

GRI-rapport 2008:7

## Identity work and identity regulation in managers' personal development training

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ISSN 1400-4801

Layout: Lise-Lotte Walter



## **Abstract**

This article describes the role of personal development training in managers' identity processes. Personal development training constitutes a local management discourse, which can influence both identity work and identity regulation processes. The study emphasizes the importance of personal life stories in understanding how managers are influenced by personal development training. The training provokes different processes of identity work and identity regulation, and managers actively work with different identity templates, both on macro and micro levels, in pursuit of their ongoing identity processes.

Key words: identity, identity work, identity regulation, personal development, discourse



## Introduction

'Being yourself and being a manager can be complicated' (Watson and Harris, 1999:155). Managers struggle to make sense of their daily work. Even if they are humane and caring people, they may also manipulate others. This is a complex struggle. On the one hand, the manager is a human being, but on the other hand, the manager must conform to the organizational requirements manifested in the daily structures, processes and practices that managerial work involves. Organisational and managerial practices significantly influence people's identity processes since they involve intertwined processes of identity work and identity regulation (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). Managers' identity processes have been described in terms of struggles (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003), filled with tensions (Thomas and Linstead, 2002) and as messy and muddled processes (Clegg and Palmer, 1996). It is no wonder then that identity has become a popular frame for an increasing amount of organizational research (Alvesson et al., 2008).

The academic interest in identity reflects and reproduces today's society with its explosion of images and industries on how one should be (Alvesson et al., 2008). A manifestation of this interest is the publicity and promotion in management training on similar issues, even if the term 'identity' is not used. Commonly used terms are personal growth, personal development, self-knowledge and authentic selves (Conger, 1993a; Luo, 2002; Andersson, 2005; Goffee and Jones, 2005). This type of personal development training acknowledges no tension between being a manager and 'being oneself'. One significant difference distinguishes organizational research on identity from personal development training: the view of self. Personal development training is mainly based on a view of the self as something that can be pinned down and found (Watson, 1996), while organizational research mainly views the self as created and constructed in relation to other people. Personal development training has a tempting rhetoric since it promises less confusion in its offer to 'find the true self' that then may, like a compass, lead us in the right direction, bringing wholeness into life (Zweig, 1995). This future is very far from the combative and tension-filled processes that identity research in organization studies envisions. There are, of course, good reasons to question why self-actualization and self-knowledge should be related to management, but it is undeniable that personal development training has a significant influence on the identity processes of managers who participate in such training (Conger, 1993b). However, the influence is not as well-ordered and certain as the rhetoric suggests (Andersson, 2005).

Management training and management learning are not equals (Cunningham and Dawes, 1997). The effects of management training have frequently been questioned and debated (e.g., Burke and Day, 1986; Whetten and Cameron, 1991), but the focus of such training has been on learning and not on the influence on managers' identity processes (Hill, 1992). There are, however, some

excellent examples that implicitly deal with identity where the role of training as means of organizational and normative control is studied (e.g., Kunda, 1992; Kamoche, 2000; Scheeres and Rhodes, 2006; Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2007). Yet there are few examples of studies of training with external organizers where the organizational control is limited. Sveningsson and Larsson (2006) describe leadership discourse in management training as fantasies used as input in managers' identity work rather than as real contributions. Sturdy et al. (2006) argue that MBA programs constitute therapeutic language training that helps participants gain self-confidence, bringing them an existential sense of management control. Fairclough and Hardy (1997) argue that management training, while an important site for the development of managerial identity, also seems to be a site for tensions and competing discourses. They call for research that investigates how these discourses influence managers' becoming processes.

In accordance with these examples, I argue that management training in general and personal development training in particular provide excellent opportunities for studying managers' identity processes. Management training is affected by different discourses that may partly be used in identity work and may partly work as identity regulation. Based upon metatheoretical division, identity research in organization studies has been performed using three main orientations: functional, interpretive and critical approaches (Alvesson et al., 2008). While the functionalistic approach, mainly based upon social identity theory, dominated early identity research in organization studies, interpretive and critical approaches have gained more influence in recent years by giving discourse a central role in identity processes. Critical approaches, often inspired by poststructuralist influences, have especially attracted much interest in recent years (Watson, 2008). The focus in research has thereby shifted from functionalistic 'creators' of identities to identity processes that to a greater extent are determined by discourses that constrain agency.

