

# Who am I?

## An exploration of identity, identity work and leadership development for Christians in the workplace

*Peter Cumming and Kara Martin use the Book of Ruth to illustrate how we develop our identity in the workplace as Christian leaders. They explore three theories of identity – Who am I as a leader? (Identity theory); How do others see me as a leader? (Social identity); How does my sense of self get impacted by the leadership role assigned to me? (Social construction). But ultimately, our identity is stable and secure in Christ.*

In the 2020s, even without the impact of a pandemic, our careers are being subjected to almost continuous change. This is especially so in relentlessly shifting organisations which are intent on transformation<sup>1</sup>. Such change results from a business being under pressure to respond promptly to either disruption or opportunities. Not to change could result in either business failure or a lack of exploratory growth. These changes have an impact – often a negative one – on the long-term mutual obligations between an institution and an individual leader within the organisation, also termed the ‘psychological contract’<sup>2</sup>.

The relationship is felt to have weakened or deteriorated. Importantly, organisational change also disrupts our sense of self, the way we see or describe ourselves<sup>3</sup>, known as ‘identity change’.

We aim to pick up this theme of identity change in the workplace environment using resources from organisational behavioural scholars. Over a set of two articles, our objective will be to demonstrate the practical benefits of reflecting on this for Christians in the workplace. We hope also to broaden the horizon of identity change in a Christian context by considering a biblical understanding of identity which can be

seen in the Book of Ruth. We do not see that book as a text focused on leadership or identity change; however, there are some helpful parallels to illustrate the theories we are articulating. Ruth also links to us as Christians, as we recognise the fact that she is named in the lineage of Jesus (Matthew 1:5–6). Part of our identity comes from our sharing in Jesus the family line of David.

Our focus is to address these identity issues for leaders. While there are different types of leader, the focus of this article is on leaders distributed across the organisation who may or may not have a formal set of titles,



*The Gleaners (1857)*  
Jean-François Millet,  
Musée d'Orsay, Paris, France.

organisational positions or formal authority, but instead exercise leadership, or influence, as a process<sup>4</sup>.

## The Book of Ruth and 'identity work'

For very different reasons to our own, Ruth's time was also very disruptive. It was the age when 'the Judges' ruled. It was a time of civil, religious and moral chaos in Israel's history. Notably, it was not a safe environment for women (Ruth 2:9). For us, the events of the last five years with increasing reports of the abuse of women, and more recently, COVID-19, all make it easier to empathically enter into the period of the Judges.

The start of the book of Ruth contains the background story that a famine has forced a family to move east from Bethlehem to Moab. This is quite a significant move, since there was constant enmity between Israel and Moab. If we read carefully, we notice an 'identity change' at the social level. Naomi's two sons marry Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth; then, tragically, after an extended stay, the husbands of all three women died.

Our entry into this topic on identity is a simple question, "Who am I?" Orpah and Ruth answer this question with two different responses. Orpah stays in Moab, but Ruth follows Naomi as she returns to Israel. Ruth's 'identity change' begins with discarding the identity of being a Moabite, and that region's gods, to become part of Naomi's people and her God, as described in one of the most poignant passages in Scripture (1:16–17):

*"Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me."*

Interestingly, Naomi also indicates an identity change at one level by

requesting a change from her birth name, which means 'pleasant' or 'sweetness'. Instead, she asks the women to call her Mara to reflect her lived experience as being bitter (1:20). In biblical literature, as in many cultures, naming is significant, indicating the identity of the one named. It is also an indication of authority. Naomi is rejecting the name given to her by her parents, and is claiming her new identity as one embittered by her circumstances.

Hints of a reversal of circumstances begin with the mentioning of God's provision in the form of barley, which is now ready to harvest. Ruth's story thus represents God's *hesed* (commitment) to his people, and through them to the nations. Ruth shows initiative, enters into a field and takes up the role of a gleaner.

When leadership scholars use the phrase 'identity work', they refer to the work that creates, discards, claims or adapts identity<sup>5</sup>. A person generates new identities through 'identity work' activity, which is "defined as people's engagement in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising their identities"<sup>6</sup>. Such activity requires both the act of introspection and a social process<sup>7</sup>. It cannot be attended to alone.

In the 2020s, one of the benefits in using this lens of 'identity work' is that in times of uncertainty, the underlying strength of the 'psychological contract'<sup>8</sup> between the institution and the individual leader is brought to the surface<sup>9</sup>. The less attachment that is felt towards an organisation, the more problematic it is for a person to sustain a stable work identity<sup>10</sup>. Workers sense this lack of attachment during business organisational shifts. When there are such shifts for either disruptive reasons or future opportunities, a firm's value proposition (the attractiveness of its products or services) is changed for the firm's leaders and workers. All this

puts a person's work identity at risk and hence requires us to do some 'identity work' (i.e. work on one's identity).

