these are scenarios where members deliberately model identity-related behaviors. A mentoring relationship is traditionally conceptualized as a developmental bond between a more senior individual and a less experienced individual (Higgins and Kram, 2001). This type of connection has been found to be an important source of identity information for organizational members. For example, in a case study of accounting firms, Covaleski, Dirsmith, Heian, and Samuel (1998) described how mentors conveyed appropriate language, professional appearance, and information about organizational politics, among other organizational values.

We see another fundamental way of showing “who we are” as displays of the visible physical objects that serve as symbols of organizational identity content. Displays are likely to take a number of forms that organizational members confront on a daily basis. Exemplar forms include the physical setting of the organization (e.g., Berg and Kreiner, 1990), how individuals dress (Pratt and Raffaelli, 1997; Raffaelli and Pratt, 1993), the images that represent the organization (e.g., corporate logo: Harquail, 2006), and the company’s products (e.g., Cappetta and Gioia, 2006). For example, in Apple’s internal training program “What Makes Apple, Apple,” facilitators show a slide of the highly complicated Google TV remote (Apple’s competitor) and contrast it to the Apple TV remote with only three buttons. The remote example communicates what members perceive to be central, distinctive, and more or less enduring attributes of Apple: its commitment to simplicity, functionality, and working collaboratively (Chen, 2014).

Showing may also be the form through which identity custodians are most likely to communicate identity content without realizing it (i.e., unintentionally convey to others “who we are”). Just because individuals are *perceived* by others as being custodians does not mean that they are necessarily aware of their role in conveying organizational identity content. Indeed, members of the organization may observe custodians’ day-to-day role enactment, and infer identity-related information. We see this being particularly true for those in highly visible roles (e.g., top management), but also likely for individuals who are especially proximal. As a result, “showing” done by members of one’s “tribe” (e.g., one’s immediate supervisor, fellow members of one’s department, or workgroup) may be particularly impactful in shaping members’ perceptions of the organization as a whole (Ashforth and Rogers, 2012).

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## STAGING WHO WE ARE

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The third type of identity communication in our framework is “staging” who we are. Through staging, identity custodians provide a context in which one or more

members of the organization can experience or enact organizational identity. Illustratively, when the top management of Japanese pharmaceutical company Eisai wanted employees to understand that the company was adopting “human health care (hhc)”—a focus on patients and their families—as a core value and belief of the firm, they selectively chose 100 managers to participate in a training program. As described by the authors of the case study, “The core of the training was the hands-on experience gained in the geriatric hospital ward, which actualized hhc ... by working on the ward, Eisai employees ... could thereby not merely rationally understand but actually ‘feel’ the meaning of hhc” (Takeuchi, Nonaka, and Yamazaki, 2011: 5). Another example of staging is provided by hearing aid manufacturer, Oticon. During the reconstruction of Oticon’s identity as the “Spaghetti Organization,” the CEO invited media into the organization to interview members. Through these interviews, members shaped how the media saw Oticon while also furthering their own understanding of Oticon’s organizational identity (Kjaergaard, Morsing, and Ravasi, 2011; Morsing, 1999).

We speculate that custodians engage in staging because enactment provides a visceral experience that being shown or told “who we are” cannot, and might therefore communicate identity content in more memorable and self-referential ways. Also, when done in groups, staging allows members to experience the identity content in similar ways, which may promote a high level of agreement among members’ perceptions of the identity content. Staging thus gives custodians an opportunity to provide a common experience whereby members interact with the identity in a controlled way.