Personal development training is an interesting and opposing alternative to the present interest in critical approaches since its functionalistic approach is very clear. Because its inspiration comes from existentialistic and humanistic psychology (Conger, 1993b), the theoretical grounds (to the extent there are any) are very different from the functionalistic approaches in identity research. Existentialistic and humanistic psychology is in a way normative since it rejects social identities while claiming that the 'true self' is to be found within and social identities are 'false selves' (Andersson, 2005).

In this article, I take a broader social constructionist perspective (e.g., Watson, 2001; Humphreys and Brown, 2002), and ignore any possible theoretical claims from the organizers of the personal development training studied in my research. Instead, I look at the empirical influences on the participating managers' identity processes. Regarding metatheoretical division, I take an interpretive and critically influenced approach. I find that poststructuralist research has advanced the field significantly by providing insights on how identities are regulated by

different discourses (e.g., Alvesson and Willmott, 2002), but the disadvantage of poststructuralist research is its too strong focus on temporal, fluid selves. There are many studies that illustrate how people work on their identities by using, interpreting and balancing different discourses (e.g., Halford and Leonard, 2006) based upon personal strategies driving their life stories in certain directions (Watson, 2001; 2008). This does not mean that regulative effects do not exist, but it is the principal reason why an interpretive approach is the main point of departure in this study. The purpose of this study is to describe managers' identity processes during their participation in personal development training.

This article is organized as follows. First, I position myself within the vast identity field by viewing identity as relational, processual and situational. I next describe the role of discourse in the processes of identity work and identity regulation, which means using/interpreting and being constrained by different discourses. Discourse is used both as micro and macro phenomena, since personal development training for managers means that the participating managers engage in both a local discourse and a more general management discourse. Second, I present five separate cases where five managers participated in personal development training. The study is longitudinal as I follow the managers before, during and after the training over the course of two years. Finally, I conclude by offering three insights that illuminate identity research: 1) the importance of personal life stories in understanding how managers are influenced by personal development training; 2) the different processes of identity work and identity regulation, depending on the managers' life stories; 3) and ways in which managers actively work with different identity templates, both on macro and micro levels, in their ongoing identity processes.

## **Identity – processual, relational and situational in character**

The traditional view of human beings is that the self is stable and fixed, and can be pinned down and discovered (Watson, 1996). However, increasingly scholars reject that view and consider identity as an ongoing, social construction defined as the conscious conceptualization of the self (Albert, 1998). Thus, identity is not fluid and temporal, but is always emerging (Watson and Harris, 1999) with a direction. Furthermore, this definition emphasizes self-awareness in identity processes (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002), a view that has its origins in Giddens' (1991) concept of self-identity. Self-identity, which focuses on identity as a reflexively organized narrative, differs from the concepts of personal and social identity because of this aspect of self-awareness. Reflexive questioning of 'Who am I?' is always answered in the context of a social system of meaning, that is, 'Who do I want to be/-come?' Identity processes capture people's efforts to make sense of themselves in relation to different social systems of meaning (Fiol et al.,



1998; Whetten and Godfrey, 1998). Identity is thus established in relation to its context (Gergen, 1991; Czarniawska, 2002a); identity is not possessed by the individual. The interpersonal functions are essential since the basic human need for meaning is met by autobiographical narratives, which are part of a negotiation between the idea of the self and the external world (Baumeister, 1999).

The process of establishing identities is an ongoing process of referring to different social systems of meaning, which either are brought to us as something we relate to (identity), or something we *de-identify from* (alterity)<sup>1</sup> (Czarniawska, 2002a). The social systems we do not relate to ('I am not like that') are just as important as the social systems we relate to in constructing our identities. Consequently, identity processes consist of ongoing dialogues of 'Who am I?' 'Who do I want to be?' 'Who am I like?' and 'Who am I not like?' that are related to each other, which means that identity is processual, relational and situational.

## Discourses as providers of identity templates

Social systems of meaning are created by different discourses that frame the way people understand and act with respect to a certain issue (Watson, 1995). Managers (like all individuals) draw on different discourses (Watson, 1995; Thomas and Linstead, 2002; Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003; Kornberger and Brown, 2007) in order to make sense of themselves. Different discourses serve as discursive resources when they provide identity templates that the individual can elaborate on (Watson, 2001). In this article, I stress the active elaboration aspect, where the individual uses the discourse instead of being formed and determined by discourse. This does not mean that I reject Foucault-inspired views of power exerting discourses (e.g., Keenoy et al., 1997; Grant et al., 2004; Fairclough, 2005), but I emphasize that discourses also leave room for individual agency. Consequently, my view of the role of discourse is based mainly upon an interpretive approach, but with aspects of a critical approach.

