

## Teaching Note for Chapter #: Construct Positive Identities

**General overview:** This chapter calls attention to the central role that positive identity construction plays in generating essential psychological and social resources for individuals at work. It defines four key dimensions of positive identities that can strengthen individuals, teams and organizations. It also features three positive identity infusions, which leaders can use to bring out the best in themselves and, by consequence, bring out the best in others. This chapter is the basis for a whole course that I teach on Authentic Leadership as an MBA elective, but can also be used as a stand-alone module in courses on leadership, management, organization behavior, careers, or diversity at work.

### Core concepts introduced:

- Positive identity construction
- Four bases of positive identities that unlock psychological and social resources at work
  - Growing Selves
  - Integrated Selves
  - Virtuous Selves
  - Esteemed Selves
- Positive identity infusions
  - Societal messages, symbols and artifacts
  - Story-telling and self-reflection
  - Envisioning collective best-selves

### Preparation

- Early in class or before class, ask students to think about how they define a positive identity. What makes it “positive”?

### Possible class flow

1. Assumptions about Positive Identities.
  - What defines a “positive” identity? Who gets to decide whether an identity is positive or not? (Use a whiteboard or flip chart to capture students’ definitions of positive identities).
  - Define positive identity construction is the process of (re)defining a person’s identity using images, stories and descriptions that are considered to be positive or valuable in some way.
  - Recognize the diversity of viewpoints and value statements that shape our assumptions about positive identities. (Refer to the opening discussion). Acknowledge that positive self-views do not always promote positive actions (i.e., actions that benefit other people or organizations).

2. Why are positive identities so important?
  - Links between positive identities and resources for individuals, dyads, teams, and organizations; implications for leadership.
  
3. What are the bases of positive identities at work?
  - Introduce the G.I.V.E. model of positive identity.
  - Small group exercise.
  
4. Individually, students reflect on times in their lives when they constructed positive identities for themselves based on feeling a sense of growth, integration, virtue and/or esteem.
  - Students journal about the qualities/characteristics/experiences that reflect their personal positive identity according to the GIVE model.
  
5. How do people construct more positive identities at work?
  - Use concrete examples of additional personal and organizational practices that foster positive identity construction, while strengthening the individual *and* his or her organization.
  - Visioning exercise about how a group, team, organization, or community can become its collective best. I often use this exercise at the beginning of the semester with study groups and large cohorts. The students define their vision of working together as a learning community “at its best.” After documenting the vision, students commit to a set of core values and social practices that will support their collective best vision. The exercise captures the students’ hopes and visions for who they can become, and how they can support one another throughout the learning experience.

## Supplementary materials

### Readings

- Roberts, L. Morgan & Dutton, J. (Eds.) (2009). *Exploring Positive Identities and Organizations: Building a Theoretical and Research Foundation*. Routledge Press, New York.
- Dutton, J.E., Roberts, L. Morgan, & Bednar, J. (2010). Pathways for positive identity construction at work: Four types of positive identity and the building of social resources. *Academy of Management Review*, 35, 265-293.
- Roberts, L. Morgan, Dutton, J.E., Spreitzer, G., Heaphy, E., & Quinn, R. (2005). Composing the reflected best-self portrait: Building pathways to becoming extraordinary in work organizations. *Academy of Management Review*, 30: 712-736.
- Roberts, L. M. (2012). Reflected best self engagement at work: Positive identity, alignment, and the pursuit of vitality and value-creation. In I. Boniwell & S. Davis (Eds.). *The Oxford Handbook of Happiness*, pp. 767-782. Oxford University Press.
- Roberts, L. M. & Creary, S. J. (2012). Positive identity construction: Insights from classical and contemporary theoretical perspectives. In K. Cameron & G. Spreitzer (Eds.). *The*

*Oxford Handbook of Positive Organizational Scholarship*, pp. 70-83. Oxford University Press.

- Dutton, J., Roberts, L. Morgan, & Bednar, J. (2011). Prosocial practices, positive identity, and flourishing at work. In S. Donaldson, M. Csikszentmihalyi and J. Nakamura (Eds.) *Applied positive psychology: Improving everyday life, schools, work, health, and society*, pp. 155-170. Taylor & Francis Group.

### **Tools (Reflections, Interventions, Assessments)**

- The G.I.V.E. model introduction – societal messages (Appendix A)
- The G.I.V.E. model introduction – and personal reflection (Appendix B)
- The Reflected Best Self Exercise™ (RBSE™)

**The Reflected Best Self Exercise™ (RBSE™)** is an innovative leadership and career development tool for helping accomplished and emerging leaders to discover and leverage their strengths. The underlying assumption is that the knowledge of one's best self is grounded in the reality of one's prior contributions, not on an idealized, unattainable image of who a person hopes to become. The **RBSE™ is a multi-step process that helps people to discover and activate their best selves**. This process involves reflecting upon moments when a person was at his or her best, examining these best-self episodes closely for cross-cutting themes and variations, and composing a best-self portrait (written or multimedia) that captures the essence of the qualities and behaviors a person exhibits when at his or her best.