Established organizational practices or structures also play a critical function in staging as they likely reflect identity content embedded in an organization’s way of operating. Prototypical forms of staging include rituals or routines that are enabled or supported by organizational structures. As Pratt (2003) articulated, “the *content* of [these forms] ... can each convey the central and enduring qualities of a collective” (p. 176). Routines, or “stable patterns of behavior that characterize organizational reactions to variegated, internal or external stimuli” (Zollo and Winter, 2002: 341), are a crucial mechanism for staging identity content. Routines have been posited to both maintain and change an organization’s self-concept (Brown and Starkey, 2000), and generate value that transmits organizational identity information to members (Brickson and Akinlade, 2016). For example, in their study of the NY/NJ Port Authority, Dutton and Dukerich (1991) found that members’ sense of organizational identity was associated with the enactment of Port Authority’s standard ways of dealing with the issue of homelessness. Routines are often connected to rituals, or standardized ways of behaving that communicate meaning (Friedland and Alford, 1991; Islam and Zyphur, 2009). At the University of Cambridge, for instance, members learned the college’s implicit hierarchies as they participated in its dining rituals (Dacin, Munir, and Tracey, 2010).

Additionally, the organization’s structure itself, or “the formal allocation of work roles and administrative mechanisms to control and integrate work activities” (Child, 1972: 2) plays an important part in identity staging. By setting and reinforcing the organizational structure, custodians provide members opportunities to gain a sense of organizational identity through enacting certain roles or interacting with other



members (e.g., sharing new ideas with multiple supervisors from different departments in a matrix-structure organization).

## A TYPOLOGY OF ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTITY COMMUNICATION

While our discussion of saying, showing, and staging identity labels and their associated meanings provides a solid basis for understanding the concrete ways that organizational identity is communicated to members, the lack of a coherent understanding of when, why, and how such communication tools are utilized leaves us with an incomplete picture of the phenomenon. Figure 12.1 captures a parsimonious yet holistic typology of two determining factors that help us understand the nature of identity communication: the extent to which identity custodians clearly understand the content of organizational identity and the extent to which these custodians deliberately communicate this content. When organizational identity content is clear to custodians (the vertical axis), they “seem quite sure of the meanings associated with their identity labels and what those meanings mean” (Corley and Gioia, 2004: 186). The horizontal axis, or custodians’ intentional communication of organizational identity

Custodians' Clarity of OI Content	<p><i>High</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">“We don’t need to communicate who we are”</p> <p><i>Characteristics of organizations:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mature organizations in stable environments</li> <li>• Organizational identity is deeply embedded</li> </ul> <p><i>How identity is communicated:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identity content is primarily “shown”</li> </ul> <p><i>Example: Cook &amp; Yanow, 1993</i></p>	<p style="text-align: center;">“This is who we are”</p> <p><i>Characteristics of organizations:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hold organizational identity and identification in high regard</li> <li>• Have a particularly strong or ideologically driven identity</li> </ul> <p><i>How identity is communicated:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identity content is “said,” “shown,” and “staged”</li> </ul> <p><i>Example: Pratt, 2000</i></p>
	<p style="text-align: center;">“We don’t know who we are”</p> <p><i>Characteristics of organizations:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Changing/new organizations</li> <li>• Organizations in which strategic ambiguity is desirable</li> <li>• Organizations in which the organizational identity is <i>not</i> central to completing work</li> </ul> <p><i>How identity is communicated:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identity content is not “said,” “shown,” nor “staged”</li> </ul> <p><i>Example: McGinn, 2007</i></p>	<p style="text-align: center;">“We don’t know who we are, but will communicate who we might be”</p> <p><i>Characteristics of organizations:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• New organizations</li> <li>• Organizations undergoing change</li> <li>• Organizations in which the organizational identity is central to completing work</li> </ul> <p><i>How identity is communicated:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identity content is primarily “said”</li> </ul> <p><i>Example: Corley &amp; Gioia, 2004</i></p>
<i>Low</i>	<i>Low</i>	<i>High</i>
	Custodians' Intentional Communication of OI Content	

FIGURE 12.1 A typology of organizational identity communication

content, denotes deliberate efforts to communicate that identity content to organizational members (Fiol, 2002).

Each axis of the figure represents a continuum; identity custodians may have low (i.e., ambiguous) to high (i.e., unambiguous) clarity of organizational identity content, and the intention behind communicating that identity content may also be low (i.e., unintentional) to high (i.e., deliberate). The four sections of the figure illustrate how organizational identity communication will likely occur (i.e., whether the identity is said, shown, staged, or none of the above) depending on where the identity custodian falls on the axes. We discuss each quadrant below, including the probable characteristics of organizations that fall into each, as well as the benefits and drawbacks of each quadrant.