There is a current trend of highly localized identity research (Alvesson et al., 2008) that tends to neglect larger and historical formations that influence identities. Such identities are constructed by discourses, which means that there are micro and macro levels of discourse, even if research is somewhat unclear on their relationships and their influences on each other (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000). In macro studies, the focus is on aggregated similarities, which are seen as expressions of culturally standardized discourses. These are called Discourses (with capital D) because of their long-range influence. In micro studies, discourse is an emergent and locally constructed phenomenon, that is, there are variations

<sup>1</sup> Alterity resembles what Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) call anti-identity, and furthermore has similarities with the concept of organizational disidentification (Elsbach, 1999) (see also Kunda, 1992; Dukerich et al., 1998).

at the local level that macro studies tend to neglect. The macro Discourse forms the contours and context that guides the construction of the local discourse (Kuhn, 2006).

Discourses are complex in themselves and are also intertwined with other discourses (Hardy et al., 2000). Since people participate in many discourses, they are receivers of messages that present conflicting ideals, norms and images of the world (Gergen, 1995). Managers are likely to participate in Management Discourse and local management discourses as well as other discourses, such as various professional discourses (e.g., Doolin, 2002; Pratt et al., 2006). Some of these professional discourses co-exist harmoniously with Management Discourse, while others directly conflict with it (Andersson, 2005). Identity processes are therefore based on adjusting to shifting contexts and being true to divergent - and occasionally conflicting - commitments. Processes of managing managerial identities are characterized by struggles to fit into the different discourses (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003; Andersson, 2005).

## **Identity work and identity regulation**

Identity work and identity regulation constitute two different roles that discourse has in identity processes (Kuhn, 2006). Identity work can be defined as 'forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness' (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003:1165), that is, interpretive activities in reproducing and transforming self-identity. Identity regulation is defined as the discursive practices that condition identity processes (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). Identity work and identity regulation influence self-identity (the organized narrative of the self), but self-identity can also induce identity work. Identity processes are thus constituted by the interplay between self-identity, identity work and identity regulation (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). Processes of identity work and regulation are always parts of the ongoing identity process, but they can take more salient roles in reconstructing identities when triggered by experienced identity violations, such as experienced mismatches between who you are and what you do (Pratt et al., 2006). Identity work means that the actor uses discourse as a tool, while identity regulation ties people to social structures through roles, scripts, etc. Discourses can, at the same time, regulate identities and can be used in identity work. The processes are complex and intertwined, which Alvesson and Willmott (2002) emphasize by explaining that the most sophisticated forms of identity regulation are 'hidden' in people's identity work.

In the previous section, I noted that discourses provide identity templates that individuals can elaborate on. Since there are both macro and micro levels of discourses, there are also different types of identity templates. Watson (2008) develops this idea, adding that identity work concerns both self-identity and

social-identities<sup>2</sup> (similar to identity templates). He describes identity work as the integration of self-identity and social-identities, in which inward/internal self-reflection and outward/external engagement – through talk and action – are brought together. Social-identities are cultural, discursive or institutional notions of who an individual is or what any individual might be. They can relate to both macro and micro levels of discourse with macro phenomena, such as a) social-category social-identities (class, gender, nationality, etc.) and b) formal role social-identities (occupation, rank, citizenship, etc.), as well as micro phenomena, such as c) local organizational social-identities (local community social-identities) and d) local personal identities (context and situation specific characterisations that various others make of an individual). This division of different social-identities can be used to understand identity work as related to both competing discourses since discourse produces social-identities (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997) and discourses on micro and macro levels (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000).

## **Managers' personal development training**

Personal development training can be described as the by-product of decades of experiments within several streams, such as T-groups, New age movements and humanistic psychology focusing on self-actualisation and human potential (Conger, 1993b), and as the revival of sensitivity training and T-groups dating from the 1970s (Andersson, 2008). In terms of identity, training and education are normally understood as forms of identity regulation (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002), since they imply accepting certain discursive practices that regulate self-identity and prompt identity work in a specific direction. In recent years, management has often been concerned with managing the 'insides' of the workers rather than managing their behaviour directly (Deetz, 1995). Thus, identity regulation has been used as a form of organizational control. Identity regulation includes the more or less intentional effects of the implications of shaping the 'right' identity (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). Participation in management training influences processes of identity work and identity regulation, although, depending on the type of training, the work/regulation relationship may vary.

