Authentic Identity:
The Essence of How Successful Ecopreneurs Communicate

by

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Abstract

This thesis employed qualitative methods including grounded theory to assess how successful ecopreneurs communicate to maintain and sustain their triple bottom line organizations. The analysis of transcribed interviews from 13 exemplars in North America revealed five groups of common attributes that form an overarching theme of *authentic identity*. This finding confirms the Communication Theory of Identity and furthers it because it is through authentic identity that successful ecopreneurs manage to narrow identity gaps across the four layers of identity: they continuously strive for alignment with themselves, in relationships, among and across stakeholder groups, and in their daily execution. Understanding ecopreneurs and their practices, distilling recommendations, and adding to the scarce body of academic literature on ecopreneurship, are critical because ecopreneurship, in light of the alarming economic and environmental outlook, is establishing itself as a considerable area of business activity and influence for social change and a sustainable future.

Keywords

Ecopreneurship; ecopreneur; sustainability; triple bottom line; authenticity; identity; personal identity; authentic identity; identity gap; communication; communication theory of identity.
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This is who we are and this is what we do. You’ve got to stick to your guns. Things will come around -- sometimes a customer will drop off but then come back. So once again, stick to your values and beliefs and what you set out to be in the first place. I cannot compromise, I just can’t. In many instances you have to make a business case decision, because without a viable business, you cannot survive. But when it comes to bailing on who we are, and our values, just to make a sale -- I just can’t do that. In fact, I just want to keep getting better and getting at the core -- digging deeper. I don’t think we’re doing nearly enough. We could be doing a whole lot more. I am always driven by that. (M. McLeod, personal communication, February 4, 2009)

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According to a recent report commissioned by the Suzuki Foundation (2008), there is a fast growing realization by Canadians that in the long-run, a trade-off between economic prosperity and environmental protection is not an option (Rivers & Sawyer, 2008). Governments are increasingly investing in green economic solutions to contribute to global climate change initiatives, to prepare for an economic recovery from the recession, and to leverage the opportunity of long-term job creation (Finlayson, 2009). Leaders can contribute the most by looking beyond the bottom line. To foster the long-term development of their people and organizations is critical to allow for continuous adaptation to the changing environment, and to thereby thrive and grow (Kouzes & Posner, 2007). Thus, today’s “age of accountability” (Savitz, 2006, p. xiv), which demands economic development, social benefits, and environmental protection, leads back to what Elkington (1997) already argued twelve years ago. For companies
to be sustainable, they need substantial performance shifts against the triple bottom line (TBL), a concept that supports the three dimensions of economic, social, and environmental values (Dixon & Clifford, 2007; Elkington, 1997; Henriques & Richardson, 2004). Successful entrepreneurs are particularly well suited to act both as role models and catalysts of change in taking proactive steps towards triple bottom line practices because they have the visionary, can-do attitude to persevere and attract the right resources to get the job done (Schaltegger, 2002; Schaper, 2002; Schick, Marxen & Freimann, 2002; Walley & Taylor, 2002; Thomas, personal communication, November 7, 2008). Venturing confidently into uncharted territory to break new ground, thereby developing a new future, is what entrepreneurial leadership is all about (Darling, Keeffe, & Ross, 2007).