## Kara's story:

Like many workers these days, I have multiple employers. I lecture for a theological college, I coach for a business incubator, and I do contract work for various organisations. At times I am dealing with shifts in many of these organisations. I find myself sometimes overwhelmed by the amount of change, and that can lead to me caring less for each organisation that engages me. A challenge for me is

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to continue to do my best work despite whatever is happening in the organisation. Sometimes I yearn for a simpler time when I worked for just one organisation, and my identity felt more contained and secure. However, there was a temptation then to identify more with the work itself, than to find my security

in my relationship with Christ. I relate to Ruth taking on the risk of leaving what was familiar and known, and I am challenged by her flexibility, loyalty and initiative.

## Social and personal identities

Scholars propose that a person's 'self-conception'—the way we see ourselves—is comprised of multiple identities, both social and personal. Social identities include "the social roles and group memberships a person holds"<sup>11</sup>. Personal identities include "the personal and character traits they display, and others attribute to them, based on their conduct"<sup>12</sup>. Social and personal identities help us answer the following questions: "Who do other people know me as?"<sup>13</sup>; and "Who am I?"<sup>13</sup>. As workers, there is an added layer of professional identity, which becomes even more complex when we become leaders<sup>14</sup>.

In the Book of Ruth, we can observe the following social roles of Ruth: she is a





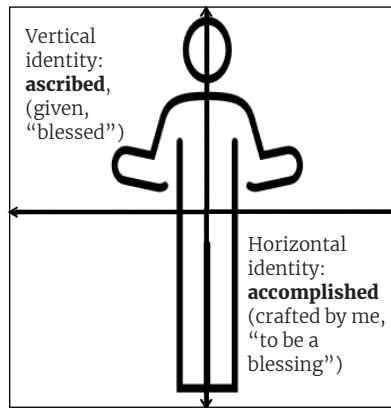
Photo: Godtube.com

foreigner (2:10), a daughter-in-law, a gleaner, and an outsider. She also reveals character traits in her personal identity through her behaviour while at work. Through the narrative she moves from being extremely marginalised to becoming accepted as part of the community. At the human level, this happens largely as a result of her own personal 'identity work', which begins by her taking the initiative and gaining permission to glean, but also through the intervention of Boaz, the wealthy and powerful owner of the fields in which she is working. However, this is with God's providence operating in the background.

She is later observed by the harvest supervisor to be a hard worker (2:7), but at the beginning, Ruth comes last in line in the field, following on from the men, then the women (2:9). Boaz echoes the town's opinion in describing her as a woman of noble character (3:11). Her conduct reveals her personal identity, rather like the woman celebrated in Proverbs 31:10–31.

Many translations use the word "noble" in Proverbs 31:10, and Ruth 3:11, but "valiant" is a better translation<sup>15</sup>. The Hebrew word here, *chayil* is often used to describe someone in battle (for example, David's 'mighty' warriors in 1 Chronicles 7:2). The 'Proverbs 31 woman' shares those characteristics as she "sets about her work vigorously; her arms are strong for her tasks" (Proverbs 31:17).

In one Hebrew canonical tradition, the Book of Ruth follows Proverbs, and the use of the same description of Ruth as a "woman of *chayil* character" implies that Ruth also is such a warrior woman: brave and strong, industrious and courageous; as well as compassionate and wise. It raises the question, "What would valiant work look like in my own current position?"



## Identity as both ascribed and accomplished

In our post-modern world, identities are more often crafted – accomplished – by us than ascribed – that is, given to us<sup>16</sup>. In the biblical context, it is helpful to link the granted or ascribed vertical dimension with our crafted or accomplished horizontal dimension. For instance, Abram's blessing is granted or ascribed to him (Gen 12:2). In the New Testament, Paul names our ascribed identity as being "in Christ" (amongst others). Furthermore, Scripture also accommodates a horizontal dimension of identity as accomplished or crafted by us. Abram, and later Israel and the Church, are to be "a blessing to the nations" (Gen 12:3). They craft this identity to be a blessing, springing from their God-given vocation as priests and vice-regents (Ex 19:6; 1 Pet 2:9), carrying out the inherent responsibility of Genesis 12:2–3 to be a blessing to all peoples<sup>17</sup>.

Ruth insists on fulfilling her duty to her mother-in-law, in spite of being freed from that obligation by Naomi. She moves beyond what is expected in her social identity, crafting a new identity and reality through her industrious work. This is under God's protection, as highlighted by Boaz's address to her (Ruth 2:12, 14):

*'May the LORD repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.'...*

At mealtime Boaz said to her, 'Come over here. Have some bread and dip it in the wine vinegar.'

Boaz, later revealed to be her kinsman-redeemer, includes her in table fellowship. In one sense, Boaz is fulfilling the promise given to Abram that "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Gen 12:3). Ruth's once peripheral identity as a person on the margins is now included in table fellowship and she is also crafting a working identity that encompasses gleaning, threshing and providing (2:12–18).