Two common divisions of management training are external/internal training and off-site/in-house training. External/internal training focuses on the controller of the training content, whether it is the organization itself or an external organizer. Off-site/in-house training focuses on the on-site training with only colleagues at the workplace or outside the workplace with managers from other organizations. Personal development training usually is conducted as external, off-site training, which is of significant importance. While internal training often means identity regulation based on managerial interest in regulating employees'

<sup>2</sup> They are called social-identities in order not to confuse them with social identity and social identity theory that constitutes another theoretical frame.

'insides' (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002), external management training is not under 'managerial control' to the same extent, and so the identity regulation aspect is not as self-evident. However, all types of management training involve participating in Management Discourse, which constitutes a form of identity regulation in itself, but not as a form of organizational control. External management training may also be an opposing alternative to organizational control because it might release 'lock-in' effects created by identity regulation (Andersson, 2005).

Another aspect that differentiates personal development training from other management training is the focus on the individual, which can result in a more active and conscious identity process. The level of consciousness in identity work is something that both Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) and Alvesson and Willmott (2002) mention, although they do not develop the idea in their studies. Conscious identity work is described as grounded in at least some self-doubt and some self-openness. In complex and fragmented contexts, identity work is claimed to be on-going although possibly it is more temporally connected to crisis and transitions in contexts with high stability. Alvesson and Willmott conclude, however, that 'much, if not all activity involves active identity work' (2002:626), an argument they support with conditions of late modernity where identities are comparatively open and achieved rather than given or closed. Even if the logic of conscious and unconscious identity work is described, there is no differentiation between the two since most identity work is described as active and conscious. I argue that people do not normally reflect about themselves. Instead, identity processes are perceived more or less as 'just being there', like context (March, 1994). Personal development training can trigger identity work to become a more conscious and active process. Identity is then suddenly a conscious elaboration of something in itself, not as something contextually dealt with passively or unconsciously (Andersson, 2005). Consequently, the outcomes of conscious and unconscious identity work can be very different.

## Settings and data collection

The theoretical positioning of identity as processual, relational and situational has significant consequences for the choices of research method. First, the processual identity guided my choice of a two-year, longitudinal, qualitative study. I followed five managers for two years, which included their participation in eight months' of personal development training. I conducted the study before, during and after this training, using interviews and observations, mainly in their organizations. Second, I considered the relational aspect of identity by conducting interviews with these participating managers as well as with their own managers, subordinates, peers and the organizers of the training. My purpose was to collect in-depth, context-sensitive, rich stories. In total, I conducted 62

interviews (22 with the participating managers) and made 13 observations. The data collection was most intense during the eight months of the training. The interviews provided narratives of the managers' experiences and daily lives. The observations were mainly used to suggest specific situations to talk about in upcoming interviews. As a result, the situational character of identity was considered since specific situations were described. One of the biggest challenges with interviews is keeping interviewees focused on their own experiences and preventing them from talking 'theories and beliefs' or engaging in impression management (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003). In my presentation of the data collected, I have tried to 'let the data speak' and thus to allow the reader to get close to the data in order to capture the processual, relational and situational character of identity.

The five managers came from two organizations, but none of them worked close together. The organizations are identified here as Vet and Consultancy. Vet is a public sector authority that has an expert function for other public sector authorities and for practicing veterinarians. It has the characteristics of a professional organization. The other organisation, Consultancy, is a large and rather hierarchical IT consulting firm.

The interviews are not objective windows to another world (Czarniawska 2002b), but are situations where the interview becomes a part of the managers' identity work.

These interviews are great, because they make me reflect upon the training once more...maybe you should charge the organizers (laughter).  
(Richard, participating manager)

Interviews are therefore both sources of information on individual and organizational sensemaking and stimulus of identity work (Alvesson et al. 2008). However, abandoning any claim to mirror and represent the social world does not that it does not exist (Watson, 2000). The problem with 'reaching' a social construction is that people tend to be unaware of the fact that it is created (Berger and Luckman, 1966). Therefore, the texts generated from interviews and observations have been analyzed for what they say a) about social reality b) about a 'subjective shared reality' and c) about what they accomplish rather than what they mirror (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000).

