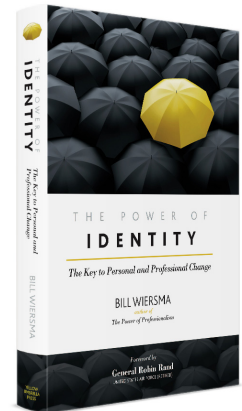


# The Power of Identity

## The Key to Personal and Professional Change

by **Bill Wiersma**



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### THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

Struggling inner-city kids. Dismayed girls in Sub-Saharan Africa. Disillusioned business veterans. What do these seemingly unrelated groups of people have in common? Each has had their life dramatically altered for the better—the by-product of a newfound sense of self. Each developed a more robust identity.

Identity, with its unique ability to reveal our better angles, breeds confidence sufficient to fuel desirable change. *The Power of Identity* takes the central principle (identity) from author Bill Wiersma's groundbreaking book *The Power of Professionalism* and deepens its application to individuals and organizations alike, demonstrating how identity is a powerful agent of change in every aspect of a person's life.

When it comes to higher-order development, identity has a dramatic impact on choice and behavior. But identity's real magic lies in its unique ability to ignite one's value system in a personal way.

Identity-based development is an idea whose time has come. *The Power of Identity* promises to be as transformational as Wiersma's prior work.

### IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- Identity's vital role in behavior change and decision-making: how an identity refresh, aided by a personalized identity profile, can jump-start one's outlook and confidence—even in dire circumstances.
- Why the advent of identity-based development promises to disrupt leaders' thinking about their approach to development and change management.

### Identity: A First-Order Mover of Behavior

In the United States we put enormous emphasis on *doing* but far less on *being*. More than ever, people are overwhelmed with activity but starved for purpose. Given the breakneck speed at which so many of us live our lives, the all-important “who am I” question is not asked by that many of us, much less answered.

Perhaps we dismiss the question because we think it’s superfluous. Perhaps the question lacks cachet. Perhaps we think it’s too simple. Perhaps it never occurred to us to even ask the question. Or perhaps we’re anxious about how we would answer it.

The bottom line is the power of identity has not been fully appreciated let alone understood well.

#### Behavior Precedes Identity

When you listen to people, whether they be a teacher talking about their students, a store manager talking about an absentee owner, a mother of three talking about her teenage boys, a politician talking about their opponents, the all-star performer talking about their less-than-credible boss, a millennial talking about their roommate, the common denominator in all their stories is *behavior*—often undesired behavior. Behavior is where the rubber meets the road. It’s a big deal in every aspect of life and work.

Undesired behavior, because of its nature, gets a lot of air-time. Far too many senior business leaders are deluged with undesired behaviors within their organization. It saps their time and energy. Every one of those leaders, not surprisingly, talks about the need for behavior change. And the need for behavior change is indisputable. The question is how do you approach it so you have positive results?

While behavior garners the spotlight, it’s invariably a symptom, an outward expression of something deeper. Frankly, the something deeper is more important than the behavior itself. That something deeper is *identity*. The key principle here is that *being* precedes *doing*. Who we are (our identity) shapes what we do (our behavior).

Consider why a tightfisted friend on a fixed income—and a cancer survivor—consistently contributes more than a thousand dollars a year to the American Cancer Society; why an accountant with a strong environmental leaning buys a hybrid, even though the numbers don’t add up; or how a long-standing entrepreneur and free-market zealot

suddenly joined spirited public demonstrations as a 99-percenter, which meant that he was taking aim—politically and culturally—against the wealthiest Americans and engaging in unvarnished, bare-knuckle identity politics.

What do these three examples have in common? Each person was acting against their own short-term self-interests. Each felt they were making a principled choice—one that they took pride in. Their identities—a cancer survivor, an environmentalist, a 99-percenter—drove those decisions and the behavior that followed.