### Low Clarity—Low Intent: “We Don’t Know Who We Are”

The bottom left quadrant represents organizations with identity custodians who are low on clarity of identity content and low on intentionally communicating that content to members. Organizations that fall into this quadrant include those with identity custodians who do not devote time and attention to “who we are,” and are therefore unlikely to intentionally communicate identity content to members through saying, showing, or staging. At the same time, identity custodians in this quadrant may purposely invoke a strategy of low-clarity–low-deliberateness in order to achieve strategic ambiguity, or the practice of orienting individuals toward conflicting or multiple goals (Eisenberg, 1984). Given the extensive research on the importance of a common set of identity understandings in organizations, it’s difficult to imagine why organizations would occupy this quadrant for long without either failing or moving to another quadrant. Considering examples that illustrate “low” on both axes, however, helps clarify the types of organizations that may fall into the low–low quadrant.

First, as noted, being low on the Y-axis (clarity of identity content) suggests that custodians’ perceptions of organizational identity are unclear. There are many reasons why this could be the case. The organization may be very new (Gioia et al., 2010) or in the midst of change, making the content ambiguous, fluid, or unsettled (Corley and Gioia, 2004). Identity custodians in these situations may choose not to deliberately communicate identity content, given that there isn’t a clear message to communicate. Another reason for a lack of clarity about organizational identity content may be that the most salient or important identity for members is not at the organizational level, but rather the occupational, workgroup, or relational levels. One example is an organization that operates as a collection of independent contractors who are highly identified with their occupation and the relationships through which they complete their work (e.g., a salon where stylists rent their stations and independently build their own client bases through relationships). In these cases, identity custodians might recognize that the strong identity of the occupation supersedes or substitutes for identity

at the organizational level. For instance, in a study of longshoremen in California, McGinn (2007) found that longshoremen's sense of identity was derived from their community of longshoremen peers, rather than the different organizations that employed them on a daily basis.

There are both pros and cons when identity custodians don't fully understand the identity and also don't intentionally communicate it. On the pro side, there are circumstances when communicating organizational identity could be an unwise allocation of time and resources, such as when identity at other levels (e.g., workgroup, occupational, relational) is more central to completing work than organizational identity. Additionally, strategic ambiguity is posited to be useful in times of change because it allows members to "fill in" the gaps of any identity-related communication received (Eisenberg, 1984; Eisenberg and Witten, 1987). Furthermore, it is possible that not paying attention to identity communication may generate short-term gains, for example when members are focused on the work at hand and maximizing efficiency, rather than attempting to understand and live the identity content espoused by custodians. On the other hand, because identity communication has been empirically found to strengthen organizational identification (e.g., Smidts, Pruyn, and van Riel, 2001; see also Scott and Lane, 2000), not communicating a clear organizational identity might confuse members about "who we are." Thus, in the absence of identity custodians knowing and communicating "who we are," it is less likely that organizational members will find meaning in their work toward collective goals. In such cases, the lack of identity information might lead members to focus their efforts on other, less organizationally beneficial identities.

### **High Clarity—Low Intent: "We Don't Need to Communicate Who We Are"**

The top left quadrant represents organizations with identity custodians who have a clear sense of organizational identity but do not intentionally communicate identity content to members. In these organizations, members are largely left to their own devices to pick up on implicit identity cues in order to reach their own understandings of "who we are." Because organizational identity content is unambiguous and likely well understood, the most prominent mode of identity communication will be showing, as custodians will not take explicit measures to communicate identity, but will instead (1) behave in ways consistent with the identity, and (2) embed the identity in the symbols and physical space of the organization.