### *The studied personal development training*

An external party with no relation to the managers' organizations (other than that the organizations paid for the managers' participation) organized the training, which was called 'Existential leadership'. The training was held offsite, in a country house, and consisted of five courses, one week each. The courses were spread over a period of eight months. Since training means that the participants engage in a local discourse, it is important to understand its character. Reflection in order to '*gain self-knowledge*' and '*conscious awareness*' was described as the

keystone of the training in this study. During the course, the participants mainly worked with different role-plays and exercises that were used to evoke different feelings that could be reflected upon.

The leadership trainers emphasized that they were not trying to impose a certain role model of 'good leadership' on the participants: Instead, the training was intended for the '*free development of the participants' personal leadership based on their unique abilities*'. However, there were definitely implicit role models of 'good leadership' that were evident in several transformation goals. In the local discourse, the transformation processes were described in different ways: from controlling to coaching, from pushing to facilitating, from directing to involving, and from managers (specialists, experts) to leaders (generalists, humanists). The preference for leaders and leadership has been generally observed as an important part of management discourse since fantasies of leadership have been described as an input to managers' identity work rather than as substantial and real contributions (Sveningsson and Larsson, 2006).

## Identity work – the five separate cases

**Case A: Mary** - Mary is a veterinarian and a department manager at Vet. When I asked Mary's peers to describe her, they painted a picture of a very respected but 'difficult' person. When describing her as a manager and as a person, three managers independently made a square with their hands, as if to say: '*Well, she is a little bit like this.*' Several managers seemed to wish that the training would cause her to change her attitude.

I am glad that Mary has found a course in personal development. She has to change the way she is. I think she would relate to others so much better if she didn't have such an aggressive and uncompromising manner.  
(Staff manager)

Mary had made a very active and conscious decision regarding this particular type of training. She felt frustrated about '*the people aspect of the job*' and hoped that the training would help her with approaches to handling the problem.

Mary experienced the training as an opportunity to reflect upon herself as a manager, which she had not paid much attention to previously. She had seen herself as a veterinarian who just happened to be manager.

I am not that interested in the position as such...being a manager I mean, but it is extremely important for me to be able to influence the organization and to feel that my competence is being used in the best interest of the organization. Being a department manager is no guarantee of influence. Rather it means responsibility for the subordinates and less freedom in what I do...so I have started to question why I am a manager.

From the role-plays in the program, Mary started to understand her preference for certain qualities in her relationships at work.

I have always known that I want subordinates who are self-motivating. I don't want to exercise the direct leadership that passive subordinates require.

More and more, Mary seemed to realize what it meant to be manager, and she became more and more confident that she preferred to be 'only' a veterinarian.

A few months after the end of the training, Mary was promoted. However, she thought that the structure prevented her from exerting any real influence. Her doubts about whether she should be a manager or not became even stronger and she finally left her managerial job for a specialist position in another organization.

**Case B: David** - David is a veterinarian and the head of a department with 30 subordinates. Like most managers at Vet, David sees himself mainly as a veterinarian, and he seems a little confused at being both a veterinarian and a manager.

Well, after all I am a veterinarian and that is what I want to be. I am not a manager and I am definitely not a budget expert (laughter), I must be one of the world's lousiest business administrators. Still, I am a manager... hmmm... but I am a veterinarian in my profession.

David had made a more passive decision than Mary. He was not very specific in what he expected. He said: *'I want to learn what management is, I mean... what it really is, after all, I am a veterinarian.'*

David appreciated meeting 'real managers' as he described them, that is, managers who are not veterinarians, and he started to notice that they seem to do the same things he does:

The 'real managers' seem to have the same problems as we do. There are difficult people at every workplace, and they don't seem to have another way to tackle the problem than I do.

Otherwise, David did not seem to take much interest in the training. He was there during the course weeks, but the training did not seem to affect him greatly. As one leadership trainer commented:

David... Yeah, I honestly don't know if he will get much from this program. It feels like we are back at the starting point every new course week. He seems to forget about it between the courses. I know several times when we have said 'But David, we discussed that last time'; he responds 'Ah, I had forgotten about that'. (Assisting leadership trainer)

Eight months after the training ended, neither David nor his subordinates noticed any big differences in him either as a person or as a manager, but David was sure that he *felt* different:

I have become calmer. I don't get stressed as easily as before. I still have as much to do as before, but it doesn't get to me. I have not had palpitations since I started the program. Before the program it happened rather often; the reason was stress, nothing else.

David's experienced similarities with '*real managers*' had made him more self-confident in his manager identity. The security reduced his stress, even if he had just as much to do as before.