#### When Identity Influences Decisions

When people allow their identity to influence their decisions, they essentially ask themselves three questions: “Who am I?” “What kind of situation is this?” “And what do people like me do in this kind of situation?” More often than not, this process occurs naturally, automatically, subconsciously. But the tougher the decision, the more it becomes a conscious decision.

Identity is especially helpful when we must grapple with tough decisions, when we’re conflicted, when we’re tempted, and when we’re out of sorts. If you want to make a dramatic change in your life, identity is an essential first step in helping you get there.

What about changes in others? Do you want your company’s suppliers to be more responsive? Do you want your work team to ditch all the pointless drama? Would you like your work silos to become a thing of the past? Identity is the key to all these changes. And in the end, changes like these significantly improve everyone’s quality of life.

### Identity: What It Is, What It Isn’t

Who am I? This long-standing question is arguably one of life’s most important. Yet, it’s a question that too many simply haven’t addressed. As a result, it’s no wonder that most people struggle to answer it—at least with much confidence. The question seems straightforward enough, some might even say simple. But the question is anything but simple.

We all have parts: big parts, obscure parts, unique parts, passionate parts, defining parts, inspiring parts, colorful parts, loving parts. Put all the parts together, and they reveal a unique mosaic of who we are. Who we are is a collection of identities that give meaning and direction to our life.

Let’s understand identity as an array of important values, beliefs, ideologies, and philosophies. It’s a metaphorical

Some identities shape us more than others. There are precious few identities that truly reflect *who we are* and volumes more that reflect *what we are*.

basket that we're always carrying around. It contains the things we love, the things we take pride in, the things we're passionate about, our values, the things we gladly commit our resources to. Identity is a way to express to others who we see ourselves to be.

Some identities shape us more than others. There are precious few identities that truly reflect *who we are* and volumes more that reflect *what we are*.

Assume for a moment that a newborn named Anne in Montreal has the ability to answer that question. What might she say? "I'm Canadian (my nationality). I'm Asian (my ethnicity). I come from pioneer stock (my heritage). I'm upper-middle class (my social status). I'm French-speaking (my language). I'm Catholic (my religion). I'm a Phang (my surname). I have a well-established ancestry (my genetics)."

Collectively, these things, which are largely inherited, tell Anne a lot about her beginnings. Yet knowing Anne's genetics tells us a lot more about *what* she is rather than *who* she is. Who Anne will become is ultimately how she chooses to live her life. We don't yet know what is important to her. We don't yet know who is important to her. We don't yet know what she stands for. Who Anne will become is all ahead of her.

### Identity Profiles

As we acquire more experiences in life, it becomes easier to recognize the identities that define us in unique ways. For example, we could say that a man is a husband, educator, and a professional. These three identities are starting points in understanding who he is. Yet, intuitively we know that three identities provide only a partial picture.

That's why a template is provided in Chapter Four of *The Power of Identity*, to help readers create an initial identity profile. Having the profile is important because it helps provide a more robust picture. It's more robust because of the methodology that accompanies the template.

In short, the methodology, among other things, produces "identity tiers," which segment identities by importance. First-tier identities carry the most sway and have the highest degree of impact; third-tier identities have proportionally

less sway, less impact. Tier-one identities come closest to describing who we are at our core.

For example, the man's identities of husband, educator, and professional could be his first-tier identities, whereas his second-tier identities could include things such as dad, American, and servant. Third-tier identities could include things like friend, change agent, and entrepreneur.

Invariably there's a difference, sometimes a big one, between who we are and who we imagine ourselves to be. Faux identities, which can arise for any number of reasons, are both prevalent and problematic. Each of us can distort the view we hold of ourself. Sometimes our self-views are embellished, artificial, or illusionary. And naturally, consequences follow from each.

The methodology helps to maximize the number of identities that truly belong on one's profile and to minimize the number of identities that have no business being there in the first place.

Identifying our core identities is often messy. It forces us to go deep, which can be uncomfortable. We're so close to the subject, we don't always see the forest for the trees. Plus, our self-examination suggests that change is in the offing, which is something many of us would prefer to avoid.