Unlike archetype entrepreneurs motivated predominantly by the bottom line, ecopreneurs are entrepreneurs who aspire to grow profitable, sustainable businesses while changing the world through quality improvement of life and environment (Dixon & Clifford, 2007; Linnanen, 2002). A sustainable business for the purpose of this study is one that remains successful for the long-term by creating shareholder profit while preserving and improving the environment and the lives of its stakeholders (Savitz, 2006). In other words, a sustainable business upholds the principles of the triple bottom line. Ecopreneurs in particular, focus on bridging the gap between economic success and environmental progress (Schaltegger, 2002). As such, they have the opportunity to be leaders in advancing sustainable economic and commercial systems designs (Schaper, 2005). As the importance of sustainability in business increases, and global stakeholder awareness (in addition to demands) grows through media and Internet accessibility, the arrival of a “new social norm” (P. Robinson, personal communication, May 5, 2009) is inevitable. To direct this change, communication plays a critical role, especially since managing
meaning and mastering communication is essential and “inseparable from leadership
effectiveness and entrepreneurial success” (Nurmi & Darling, 1997, p.58). Companies are
progressing well on the environmental and social fronts; however, as Willard (2002) explains,
they must move from treating environmental aspects as a specialized departmental or staff
concern to an organization-wide context of sustainable development. For this behavioural shift to
take place, the implementation of solid communication and education strategies are essential
(Willard, 2002). To contribute to the growing need for communication strategies and educational
programs, I set out to understand how successful, role model ecopreneurs communicate to
establish and sustain their triple bottom line organizations, and based on the findings, distil
recommendations to assist aspiring ecopreneurs, and encourage current entrepreneurs and
entrepreneurial leaders with their triple bottom line pursuit.

This qualitative study relied on identifying exemplary ecopreneurs in various industries
across North America, with emphasis on British Columbia, who are successfully leading
sustainable small to medium-sized organizations. Through in-depth, one-on-one interviews, I
asked 13 select role models to reflect on their journey, experiences, motivations, success factors
and challenges to date, and to share current practices, future objectives and advice. Five key
groups of common attributes emerged from the ecopreneurs’ accounts, and revealed an innate
presence and overarching theme of authentic identity as the essence of how successful
ecopreneurs communicate. What was apparent and speaks to Kouzes and Posners’ (2007)
comment about leadership in general, “We all know deep down that people can only speak the
truth when speaking in their own true voice” (p. 48). This is what these role model ecopreneurs
epitomize -- an unwavering confidence in who they are and what they stand for, conveyed
authentically in all their actions. Since successful entrepreneurs have the power to be true change
agents, the more leadership in triple bottom line practices emerges from entrepreneurs, the faster we can move our communities toward a successful sustainable future (Dixon & Clifford, 2007). The formation of new eco or green enterprises plays a considerable role in this endeavour, and assisting aspiring ecopreneurs to do so is critical. Thus adding to the young discipline and currently scarce body of literature on ecopreneurship, in particular given the growing need for communication and education strategies in this field, is a significant endeavour (Schaper, 2002; Gibbs, 2009; Walley & Taylor, 2002; Willard, 2002).