Organizations in this quadrant are likely mature firms with established organizational identity content operating in a stable environment. The expectation that identity content will be clearly perceived without explicit communication suggests that identity has become deeply embedded in daily organizational life. Custodians, by showing organizational identity, promulgate natural convergence around identity content without the need for formal espousals. Unlike those organizations with

custodians who explicitly communicate identity content, members of organizations (particularly newcomers) in this quadrant are not expected to understand “who we are” immediately. For example, in their case study of a global leader in flute making, Cook and Yanow (1993) highlighted the implicit ways new members of the Powell flute company came to understand what distinguishes Powell from its closest competitors (in essence, its identity). No formal identity statements were communicated nor was formal training provided; instead, new members had to “learn a new ‘feel’, a different way of ‘handling the pieces’” by watching others perform “the collective activity of the workshop as a whole” (p. 381).

The intersection of having a clear idea of ‘who we are’ yet not explicitly communicating it has both pros and cons. On the one hand, custodians have a coherent sense of the identity, suggesting that the identity messages that are conveyed will be relatively consistent. On the other hand, implicit understanding of organizational beliefs and values takes time (Ashforth, Harrison, and Sluss, 2014). This implies that members will have to work through ambiguity to gain a sense of the collectively held identity. Additionally, because identity content is primarily conveyed through showing, the inability to triangulate the identity content being communicated may reduce members’ shared understanding of identity content, as custodians have no other formal statements of the identity to compare behavior to, and members have no formally espoused messages through which to understand the identity content being shown. However, the clarity of the identity suggests that once implicit communication efforts are successful (likely through showing), the unitary identity will be quite sustainable.

### **Low Clarity—High Intent: “We Don’t Know Who We Are, but Will Communicate Who We Might Be”**

The bottom right quadrant represents organizations with custodians who don’t have a clear understanding of “who we are” but who still engage in efforts to intentionally communicate organizational identity. In these cases, formally espoused statements of identity are highly common, though the messages themselves are likely conflicting or unclear. To be sure, research suggests that organizations recognizing the potential benefits of an ambiguous identity will continue to send identity-related messages to employees (e.g., Clark, Gioia, Ketchen, and Thomas, 2010). As a result, organizational members may perceive inconsistencies between the espoused identity and the identity actually “in-use” (Argyris and Schon, 1974). Due to the lack of clarity around the identity, enacting and creating contexts for members to reach a shared understanding of “who we are” becomes challenging for custodians. We thus expect that verbal and written modes of communication (i.e., saying) will be most prevalent for organizations in this quadrant.

There are many possible types of organizations in this quadrant. Certain forms of political arenas, or organizations rife with politics and conflict, potentially fall into this quadrant, as individuals may illegitimately abuse their role as identity custodians

to build power (Mintzberg, 1985). We may also expect to see organizations in this quadrant with multiple or conflicting identities (e.g., Pratt and Foreman, 2000), those undergoing a major change such as an acquisition or spin-off (e.g., Corley and Gioia, 2004), or those still forming their identity (e.g., Gioia et al., 2010). For instance, when “Bozkinetic” spun off from Fortune 100 parent company, “Bozco,” the executive team of Bozkinetic communicated a new vision, mission, strategy, and “commitment statements” in an attempt to help allay the identity ambiguity (Corley and Gioia, 2004).

Like other combinations of identity clarity and intentional communication, this quadrant also breeds both pros and cons. In terms of opportunities, because the identity content itself is somewhat ambiguous even to identity custodians, the lack of clarity may provide the opportunity to customize the identity content being communicated. This, in turn, may further facilitate custodian and member identification with the organization as they have the opportunity to shape how they themselves see the organization. In this way, individuals may perceive a greater overlap between who they are and the organizational narratives they are constructing (Cheney, 1983; Scott and Lane, 2000). At the same time, existing literature has empirically found that organizations with leaders who do not agree on organizational identity content perform poorer than those with leaders who do (Voss, Cable, and Voss, 2006). Ambiguous communication may confuse and frustrate custodians and members alike, who look to organizational identity as a way of gaining their bearings in the organizational context and as a lens for interpreting organizational life (Ashforth, 2001; Corley and Gioia, 2004). Thus, when custodians espouse unclear messages about “who we are,” it may lead to sustained disjointed understandings of organizational identity. Furthermore, depending on the intensity and pervasiveness of the political arena mentioned above, organizations “captured by conflict” are thought to be unsustainable (Mintzberg, 1985: 133).