**Case C: Richard** - Richard is a veterinarian, who has been department manager for nine years. When asked to describe Richard, several people started with '*He is a scientist*'. Accordingly, the focus of his department is mainly research, and the main financing of the department's activities comes from research grants.

The departments at Vet are very diverse... they are extensions of the department managers' interest. You have departments where activities are exclusively financed by regular sales, and at the other extreme is Richard's department, which is almost exclusively involved in research. He runs it like a branch of the university. (Peer to Richard)

Richard describes himself as a reluctant manager who prefers subordinates who are self-motivated.

What I do as a manager? As little as possible! I want to have as much time as possible for my operations work and my research...so I don't want people who have to be directed. I want people who take responsibility for themselves. People have rather free hands. But it has become harder and harder...it is like people expect you to be more of a manager when you grow older. When I became department manager I was one of the youngest in the department, and now I am among the oldest...so, slowly and reluctantly, I have started to accept being more of a manager.

This expectation that he should be more a manager caused Richard to apply for the management training, but he did not seem to expect much from it:

I have been manager for so long that I risk being sent to a management training, better to choose one myself then...

Richard seemed not to accept the concept of the training totally in the beginning, or at least he seemed reluctant, conveying the impression he was a 'problem student' and a slow starter. Later in the training, Richard started to pay more attention, but he did not experience any change personally.

It's not so much that I have changed as a person or changed my leadership; rather I have become more aware of how I manage people. I manage them very gently. I work with academic people and the 'typical approach' for an academic is: 'Tell me what to do, and I will prove that you are wrong', so you can't give direct orders. Therefore I think these gentle, small pushes are my way of managing people.



Richards' peers also noticed that he had started to reflect more upon management issues than before.

Richard seems to have taken the program very seriously. Even if he seldom talks about the program itself, he has started to discuss with me what he wants to do in his department... and it concerns managing the people. I think the program has opened up fields for him that are new... I don't think he had reflected that much about being a manager before. (Peer to Richard)

Richard started to question 'who he was' during the training and he saw himself more as a veterinarian than as a manager. This questioning made him doubt if he should continue in his managerial position or '*go back to just being a veterinarian again*'. However, after a summer vacation, he decided to stay and try to make the best of the situation. He realized that he could continue to be a good veterinarian without ignoring his managerial position (now when he had understood what it meant), and he seemed to have found peace with the two identities.

**Case D: Monica** - Monica works as a group manager with 15 subordinates in Consultancy. She has begun to feel dissatisfied with her job.

I am a person who easily gets bored if nothing happens, and I feel that nothing could happen in my group manager job that I couldn't deal with in my sleep.

Monica came to the training mainly for personal reasons:

My private life has been a roller coaster the last months. I want change, I have no specific expectations, other than that I know that I want a change, but I do not know what kind of change... the driving force is a change in me as a person.

Monica described herself as '*vulnerable and inquiring in the beginning of the training*.' She experienced a radical redefinition of herself during the first course week. She felt like '*someone new*' and that she had discovered '*who she really was*'. However, she had trouble bringing the experienced change to her organization, and she felt like she was living in two different worlds with different rules.

Returning after the first week was a shock! I had done a real turn around during the week, and then I came back and everything was as it used to be... I mean, it felt unreal that so many things had happened to me, but the world around me hadn't changed.

Monica experienced a heavy resistance from her environment when she tried to play out her new identity. She was not able to live as the person she had found that she wanted to be during the courses. Her peers and manager openly rejected her new inspired identity with words such as '*why are you going to these courses, they only make you strange!*' She wished she could go back to the training immediately.

Monica continued to experience the training and her organization as two different worlds and she felt frustrated when, time after time, she failed to integrate these two worlds. Her working situation became impossible and a few months after the training had finished, she took five weeks off from her job for a completely different occupation - she became a snowboard teacher. When she returned, she was placed in another manager position in her organization where she felt that it was easier to play out '*the way she was*'. She even was appreciated for it.

**Case E: Christine** - Christine has a background in the public sector medical services where she worked as a department manager. She had retrained to become a system developer and is now a manager at Consultancy for a group of 60 persons. Christine enjoys change and new things. She prefers to be a visionary in her job, which has had direct implications for her department:

The growth is mainly thanks to Christine's ability to attract new customers and her interest in continuous development. Probably that is the main reason why she attended this training as well. Some people just have to continue their development. I would say that Christine is very much like that. (Project leader subordinate to Christine)

Christine saw the training as '*a complement to my earlier programs. It seems focused on me as a person and what I could do as a leader.*' Furthermore, she felt ready for the next step in her career and thought the training would give her opportunities to think about what to do next.