Literature Review

The study of ecopreneurs and ecopreneurship is a relatively young discipline emerging in the 1990’s (Shaltegger, 2002; Schaper, 2002), and appearing in discussions of the triple bottom line, social entrepreneurship, sustainability, environmental entrepreneurship, green entrepreneurship and eco-entrepreneurship; it only gained true momentum in the early 21st century with authors, such as Isaak (2002), Linnanen (2002), Schaltegger (2002), Schaper (2002), Walley and Taylor (2002). More recently, the discourse in this field, especially through mainstream articles, blogs and websites, has broadened further which can be attributed to the growing awareness of the importance of sustainable development and the role small to medium-sized businesses can play in leading change (Schaper, 2005). Ecopreneurs have the opportunity to be role models and express the economic benefits of more sustainable business practices, thereby “acting as a ‘pull’ factor,” which may at times be more effective in leading change than “the ‘push’ factors” that governments and stakeholder groups may achieve through regulations and measures (Schaper, 2002, p. 27). To date, the academic literature has focused predominantly on the definition of ecopreneurship, comparisons between conventional entrepreneurs or environmental management and ecopreneurs, a variety of topologies of ecopreneurs, and
conceptual frameworks for identifying and classifying ecopreneurs and ecopreneurial firms. In addition, and maybe through the recommendations and works of Schaper (2005), practical guides for ecopreneuring and case studies are emerging, of which five are presented in his work. Nonetheless, my review of the literature reveals and supports Gibbs’ (2009) critique that “it is heavy on speculation and extremely light on empirical evidence” (p. 73). Walley and Taylor also note that the literature is “surprisingly thin” (2002, p. 32). As Schaper (2002 and 2005) recommends, “there is a rich source of knowledge [from examples] which is yet to be comprehensively examined,” which includes distilling of experiences and lessons learned from the stories of ecopreneurs, and determining “how this information can be effectively disseminated to other current and would-be entrepreneurs” (Schaper, 2005, p. 10). In particular, I was not able to find empirical sources that focused on the study of communication as it relates to ecopreneurship or asked the question of how successful ecopreneurs communicate. Darling and Beebe (2007), for example, argue the importance of communication priorities of successful entrepreneurs in their organizations; however, their study is not empirical, and does not focus on ecopreneurship. There is one recent empirical study by Parkinson and Howorth (2008), which identified the need and conducted in-depth research into the concepts and language of social entrepreneurs in the UK using discourse analysis. Yet, they focused on a definition of social entrepreneurship which does not incorporate the environmental concern that ecopreneurship espouses. Consequently, these findings would confirm Gibbs’ (2009) comment that “we have little idea of how ecopreneurs engage in making sense of their business for themselves and for others and how (or if) they develop a coherent identity as they seek to reconcile being enterprising and environmentally aware” (p. 73).
For many years, identity has been extensively studied by social and behavioural scientists to further the understanding of human thought and action (Jung & Hecht, 2004). The Oxford dictionary (1996) defines identity as an expression of “being a specified person,” having an “individuality” or “personality.” It is the core of an individual, a “central aspect” that differentiates this person from others (Goffman, 1963, p. 56). Tamir (1996) discusses that identity is something that an individual can explore and discover through self-reflection. It is something we can define and even choose. It entails having a willingness to make changes in the way we see ourselves and in relationships with others. As such, it could be described as “an inward process” (Tamir, 1996, p.176). We are then talking about personal identity, which Hitlin (2003) explains is something individuals experience as fundamental or distinctive to their being. Further, he notes that what we consistently think about over time is what makes up our personal identity. Guilar (2008) is more explicit in this notion by saying “people become who they are through communication” (2008, p. 7). Jung and Hecht (2004) suggest that through communication, identity is not only a sign of self, but also that of an individual’s role in relationships and society. The Communications Theory of Identity (CTI) sheds further light on how communication plays a significant role for the development of personal identity.

CTI materialized in the 1990’s in an attempt to integrate communication in the study of identity (Hecht, Warren, Jung, & Krieger 2005; Jung & Hecht, 2004). It emphasizes and differentiates itself from other identity theories in that it focuses on “the processing of identity through interaction” (Hecht et al., 2005, p. 261). CTI utilizes the idea that “the mutual interaction between an individual and society is reflected in identity” (Hecht et al., 2005, p. 260). To demonstrate how communication is innately connected to identity, CTI explains four layers of identity, which are interconnected at all times, representing personal identity, identity in
relationships, identity within and among groups, and identity of enactment (Hecht et al., 2005; Jung & Hecht, 2004). The personal layer defines the understanding of self, the relationship layer denotes a mutual formation of identity through communication in relationships, and the group layer explains influences on identity through shared group characteristics and common history. The last layer of performance or enactment of self is key to CTI because “identity is formed, maintained, and modified in a communicative process” (Hecht et al., 2005, pp. 261-262). In other words, identity is a reflection of communication, and communication in turn externally projects identity (Hecht et al., 2005). Thus, communication is found among all layers of identity and creates an interdependence which makes it impossible for the layers to be isolated from each other, even when contradictions and inconsistencies occur (Hecht et al., 2005).

The mention of possible contradiction brings up the notion of “identity gaps,” which are inconsistencies or contradictions that inevitably appear since people are rarely perfect in their communication and social relations (Jung & Hecht, 2004, p. 268). Much of this can be attributed to different points of reference and interpretations given individuals’ experiences or lack thereof (Jung & Hecht, 2004). If gaps occur in one shape or form in all communication and relationships, then a key challenge or opportunity lies in narrowing the identity gaps in communication to improve relationships and results (Jung & Hecht, 2004). As such, Jung & Hecht (2004) encourage that finding ways to further the reduction of identity gaps will significantly strengthen both the applied and scholarly aspects of CTI. The concept of authenticity as it relates to identity may play a role in achieving this.