This theme of being given and also shaping our new identity in Christ is developed in Ephesians 2:10, where Paul explains that as God's handiwork, and being in Christ Jesus, we are freed so as to "walk" in the good works that God has prepared in advance for us to do. This should be our lived experience in the workplace.

For Christians in the workplace, having a secure identity 'in Christ' allows us to experiment in crafting our identity, living out our Christian vocation of being a blessing in our workplace<sup>18</sup>. We should increasingly be freed from the insecurities we see in our workplace culture and from the need to shore up our social or professional identities; instead, we can take risks and explore what it means to create opportunities for flourishing in the context in which we are placed<sup>19</sup>.

## Peter's story:

My corporate experience has taught me that personal agency (my sense of control of my life) or lack of it has important implications for my

self-conception. The changes in my professional titles reflect the turbulence of my identity over the course of my career. In my personal identity I felt a tension between copying the conduct of the prototypical leader with their associated brand and the servant leadership style of Jesus (Mk 10:43).

Once I have anchored my identity on my 'ascribed' identity in Christ, my 'crafted' identity evolves more out of a sense of playfulness than out of threat or fear. In identity work terminology, I could discard aspects of the dominant cultural scripts (inappropriate leadership stereotypes) while adopting some other aspects. I can then craft an 'accomplished' identity using my curiosity and exploration. On the other hand, when I have acted in fear, I have failed to live out my vocation of resting in the good work prepared in advance for me to be a blessing (Gen 12; Eph 2:10). I have at times out of fear been impulsive and self-sabotaging, or allowed fear to give me a sense of being an imposter. These behaviours or thoughts are at odds with my God-given identity.

## 'Identity work' and leadership development

Another benefit of exploring identity work is its connection to leadership. Ibarra, Petriglieri and Wittman emphasise three theories of leadership: Identity theory focuses on how an individual takes on a role; social identity

theory describes how individuals embody the essence of their group; while social construction theory contends that individuals are granted or claim leadership roles via interaction with others. While the linchpin across all three is personal identity, social construction theory, in particular, sees "leadership as identity work"<sup>20</sup>.

It is helpful to use the following questions to explore each of these dimensions in the workplace:

- Who am I as a leader? (Identity theory)
- How do others see me as a leader? How am I impacted by the group? (Social identity)
- How does my sense of self get impacted by the leadership role assigned to me? (Social construction)

As leaders reflect on their leadership role, mould their behaviour to conform to the group prototype, and validate their leadership claim, these processes become the means "through which one comes to see oneself, and is seen by others, as a leader"<sup>21</sup>. In sum, combining these three theories Ibarra *et al.* conclude, "identity work for leaders can be defined as the process through which individuals acquire, internalize, and validate a leader identity"<sup>22</sup>. These activities are essentially both social and relational, which means that consideration of the leader's social setting is essential<sup>23</sup>.

Boaz demonstrates some of these complexities in his interactions with

Ruth. Boaz is a businessman and leader in the town of Bethlehem. He is described as a "man of standing" or valiant character (2:1). He is also a relative of Naomi's, which has its own complex set of relationships and expectations that are developed in chapters 3 and 4. Boaz wants to do what is socially expected of him as a leader by being obedient to God in meeting the requirement of the law for gleaners (2:7, cf Lev 19:9–10; Deut 24:19). His greeting to his workers (2:4) indicates both his identity as a person who honours God and familiarity with and respect for his workers<sup>24</sup>.

After a conversation with Ruth (2:8–18), he shows his good character by going beyond the basic requirements of the law, ensuring that she is well cared for and protected. He thereby demonstrates an understanding of God's character as the one who provides abundance and refuge (2:12).

An element of identity work which is of great advantage to the Christian is that we do not do this work on our own. The reality is that we are known by God, the creator of the universe who knit us together in our mother's womb, and knows the next word we are going to say before it is on our lips (Psalm 139:4, 13). As Rosner eloquently describes it:

"Being known by God gives our lives true and lasting significance... God reassures us of our significance and worth by reminding us that our






names are written in heaven, that he remembers us constantly, and that he knows us intimately and personally”<sup>25</sup>.

## Conclusion

We recognise that we live in a time where there is constant change within the businesses in which we work, and this impacts our own sense of identity which is complex and influenced by personal factors, how others see us, and by our professional roles.

However, as Christians, we are freed from some of the ‘identity games’ that our culture may nudge us to play, because amidst the change our identity is stable and secure in Christ. This frees us to embrace both the identity ascribed to us, and also to craft our identities so they align with God’s purposes.

It is important for us to be self-aware, to recognise how much our

identity is being shaped by our work, and/or shaped by how others see us. However, working on our identities in work settings also gives us the capacity to change our situation. This is illustrated through the narrative of Ruth, who was transformed from a marginalised woman to one who is heralded as a woman of valiant character, and goes on to be named in the lineage of Jesus. 

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