## HIGH CLARITY—HIGH INTENT: “THIS IS WHO WE ARE”

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The top right quadrant represents organizations with custodians who have a clear perception of organizational identity and intentionally communicate that understanding. Organizations that fall into this quadrant likely have custodians who hold organizational identity in high regard because they value communicating a cohesive message. In this quadrant, custodians are most likely to engage in all three modes of communicating identity: saying, showing, and staging. Utilizing all three communication approaches maximizes the likelihood that identity content is effectively and accurately conveyed and facilitates triangulation that fosters a cohesive message to members.

There are noteworthy characteristics of organizations that fall into this quadrant. First, identity custodians in these organizations likely value member identification and the positive outcomes that tend to follow (Ashforth, Harrison, and Corley, 2008),

and are motivated to communicate identity content in hopes of “cueing” member identification (Scott and Lane, 2000). For example, Pratt (2000) describes how Amway, a network marketing organization, fostered identification among new Amway distributors through “dream building.” In dream building, individuals are exposed to dreams through written, visual, and audio means. Dreams are also staged in “dream-building sessions” and reinforced through strong mentoring relationships. A second type of organization that may fall into this quadrant is one with identity custodians who are motivated to maintain a strong distinctive or ideologically driven identity. For instance, Greil and Rudy (1984) provide examples such as Alcoholics Anonymous or new religious movements, referred to as identity transformation organizations (ITOs), where communicating identity is especially crucial to the organization’s success. In extreme cases, ITOs facilitate “encapsulation” where “the organization attempts to create a situation in which the reality it proffers is the only game in town” (Greil and Rudy, 1984: 263). ITOs surround newcomers with individuals who can “lend credence to their new world view” (Greil and Rudy, 1984: 264), likely through saying, showing, and staging identity content.

The major advantage of intentionally communicating a clear identity is the resulting consensus achieved—all members are ostensibly “on the same page.” On the other hand, organizations with custodians who deliberately communicate clear content (especially in a fervent manner) potentially emphasize organizational identity to such an extreme that members’ personal identities are divested, creating angst and resentment, or possibly over-identification with the organization (Ashforth, 2001). Cable, Gino, and Staats (2013) suggest that more positive organizational outcomes (i.e., greater customer satisfaction and employee retention) occur when personal identities are also emphasized during the socialization process, which, given the emphasis on communicating organizational identity, may be challenging for members in this quadrant to do.

## DISCUSSION

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How are answers to the question “who are we?” conveyed to organizational members? In this chapter, we suggest that there are identity custodians in organizations who are seen as capable and legitimate communicators of the organization’s deepest held meanings and beliefs. These custodians convey organizational identity in three primary ways: by saying “who we are,” showing “who we are,” and staging contexts for members to embody “who we are.” We theorize that there are some organizations where identity custodians do not understand identity content well and also have little intention of communicating it. In these contexts, organizational identity is neither said, shown, nor staged. At the other end of the spectrum, we paint a picture of organizations with custodians who have a very clear sense of organizational identity and who are highly intentional in communicating that identity content, indicating that

identity content is so solidly embedded in the organization that custodians can create contexts (i.e., staging) in which members enact the identity. In between these two extremes, custodians likely engage in saying or showing, as the lack of clarity or lack of intentional communication of organizational identity content suggests that they only have the tools to do one or the other.

## Implications for Theory and Future Research

We see our implications for theory as twofold, and highlight the ways that each implication may shape future research on organizational identity. First, our framework stresses the important role of individual custodians to better elucidate the cross-level processes inherent in organizational identity. While more research is needed to understand these custodians and their role in the organization, we believe our theorizing on custodians' role in identity communication serves as an important theoretical foray into the cross-level dynamics of organizational identity and how individuals "interact" with identity content. That is, our typology of saying, showing, and staging provides insight into how individuals interface with and present their interpretation of organizational identity content to other members.