From a credibility perspective as a leader, authentic communication through knowing yourself is essential since “leadership is a means of personal expression” (Kouzes & Posner, 2007, p. 48). Authenticity is a quality that a person innately expresses; it means being true to
one’s self, one’s identity; to be real and act genuinely in accordance with what one values and believes at the core (Vannini & Burgess, 2009; Vannini & Williams, 2009). Hitlin (2003) explains “we feel authentic when we behave in keeping with our values. Authenticity, in other words, reflects an activation of one’s personal identity” (p. 123). When we are true to our core, as set by a “guiding ideal” or “exemplary state,” then we can attain authentic identity (Ferraro, 2009, pp. 22 & 23). In other words, we need to walk the talk to bridge the gap between what is ideal and what is reality. Guilar (2008) explains, “In becoming authentic, we deepen our connections with others” (p. 7). The more we understand how our interactions with others, our messages, both verbal and nonverbal, affect our relationships, the more authentic we become (Guilar, 2008). Given this notion, perhaps a successful ecopreneur’s key to narrowing identity gaps as described by CTI, is the ability to find congruence among the four layers of identity through alignment and consistency with self, in relationships and groups, and in action?

Method and Data Analysis

Choosing Grounded Theory in accordance with Kathy Charmaz (2006) as a research strategy seemed a natural fit for this study because I wanted to first and foremost learn from role model ecopreneurs to find common themes of communication without starting with a set of pre-conceived notions. Grounded Theory originated with Glaser and Strauss (1967) to further the process of discovery of theory from data. I combined Grounded Theory together with an interview method, allowing for the gathering of “rich data.” They are ideal for comparison across exemplars, and provide more flexibility and focus than other strategies (Charmaz, 2006, p. 14). I chose an inductive method of qualitative interviewing to capture the data because it is especially useful to gain an understanding of views, opinions, ideas and experiences of individuals (Arksey & Knight, 1999). More specifically, I applied an “intensive” interviewing technique as I was
looking for in-depth examination and discovery of the ecopreneurs’ experiences and knowledge through careful reflection and description (Charmaz, 2006). Intensive interviews “explore a particular topic with individuals who have had the relevant experience,” a feature that distinguishes this type of interview technique from regular interviews (Charmaz, 2006, p. 25).

Because this study relied on role model ecopreneurs, the best case examples, I chose the exemplars through “purposive” sampling (Palys & Atchison, 2008) in accordance with a pre-determined criterion based on Willard’s (2005) five stages of sustainability: Stage one indicates that companies are at pre-compliance, not adhering to regulations; at stage two, companies reactively adhere to the law; at stage three companies move beyond compliance because they realize benefits of cost savings, community investment and social marketing, yet green initiatives are kept to specialized departments; at stage four, companies fully transform and rebrand themselves to include sustainability as part of their strategic focus and culture; and stage five companies are founded with triple bottom line values, the passion to make the world a better place, and a belief that it is the right thing to do. These are the so called “green-green” companies, “designed to be green in processes and products from scratch,” in comparison to stage four, where companies move to integrated green practices once they realize the benefits and advantages from a good business case perspective (Isaak, 2002, p. 82).

