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NEWSLETTER FOR EDUCATORS

## Thought Leader Interview

with **Larry Ackerman** interviewed by Steve Cady (17)



A long term corporate brand and identity consulting specialist, Larry Ackerman is a leader on organizational and personal identity. He is the founder/president of The Identity Circle LLC, an identity consulting, education and research firm that helps organizations and individuals recognize their uniqueness and potential, and assists them in putting that potential to work in improving their performance, impact and reputations. According to Ackerman, the identity cycle serves as a representation of eight “laws of identity,” each containing a question, the answer to which can bring “outstanding organizational performance within reach” (18).

A guest lecturer at Yale School of Management, Wharton, UCLA’s Anderson School and Pepperdine University, Ackerman has published two books on identity, exploring the nature of identity and its impact on leadership and management through defining unique value-creating potential. (19)

**Steven Cady (SC): What obstacles did you have to overcome to write your books and live your passion? Why do you continue?**

Larry Ackerman (LA): Books are only compelling and memorable if they mirror the personal passions of the author. I had to get comfortable with “going public” with what my true passions were. That required coming out of the intellectual closet – years of consulting and analytical objectivity – and declaring what I deeply believed was how the world works – not just what I had learned over, then, the past 20 years. I had to overcome my fear of exposure, of being vulnerable.

My first book, *Identity Is Destiny*, took 5 years to write. It was a journey into my own consciousness, which led to discerning the ‘8 Laws of Identity,’ organizing them into their natural sequence, and then illustrating them through case studies, which had taken me years to accumulate. It was a life-changing experience that has shaped everything I am and do, to this day. Book two – the individual’s version of ‘*Identity Is Destiny, The Identity Code*’ – was equally challenging.

Why do I continue? I really have no choice. Following my own precepts – that identity is, indeed, destiny – how can I counsel others, help others – organizations and people, alike – if I don’t practice what I preach?

**SC: What are the critical challenges and possibilities, facing our world and our leaders, today?**

LA: I see two mega-challenges that influence just about everything. The first is the unrelenting tension between individual interests – the need for more: more money, a bigger house, a new car – and larger, institutional needs – the need to do without in the name of societal progress. For the most part, we seem to



have an innate inability to sacrifice for the common good, but a robust instinct to take what we want for ourselves, while turning a blind eye to others' needs. I call it 'selective myopia.' We choose to do only what makes sense for us.

The other mega-challenge I see is how to get nations to understand what their innate identities are, and to live in accordance with them – the potential those identities reveal as well as the limitations. Let me be clear: Nations, like people and companies, have discernable identities, but don't recognize them. These identities foreshadow how countries can make distinctive contributions in the world and get rewarded for them in return. Were the identity discipline to be practiced by nations and their leaders, we would have less conflict. It would be a more productive world.

**SC: Is there a quick fix? How can we best ready ourselves for action?**

LA: There is no quick fix. We're talking about human nature, here. I believe that we are still very un-evolved as a species. We suffer from what I term an 'awareness deficit' – we tend to see only what is evident in the physical and economic universe, and fail to see what exists in, what I call, the 'identity universe,' which is where critical, unconscious knowledge resides.

Whether individual or corporation, "readying" ourselves for action requires opening our minds to the idea that there is more going on inside us, even around us, than we're currently aware of. And that unearthing that information is vitally important to making fully-informed, wiser choices. Our just-completed research on the quantitative impact of identity corroborates this idea, demonstrating the powerful, positive connection between identity strength, employee engagement and business performance.

One way to prepare ourselves for action is by articulating our assumptions about how we think the world works, and then challenging them. One of my favorite quotes is from Albert Einstein, who said that "problems cannot be solved at the same level of awareness that created them." We need to take his insight to heart, if we're ever going to meet the challenges the world and its leaders face.

**SC: What are you seeing in college graduates today that encourages you and, also, concerns you? Do you have any advice for the faculty teaching these students?**

LA: What encourages me is watching a cross-section of college graduates pursue careers that have "world-saving" possibilities; careers in alternative energy development, in technology, in the greening of the planet; and, of course, in teaching. These graduates may be in the minority, but their collective impact will far outweigh their numbers.

I am concerned about the irrepressible divide between science and the humanities, which leads students to pick one and dismiss the other. This tug-of-war, perpetuated by companies, governments, even universities, hurts everyone. It undermines the fact that we all have two brains, our analytical, left brain (read science) and our creative right brain (read humanities), and we need them both, in order to be fully ourselves – fully human, as it were – in the name of innovation.

I would encourage professors and deans to create courses that deliberately engage both the left and right brains of students – and to tell those students that that's what they're doing! Work on developing the whole person. All faculty are charged with helping people learn and grow. Getting students to strengthen both



their analytical and creative selves is the best way to build the muscle that is the mind. I can tell you that when I'm recruiting, I'm always looking for people whose left brain and right brain are, as I like to say, 'friends.' They make the best consultants, by far.

**SC: Describe your most effective learning activity, or tool, you use with your clients or students?**

LA: I believe that Identity is the most powerful human force in nature. Nothing is more integrative in its effect on a company or individual than identity, which supplies the center of gravity we all need to set direction and make decisions that allow us to create value in the world. To get this message across, especially, with corporate clients, I turn to the human being, to "you" as it were, as my default model. We are all unique. We all have identities that make us who we are, turning us into exquisitely integrated beings, whose composite functions – mental, physical, and emotional – yield an efficiency far exceeding that of any organization. That same "efficiency" can be achieved by companies, if they follow the precepts of identity-based management.

**SC: What is an important moment you faced in learning and leadership? How did you handle the situation and what were the results?**

An important moment came in 2002, when I led a team to help Norsk Hydro, a \$30 billion, century-old Norwegian industrial conglomerate, assess its corporate brand. In a meeting the CEO made his concern clear: Did 'Hydro' have an identity that explained a value-creating logic of keeping the company together, or should the pieces be sold off? Investors were restless. For all the assignments up until then, I had never tested the power of the identity discipline on a large conglomerate. It was a watershed moment for me. But as Hydro's identity – its source of value creation – emerged, it gave the company the strategic rationale it needed to keep the company intact.

**SC: What are your deepest hopes for the future of higher education?**

LA: Above all, I hope that the idea of higher education becomes synonymous with learning about one's self as well as learning about established fields. Again, I return to the awareness deficit problem. How can students make informed decisions about careers, absent insights into their innate capacities, which influence their unique, value-creating potential?

Socrates was right when he said, "Know thyself." But schools have done little to capitalize on this injunction, at least, so far. I'd like to see universities provide courses – at least, formal tools – to help people discover who they are, and then use that knowledge to shape majors, so that career decisions benefit from the intersection of self-knowledge and book knowledge. Teach people to excel in areas that align with their natural gifts. Don't just churn out cookie cutter degrees.

Many graduation speeches exhort students to find their own path in life, in order to make a meaningful difference in the world. But higher education today does little to actually help them find that path. I hope, someday, to make the identity discipline a formal part of the educational experience for students, not just so they can learn about themselves, but so they can learn about the profound social and economic effects identity has on our institutions and our lives.



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