The subtle but important differences in identities can be major distinctions. After all, there's a big difference between someone's seeing themselves as a professional defined largely by the color of one's collar and someone's seeing themselves as a professional defined largely by how one acts. When it comes to identities, these things matter, at least if the objective is higher-order decisions and the desirable behaviors that result.

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## Keystone Identities: The Key to Transformation

Keystone identities are special. They're often game-changers. For many, being a professional is a keystone identity. So is being a parent. A keystone identity matters most because it has

special qualities that enhance other identities. Simply put, it acts as a lever—it has a disproportionate effect on everything around it. Most important, it helps make us better people.

We might think a tier-one identity would naturally also be a keystone identity. But that's not always the case. Yet, almost without exception, a keystone identity is a tier-one identity. Consider the following questions:

- Do you see evidence of keystone identities among those close to you?
- What does your gut tell you about your keystone identities? Do you recognize any?
- What would it do for your confidence if you were able to identify your keystone identities?

A keystone identity is defining. It's naturally aspirational. In many ways, a keystone identity is magical—helping people to “up their game.” In the process, people create a better version of themselves. A keystone identity is one of the precious few identities that truly reflect who we are or who we're trying to be. Non-keystone identities, as helpful as they are, don't deliver the same type of impact.

Because keystone identities have amazing transformative power, being able to identify them is especially important. The methodology in Chapter Four of *The Power of Identity* aids in the identification process.

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### Who Am I—Really?

You may have already formulated a general identity profile in your mind. If so, no doubt your intuition played a big role in that. Yet, the precision needed to develop a top-notch identity profile requires more than just intuition. The devil is in the details.

Questions help tease out those details. Consider these: How do you choose to spend your time? What do you stand for? What are the things that make you tick? What do you consider your greatest accomplishment?

What do you spend your money on? What was the last thing you took a stand on? How are you using your talents? When faced with two equally compelling choices, what tips the scale between the two? What brings you contentment? What types of things are worth making a sacrifice for?

What types of things really make you angry? What are the types of things you would do if no one paid you? These questions and others like them will stimulate your thinking

as you begin to develop your profile.

The aim of an identity profile is to help us better define who we are or who we want to be. It's analogous, as the saying goes, “Be yourself, but be your best self.” With greater clarity about who we are, we're better able to breathe life into the things that are most important to us—our values.

A robust identity profile is one that's chock-full with identities that reflect who we are. That's what you should be aiming for in developing your profile.

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### Implications for Individuals

Your profile is a terrific start, but it's not the end by any means. Let's now discuss the important implications for individuals, developmentally speaking, that stem from the learning advanced to this point.

Consider development as one of two things: (1) the growth of a person's capabilities or (2) the growth of a person who has evolved in significant ways. The former is about doing; the latter is about being. Naturally, there are synergies between the two.

When it comes to creating dramatic impact, developmentally speaking, identity is the real deal. Identity changes people's very nature. As a result, many things naturally change with it, including behavior.

So what's required of us, developmentally speaking, to become more evolved? How do we hit that elusive developmental high-water mark?

Human-development scholar Robert Kegan suggests two fundamental things have to change in the upward shift from one level of development to another: (1) one's thinking and (2) the source of one's self-worth. Kegan indicates that for us to evolve, the source of our sense of worth—our sense of self (identity)—must also evolve.

This is accomplished by adopting identities consistent with who we are or who we're trying to be. In other words, our choosing who we'll be is a precursor to our evolving.

Numerous stories, both business and non-business alike, in *The Power of Identity* illustrate how an identity refresh changed people's very nature and buoyed their confidence. In each case, the wisdom of the day suggested that the desired shifts—dramatic ones—were so much folly. Here's one such story.

### The Girls of Malawi

Mary Tuchscherer's California-based nonprofit organization, VoiceFlame, helps marginalized adolescent girls in Malawi become confident writers and published authors.