We thus see great potential for future research to better understand the custodians of organizational identity. Though we argued, in line with previous research (e.g., King et al., 2010; Whetten and Mackey, 2002), that anyone can be a custodian, examining what makes certain individuals legitimate communicators of identity content in the eyes of members is an important area for future scholarship. Further, as the primary communicators of identity content, custodians likely have tremendous opportunity to shape the shared sense of "who we are." It is therefore critical that we better understand how identity custodians, in addition to simply maintaining identity content, actually change perceptions of organizational identity. Perhaps it is inevitable, given the interaction of a custodian's social and personal identities, that a custodian's idiosyncrasies would shape the saying, showing, and staging of identity content in ways that impact organizational identity content over time. Indeed, members' individualized enactment of the identity content may allow them to personalize an organizational identity, and possibly even imprint their uniqueness on the organization by serving as a custodian to other members. This is yet another way that a deeper appreciation for the role of identity custodians enables us to better understand the cross-level dynamics of organizational identity.

A second implication of our chapter is emphasizing just how critical cross-level and dynamic approaches are to further advancing our knowledge of organizational identity processes. Our theorizing about identity custodians and members' perceptions of identity communication further articulates Ashforth and colleagues' (2011) notion that much of the identity transmission process happens at the interpersonal (or "inter-subjective") level. As we have noted, individuals within the organization are the ones actually *doing* the saying, showing, and staging. Thus, even though organizational

identity is a collective phenomenon, individuals enact many of the processes involved in its maintenance and change (Brickson and Akinlade, 2016; cf. Kreiner, Hollensbe, Sheep, Smith, and Kataria, forthcoming). We suggest that scholars studying organizational identity at just one level of analysis are likely missing much of the story, and challenge future research to account for multiple levels, as well as dynamism across levels. To illustrate, we consider the example of identity communication: scholars exploring this topic could simultaneously examine the bottom-up component of the largely top-down communication process discussed throughout this chapter. As Ravasi and Schultz (2006) noted, "organizational identities arise from sensemaking and sensegiving processes ... one needs, therefore, to account for both perspectives" (p. 436). Taking a multi-level approach, could reveal, for example, that identity content transmitted by custodians (top-down) becomes believable to members through first-hand experiences of organizational life that confirm what is said, shown, or staged (bottom-up). Further, both current theorizing (Ashforth et al., 2011) and popular press accounts (e.g., Baer, 2014) note that members of the organization are not just passive receivers of identity content, but can also impact the content of a collective identity; unfortunately, we have little insight into this process.

Additionally, Figure 12.1 painted a static picture of how identity custodians communicate "who we are." However, organizational identity is seen by many as a dynamic phenomenon (Gioia et al., 2013; Hatch and Schultz, 2002). Future research might benefit from an exploration of organizations' movement from one quadrant of Figure 12.1 to another, likely in response to a change or event (e.g., replacing a CEO, engaging in a merger or acquisition, entering a high-risk product market). Such a shift in the organization may prompt identity custodians to gain and/or lose clarity of organizational identity content or increase/decrease the intent with which they communicate that identity content. For instance, current theorizing would suggest that it is unlikely an organization could survive (or employ strategic ambiguity) for long in the low clarity/low intentional communication quadrant. Yet we don't understand the processes or outcomes, collectively and/or individually, that may induce identity custodians' marked increase (or decrease) in identity communication. For example, what processes are involved as an organization's custodians gain clarity about organizational identity content, increase their intentional communication of identity content, and move toward that upper right quadrant?

## CONCLUSION

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Though the communication of organizational identity has been highlighted as crucial, how identity content is conveyed to members has remained underexplored. In this chapter, we began to resolve this disparity by examining the various ways that identity custodians convey organizational identity content, and the conditions under which such communication occurs. It is our hope that future research will continue



to explore the nature of organizational identity communication, including how, by whom, and when identity content is communicated, as well as the ways in which these messages are received and interpreted by organizational members.

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