**The most valuable aspect of the RBSE™ is gathering “contribution stories” from colleagues, clients, friends, and family members, which allows understanding of an individual's best self as reflected by those who know him or her best.** These contribution stories about best self episodes can be task or relationship based, past or present, personal or professional. Some people are hesitant to seek this exclusively positive RBSE™ feedback, because they are concerned that other people may perceive them as arrogant. Yet, the exercise proves to be a valuable growth experience for learners of all ages who are committed to building capacity and deepening positive impact locally and globally.

**Action planning is a critical aspect of the RBSE™.** The action planning phase deepens the impact of the RBSE™ by advancing leaders' developmental agendas for enhancing individual and organizational performance. Using the best self as a platform for growth and development is powerful, because the action plans help to actualize potential for making extraordinary contributions.

For more information on incorporating the Reflected Best-Self Exercise in your course, visit <http://positiveorgs.bus.umich.edu/cpo-tools/reflected-best-self-exercise-2nd-edition/>

## Appendix A: THE G.I.V.E. MODEL – SOCIETAL MESSAGES ABOUT POSITIVE IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

**PURPOSE:** Demonstrate and reflect on four bases of positive identity construction at work. Illustrate the societal value of positive identity construction, through documenting the predominance of messages and symbols that reflect Growth, Integration, Virtue and Esteem.

### PROCESS:

1. Divide students into (4) small groups of 2-8 students per group. (If you have a larger class, use 8 or 12 groups).
2. Assign each group one of the bases of positive identity construction (Growing, Integrated, Virtuous, and Esteemed selves.)
3. Each group has 15 minutes to identify a cultural artifact or representation of their designated basis of positive identity construction. Encourage creativity through multimedia tools. Each group can start and finish this activity within 15 minutes, especially if have internet access on site.
4. Each group has 2 minutes to share their artifact or representation, and explain how it reflects the bases of positive identity.

*EXAMPLES. The following artifacts were generated by students who completed this exercise.*

- Examples of positive identity at work:
  - Growing: I am evolving and adapting in a positive way
    - Song + athletics - I believe I can fly with Michael Jordan slam dunks
    - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gWDmau1Vbxs>
  - Integrated: I am complex and coherent
    - Art - <http://www.mcescher.com/Gallery/switz-bmp/LW306.jpg>
  - Virtuous: I am a "good" person
    - Graduation speech - Always wear sunscreen
    - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sTJ7AzBIJol>
    - The lyrics are taken from a famous essay — written in 1997 by Mary Schmich, a columnist with the Chicago Tribune <http://tinyurl.com/schmich-sunscreen>
  - Esteemed: I am worthy
    - Song - I am woman by Helen Reddy
    - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FLV4BBmjnzM>
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**DEBRIEF:** How did this exercise help you to recognize messages and symbols about positive identity construction in our society? What does it teach us about cultural influences on positive identity construction? Which of these messages or symbols resonates most with you? Have any of these messages strengthened you? Why?

## Appendix B: THE G.I.V.E. MODEL – PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ON POSITIVE IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION AT WORK

**PURPOSE:** Demonstrate and reflect on four bases of positive identity construction at work. Examine the relevance of growth, integration, virtue and esteem in strengthening one’s own sense of self. Practice personal story-telling as a form of positive identity construction.

### **PROCESS:**

1. Define the four bases of positive identity construction in the G.I.V.E. model:
  - The G.I.V.E.<sup>1</sup> model of positive identity explains four of the most common ways a person might respond positively to the question, “Who Are You?” at work.
    - “I am Growing.” I am becoming more like my desired self, by evolving and adapting in positive ways at work.
    - “I am Integrated.” The different parts of my identity, such as work roles, demographic characteristics, family status and relationships, educational background, hobbies and interests, domains of expertise, organizational membership, and departmental affiliations are connected in compatible or enriching ways.
    - “I am Virtuous.” I possess virtuous qualities such as courage, wisdom, integrity, humility, and compassion, and I display these virtues at work.
    - “I am Esteemed.” I am worthy of positive regard; I feel positively about my defining characteristics and/or group affiliations, and I feel others understand and appreciate my authentic self at work.
2. Individually, students reflect on times in their lives when they constructed positive identities for themselves based on feeling a sense of growth, integration, virtue and/or esteem.
  - Write a story about a time in your life when you felt that you were growing or progressing at work.
  - Write a story about a time in your life when the different sides of who you are were complementary or fit together at work.
  - Write a story about a time in your life when you exemplified virtue or character strength at work.
  - Write a story about a time in your life when you felt esteemed at work.
3. Students discuss (in groups of 2 or 3) the qualities/characteristics/experiences that reflect their personal positive identity according to the GIVE model.

**DEBRIEF:** Which of these bases of positive identity resonates most with you? Why? How does focusing on positive aspects of yourself benefit you? What types of resources can you access – or even build – as a result of seeing yourself in this way? How can leaders help create experiences that can build positive self-perceptions for others within their organizations?

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<sup>1</sup> J. Dutton and others. “Pathways for positive identity construction at work: Four types of positive identity and the building of social resources.” *Academy of Management Review*, 35 (2010): 265-293.