“Blossom” isn't a word one normally associates with Malawian young people. Poverty is rampant in the country. Deprivation, isolation, and oppression are commonplace. For most, each day is a struggle to survive. Short life expectancies and high infant mortality are problematic. Nearly a million people are infected with HIV/AIDS, which equals more than 10 percent of the adult population.

When identity is central in an organization's change effort, it inevitably has a multiplier effect.

Most Malawian children have little education because they are needed to tend the fields and care for their siblings. In such a society, the dominant culture reinforces distinct gender roles that favor males. Thus, most routine family tasks are performed by female children. Three-quarters of the country's literate people are men.

On the surface it seemed odd: teaching girls to write and expecting dramatic and far-reaching results. But by expressing themselves through the written word, something ignited within each of the girls. Their outlooks became remarkably upbeat; their confidence waxed strong.

Instead of believing their only choice in life was to marry young (and marry well), the girls began to articulate individualized life goals. Instead of remaining silent about their dreams, the girls expressed hopes and desires through writing and by verbalizing them out loud.

For the Malawian girls, the impacts of the VoiceFlame program don't stop with a newfound ability to read and write. It shifts their mindsets. Their world expands. The girls teach other family members and acquaintances to read and write. The girls take more prominent roles in

their family businesses. They strengthened their entrepreneurial skills, and some gained the confidence to start their own small businesses.

In other words, they were very different people than before. The change was dramatic—even more impressive when one considers everything that was working against them.

Appreciating the full impact the VoiceFlame program has had on the girls is often best experienced by hearing directly from them. Some of the girls developed a simple chant, a mantra that conveys their feelings. In four short lines the girls tell their full story. The message—only 15 words long—is simple yet speaks volumes about the girls' newfound perspective: “I am a writer. I have a voice. It is unique. I write with it.”

The root of the change is the girls' newfound identity as writers; “writer” became a big part of who they became. And we know that people's most powerful identities—keystone identities—change everything around them.

Time and again, experience demonstrates that this degree of change isn't necessarily unusual. Whether it's a student at a Southern California trade school or a company president in North Carolina—stories both memorialized in the book—it's common to see a big jump in confidence as a result of a refresh involving a keystone identity.

### Implications for Organizations and Families

As impressive as behavior change can be for individuals, it is equally so when applied to groups of people within organizations. When identity is central in an organization's change effort, it inevitably has a multiplier effect.

As the nature of people change in concert with their thinking, an organization's habits improve, new norms are embraced, and cultural health improves. As a result, trust increases and results improve.

For our purposes, an organization is any group of persons joined by common interests or purpose.

Speaking of bottom-line results, what if you could improve the health of your organization's culture such that you could reduce your company's bids anywhere between 2 and 5 percent? Would that give you a competitive advantage?

Would that make your job, as the organization's principal

leader, easier? Do you think the experience might change the way you lead people?

### Organizational Change in Action

Based in Michigan's Lower Peninsula, Danboise Mechanical suffered when sister departments acted as independent entities, wasting energy by competing with each other rather than with competitors in the marketplace. Danboise suffered from a silo mentality that resulted in duplication of effort, lack of synergy, and missed opportunities.

The shift in people's thinking and subsequent actions was a result of Danboise's adoption of identity-based development, with professionalism as its centerpiece. Employees came to view themselves as professionals and worked hard to live up to its tenets by developing a professional mindset. They internalized the notion of being a professional in a way that was far more resolute than prior to the initiative.

Moreover, executive leadership made sure that the initiative wasn't treated as the "flavor of the month."

It changed the culture; it felt like a revitalized company. By becoming more interdependent, Danboise benefited in myriad ways beyond breaking down their silos—as important as that was.

Again, this type of dramatic change—one spawned by identity-based development—isn't a "one-off." For instance, the performance of one division of Otis Elevator in North America went from "worst to first," in statistical terms, in 24 months. That division took on a new aura—thanks in large part to identity-based development and reinforcing it in every aspect of the business.