Christine used the management training to reflect upon her leadership situation, but she also tried to define for herself the parts of her managerial job she appreciated the most.

The course has helped me to find the root of my feelings of unease. And I have thought more about what I really want to do. Right now, I have too many subordinates, which means there is no time for strategic questions. I have not had time for both customers and subordinates, and I think I have chosen the customers.

Christina used the ideas she had developed during the training and tried to make changes in the structure. She also tried to find a new position in her organization that would match her desires, but this search proved to be difficult.

During the training, Christine used the time for reflection to analyze her managerial situation rather than herself. She had ideas of how to improve her department, but its rigid, formal structure made it impossible to complete planned changes. As a result, her career path within the organization was blocked. A couple of months after the training, she found a new managerial job in another firm within the company group.

In my previous job, I had too much staff responsibility. It is not that I don't like that, but I want to do other things as well. Here I have 8-12

subordinates instead of 60, which gives me more time for work on a strategic level. I have found out that I want to work with the 'big picture' ... I am not that interested in details.

### Same training, different stories

The five managers' participation in the program produced five very different stories. Some key factors are summarized in table 1. The five participants had very different expectations of the training. For the three veterinarian managers from Vet, the training was their first management training, so they had little to compare it with. Furthermore, they worked in an organization where manager positions tended to be neglected and underdeveloped. Monica and Christine from Consultancy, on the other hand, had extensive experience in several different types of management training, and it was easier for them to compare this particular training to other management programs.

Mary, Monica and Christine came to the training mainly because they sought change in different ways (personal, relations and career reasons), while David and Richard were there more reluctantly to '*learn about management*'.

	A	B	C	D	E
Wanting change	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes
Previous management training	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Attitude to personal change	Inviting	Reluctant	Reluctant	Desire	Reluctant
Leaving their job	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes

Table 1: Summary

### Engaging in a local management discourse

The training represented a particular, local management discourse, which had both similarities and differences compared to a more general Management Discourse (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000). Different discourses serve as providers of identity templates (Watson, 2001), which partly can be used (elaborated on) in identity work and which partly regulate identity. The rhetoric of the training was intended to support the acquisition of self-knowledge through reflection, that is, through an active and conscious identity work. Consequently, the most general identity regulation that took place in the training was an *imposed identity work*. Identity work can be a more active process than identity regulation, but it is also more unpredictable. This study indicates that the more discourse serves as a tool in identity work (and not mainly as identity regulation), the more important people's life stories are for understanding the directions in identity processes. Identities are shaped by negotiation between what people bring to the situation (in this case, the participating managers' personal life stories, expectations,

desires, resistances etc.) and what others bring to the situation (in this case, the management training, the local discourse, the other participants, etc.). Because all managers brought their unique life stories to the situation, the identity work took different directions, which created unique and personal 'effects' from the training in the form of unique identity formations.

Discourse studies highlight the importance of language as a vehicle in the identity process (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2004). In the training, the identity work was imposed through encouraging reflection and talking about being a manager. For the three veterinarians, this activity was particularly new. For them, the training was their first in-depth experience with Management Discourse. As they started to reflect, the identity process suddenly became consciously elaborated on as significant in itself, not as a process contextually dealt with passively or unconsciously. Reflection and talk consequently can create a more active and *conscious identity work*.

The local management discourse provided an identity template, but the template meant very different things and was used in different ways, depending on the managers' previous experience with Management Discourse. The local management discourse had both similarities to and differences with Management Discourse. For the veterinarian managers, who had barely been a part of Management Discourse before, the template was not coined by the typical characteristics of the local management discourse, but by a more general Management Discourse. For the managers at Consultancy, who were deeply rooted in Management Discourse, the identity template was closely related to an *alterity template* for disidentification. The rhetoric of the training implied advocating some parts of Management Discourse (coaching, facilitating, involving, leading) and rejecting other parts (directing, pushing, controlling, managing). As a result, the managers from Consultancy mainly focused on the differences between the local discourse and the general Management Discourse.