So taken by the results as well as the process, leaders in both Otis and Danboise adopted a new approach to leading. Rather than attempting to squeeze new behaviors out of the proverbial orange, they chose to grow better oranges. These leaders learned that when someone takes on the mantle of being a professional, a lot of things naturally take care of themselves.

It's strategic in nature because it develops the whole person. Time and again, when leaders learn more about identity-based development, it disrupts their thinking about development and change management.

When leading others, what do you emphasize, behaviors (doing) or being (identity)?

Companies that have made professional ideals their north

arrow (meaning they have made a commitment to integrate them into the fabric of their business) should take professionalism out of the shadows and bring it into the sunlight.

But what about talking up the professionalism in environments outside the organization, such as market-facing audiences? For instance, what impact might that have on sales prospects or on investors?

Declaring what you stand for—in this case that your organization is built on professional ideals—with market-facing audiences can be terrific. That is, it can be terrific granted that (1) the organization and its people largely emulate the admirable traits and characteristics that people come to expect from those proclaiming to be professional and (2) that it's communicated effectively. The former is showing (actions); the latter is telling (words). Your actions must be consistent with your words.

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### Breaking the Scourge of Shame

Many researchers and therapists today believe we have an epidemic of shame. That shouldn't be surprising if people increasingly aren't clear about who they really are. In the absence of identity, we tend to be tossed to and fro by our culture's finicky whims. Under such conditions, shame has a fertile breeding ground. This is why it's so important for us to be clear about who we really are.

Shame is an especially painful self-judgment about one's self-worth that gets to the heart of who we are (our identity). Shame whispers, "There's something very wrong with you."

Identity proves to be especially valuable as both a prevention and intervention in managing shame. For example, 42-year-old Randy, a star merger-and-acquisition guru, takes a big risk on a tempting but shaky company that quickly loses 80 percent of its market value.

As a "professional" (tier-one identity), Randy felt badly about the stinging impacts on his investors, but the risk was disclosed up front. While Randy felt mortified, he successfully avoided feeling shame.

Just as you're not going to win the Daytona 500 with a 300-pound concrete block tethered to your rear bumper, it's improbable that you'll be able to reveal your best self with shame dragging you down.

Identity is akin to an inoculation from shame. When you're secure in yourself, you won't be obsessed with being liked,

One of the reasons people embrace identity so readily is a sense that it eventually will make them better people...  
Get better and you'll be better.

you won't measure your success against others, you won't be fixated by what others think of you, and you won't allow others to define you.

## Becoming a Better Person

For many who have undergone an identity-induced change, becoming a better person is the thing they treasure most. Identity plays an important role as a first-order mover of behavior, but its ultimate power is its ability to transform.

People approach identity in one of three ways. Depending on the situation, people treat identity as a means to (1) get something they need or want, (2) help them avoid making regretful decisions, or (3) help them grow as a person.

These can be sorted into the following categories: intervention, prevention, and catalyst. The impact and benefits associated with each are clearly useful, although there are significant differences in scale between the three. In terms of impact, you might think of them as good (intervention), better (prevention), and best (catalyst).

### Intervention, Prevention, Catalyst

Intervention focuses on filling a short-term need that's largely tactical in nature. Prevention focuses on avoiding falling prey to unwise pursuits, unsavory temptations, and the self-indulgent whisperings of one's own ego. Catalyst focuses on becoming secure in who you are or who you're trying to be.

Catalyst is the ideal. When identity is treated as a catalyst, it invariably creates the greatest impact. Because the focus is on becoming something (i.e., it's forward looking), a person's capabilities naturally grow in conjunction with their growth as a human being.

Contrast that against treating identity as merely an intervention, which at its core is primarily about problem solving and helping people to grow their capabilities.

Sometimes what we don't do says as much about us as what we actually do. This is where prevention comes in. Treating identity principally as a prevention has worthwhile benefits.

Prevention helps us to avoid saying something or doing something we'd later regret.

Developmentally speaking, intervention and prevention are largely focused on *doing*, whereas catalyst emphasizes *being*. Catalyst has a forward-looking nature and thus is the higher-order approach.

Becoming a better person typically involves things such as a change in one's thinking, an enhanced view of oneself, and a shift to internal validation as one's primary source of self-esteem. Each is foundational, consequential in its own right. They're also representative of the types of things one normally associates with higher-order development.

### Get Better, Be Better

One of the reasons people embrace identity so readily is a sense that it eventually will make them better people. For most, the relationship between a robust identity and becoming a better person is self-evident. Get better and you'll be better. People sense this intuitively.

Identity is, for each of us, our path home. It's our north arrow, one reflecting both our best intentions and noble desires. Because we own it, we're invested.

Getting this identity thing right can be hard, but that mustn't dissuade us. When it comes to aspirational pursuits, falling short is inevitable. But each of us is more than the sum of our individual behaviors.

Writer Charles Moore wrote about a teaching moment that Leo Tolstoy shared with his readers. A priest had been criticized by one of his parishioners for not "walking the talk." The critic told the priest that the principles he was teaching must have been just as erroneous as these aspects of his behavior.

In response, the priest admitted his shortcomings in living up to the ideals he espoused, but he disputed the parishioner's conclusion. He said, "Look at my life now and compare it to my former life. You will see that I am trying to live out the truth I proclaim."

A robust identity brings out the best in us. And identity can make what we become that much more robust.

Identity's fruits can be applied to virtually every aspect of the human condition. Make no mistake, identity is a difference maker regardless of age, tribe, or station in life. And since life is about becoming, identity—with its unique ability to address the whole person—is central in our efforts to become a better person.

### A Final Note – From the Author

As the author has noted, this identity thing is a big deal. When it comes to the subject of identity, there's a lot to unpack. The fact is, the topic of identity encompasses so many important aspects of one's life personally as well as professionally. And, as this summary illustrates, identity is a natural elixir in prompting desired change.

In some instances, it may even change one's very nature. So often, dramatic change is precipitated by a shift in identity. Thus, identity should be central in any change effort. It's higher-order development at its best.

There will be some who see the primary aim of this book to be the building of a personal brand, which is the public side of identity. But that isn't the aim. Rather, it's to help people develop the private side of their identity. It's about proactively defining ourselves and caring more about what we think of ourselves than what others think of us.

It's important to allow identity's private side (i.e., defining ourselves) to drive its public side (i.e., a personal brand), not the other way around.

The dust jacket of *The Power of Identity* dramatically superimposes an eye-catching yellow umbrella amid a sea

of plain, generic umbrellas. This powerful image artfully depicts the message and purpose of the book. The yellow umbrella represents a fresh, vigorous version of our identity.

And that's the all-important aim of the book: for readers to forge their own vibrant, distinctive self. Everyone should have a yellow umbrella.

When you're confident about knowing who you are, you have a powerful north arrow. Absent that, you'll forever be buffeted by culture's persnickety demands, your own ego, or by cantankerous people.

With a rock-solid identity you won't be obsessed with being liked. You won't measure your success against others. You won't be fixated on what others think of you. You won't allow others to define you.

You'll feel less conflicted and gain a surprising boost in self-esteem. You'll be secure in yourself—something that, unfortunately, has eluded so many.

### IF YOU LIKED THIS SUMMARY, YOU MIGHT ALSO LIKE:

- *The Power of Professionalism: The Seven Mind-Sets That Drive Performance and Build Trust* by Bill Wiersma
- *The Power of Reputation: Strengthen the Asset That Will Make or Break Your Career* by Chris Komisarjevsky



Bill Wiersma is the founder and principal of Wiersma and Associates, a management consulting firm marketed under the brand Better Professionals, which services Fortune 500 companies and the professional services sector. He is a trusted advisor to executive leadership on senior team development and organizational culture. Wiersma is a renowned thought leader. His book *The Power of Professionalism* has become the definitive source on what it actually means to be a professional and significantly changed the way in which professionals view themselves.

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