Using Watson's (2008) types of social-identities, for the veterinarians at Vet the identity work meant trying to integrate a *formal role social-identity* (manager) with their self-identity, while for the managers at Consultancy, the identity work meant integrating a *local-organizational social-identity* with their already integrated manager identity. To some extent this identity work was performed in relationship to the Management Discourse for the veterinarians and in relationship to the local management discourse for the consultants, which means that the same training provided social-identities on both macro and micro levels. Depending on the managers' personal life stories and their organizational and professional situations, different levels of social-identities were 'chosen'/used. For the veterinarian managers, the greatest difficulty in integrating the manager identity was their strong identification with their veterinarian identity. Being strongly identified with one role identity makes it harder to take on other roles and integrate them as a part of the identity (Ashforth, 2001). However, the outcomes were different among the veterinarians. For the veterinarians, David and Richard,

the identity work performed during the training became a struggle to integrate their managerial identities without threatening their veterinarian identities. The identity work mainly released the 'lock-in' effects of their veterinarian identities (created by identity regulation through their education and their organization), which enabled them to integrate their manager identities. For Mary, the third veterinarian, the training meant elaborating and testing the manager identity that she then dismissed when she left her managerial job for an expert job as veterinarian. Mary had been a manager for several years, but having a managerial position and integrating a manager identity with your self-identity are obviously not identical.

Furthermore, there were differences between the two managers at Consultancy. Monica strongly identified with the discourse of the training. Instead of integrating the local identity in her manager identity, she wanted to exchange her manager identity. It was as if she wanted to 'leave her old self behind', and the training worked more as *voluntary identity regulation* than as identity work. For Christine, the training meant carefully integrating the parts of the local social-identity that she could relate to, and at the same time abandoning some parts of her integrated manager identity. Mainly, the identity work clarified the direction of her identity process, which became a factor in her career planning (Who do I want to become?).

'Discourse does many things at the same time and over time, in different arenas, and in ways that are not necessarily compatible or even visible' (Grant et al., 2004:14). Here, different discourses and different levels of management discourse were used and interpreted in different ways in the managers' identity work, depending on their personal life stories and different expectations of the training.

## Conclusion

My purpose in this study is to describe the role of personal development training in managers' identity processes. Consequently, I have questioned the traditional view of viewing management training as a supplier of managerial techniques, and instead have focused on the influence on managers' processes of identity work and identity regulation. My study highlights that a local discourse (e.g., management training) has different influences on different managers depending on their personal life stories, which means that the agency of the individual manager is of significant importance. People do actively work on their identities and personal development training seems to create a more active identity work by inviting people to reflect upon themselves on the one hand, and by threatening established identities, on the other hand.

Personal development training means that participating managers take part in a local management discourse, which provides identity templates. Depending on the managers' life stories, especially their previous relationships to local and

general Management Discourses and their expectations of the training, the template has different meanings and different uses for the participants. There is clearly room for individual use and interpretation of different discourses.

Furthermore, the concepts of identity work and identity regulation are extremely useful in understanding managers' identity processes during personal development training. The first conclusion regarding the importance of personal life stories may suggest that identity work is more important than identity regulation. However, I have described processes that paradoxically may be understood as imposed identity work and voluntary identity regulation. Personal development training can have regulating effects by imposing identity work on the managers. Furthermore, managers' who want to experience personal change can use the identity template as voluntary identity regulation rather than as input to their identity work. Imposed identity work can create conscious identity work, which supports identity reconstructions to a larger extent than unconscious identity work does. Management training can be seen as a management fashion distributor (Andersson, 2008), which means that it not only advocates a certain view, it also rejects something existing in management discourse. In this sense, the local management discourse provides both different identity templates ('who you should be') and alterity templates ('who you should not be').

Even if the study is characterized mainly by interpretive and critical approaches and is not a functional approach (using the terms of Alvesson et al., 2008), there are managerial implications. I agree with Czarniawska (2006) who states that even the most stubborn critical and anti-rationalist researcher still wants things to function well, which means that interpretive and critical studies can be used in a functional way. This study is important for organizers, buyers and participants of management training. The study highlights that management training (mainly) is an arena of identity work and identity regulation, but these processes of identity work and identity regulation relate to an already existing identity process which also continues after the training. Consequently, it is important to understand managers' personal life stories and their expectations of the training and situation in their organizations in order to judge the consequences of the training. Organizers can take action to ensure such questions arise at the training. Buyers need to understand their managers in order to have some indication of what they can expect from the training for a particular manager. The buying organizations also need to take a responsibility for 'taking care' of managers' experienced effects of the training, for communication with the participating manager before, during and after the training, and for facilitating a re-negotiation of their implicit contracts. Finally, for participating managers, it is important to ignore the view of management training content as 'delivering a package' and something that takes place 'outside' themselves, when it mainly is an influence on their identity processes.



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