I decided to focus on successful and exemplary ecopreneurs across various industries in North America with emphasis on British Columbia, who are founding owners and leaders of their stage five, small to medium-sized organizations. To locate the majority of these role models, I looked to Vancouver-based Renewal Partners, who has a 15-year track-record in fostering ecopreneurship in North America. I invited 16 ecopreneurs to participate in this study through letters sent by email. Of those, only three did not respond; everyone else seemed eager to
share and contribute to this study. Based on initial literature review, I prepared an interview
guide with high-level, open-ended questions and probes to increase confidence and consistency
in the interview process. This made for a semi-structured interview format, which allowed for
“thick descriptions” of the exemplars’ “views, feelings, intentions, and actions” (Charmaz,
2006). Armed with a digital recorder (and recording consent), I captured the 45 to 90 minute
accounts of role model ecopreneurs through one-on-one interviews in person and over the phone
depending on geographical location, and subsequently transcribed all interviews. I started with
an initial set of four, transcribed the interviews, coded and categorized them, and noted some
early common themes that started to emerge in response to the research question. Based on the
initial findings, I refined my interview guide slightly and then repeated the process three times
with sets of three for a total sample size of 13 ecopreneurs. At that stage, I observed that I had
reached a “saturation” point because no additional key themes emerged and I did not learn
anything new that would add significant value to the key categories I chose (Charmaz, 2006, p.
113).

During the interview process, one exception occurred which distracted my focus slightly.
Even though the overall focus of my study centred on the learning from stage five ecopreneurs, I
was curious to learn from stage four ecopreneurs as well and therefore included three interviews
with stage four ecopreneurs as noted by the division line in Table 1. In addition, my research
strategy of Grounded Theory for assembling, organizing, and analyzing my data is based in
phenomenology. In other words, since I am the sole researcher for this study, I am presenting my
data analysis based on my personal perceptions and understandings of the information gathered
(Woodruff Smith, 2008). As such, there is the possibility of a natural occurring personal bias
through my interpretation of the data, in particular since as a consultant and contractor
specializing in working with ecopreneurs and non-profits, I had some preconceptions as to what the data might reveal. Following, Table 1 lists the 13 ecopreneurs interviewed for this thesis. In the next section, I present the findings of five groups of common attributes that emerged from the data.

Table 1

*List and Details of Exemplar Ecopreneurs*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ecopreneur</th>
<th>Company</th>
<th>Industry</th>
<th>Size</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sustainability Stage 5</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mickey McLeod</td>
<td>Salt Spring Coffee Co.</td>
<td>Organic Coffee</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>Salt Spring Island</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David Van Seters</td>
<td>SPUD</td>
<td>Online Retail Grocery</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>Vancouver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arran Stephens</td>
<td>Nature’s Path</td>
<td>Organic Food</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>Richmond</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madeleine Shaw</td>
<td>Lunapads International</td>
<td>Online Retail</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Vancouver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael Jantzi</td>
<td>Jantzi Research</td>
<td>Social Investment &amp; Analysis</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Toronto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judith Plant</td>
<td>New Society Publishers</td>
<td>Publishing</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Gabriola Island</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brian Schindel</td>
<td>Green Printer Online</td>
<td>Printing</td>
<td>4-5</td>
<td>Burnaby</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gil Yaron</td>
<td>Frogfile Office Essentials</td>
<td>Office Supplies</td>
<td>4-15</td>
<td>Vancouver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shannon Boase</td>
<td>Earthcycle Packaging Ltd.</td>
<td>Packaging</td>
<td>2-3</td>
<td>Vancouver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Florence Reed</td>
<td>Sustainable Harvest International</td>
<td>Non-profit</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>Maine, USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sustainability Stage 4</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eric Henry</td>
<td>TS Designs</td>
<td>Textile &amp; Printing</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>North Carolina, USA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Reading the transcribed stories and comments, and selecting the quotes thereafter made me feel inspired. In fact, it reinvigorated the feeling I got when I sat across from these individuals or listened to them over the phone during the interview process. Their language and tone was full of poise and confidence. They embody what they believe in. They give meaning to their actions. This was also evident by the emerging themes. I identified five themes or groups of attributes common across the exemplars. In this section, I introduce each group and present quotes for each segment to let the richness of the exemplar voices speak for themselves. The groups are as follows: Grounded by values and living by values; belief in cause and passion for cause; resolute in mission and consistent across mission; like-minded relationships and transparent relationships; learning for life and returning for life.

Attribute One: Grounded by Values and Living by Values

The most dominant theme depicted in the data set is a fundamental understanding and enactment of personal core values. Early influences and an innate sense of identifying with those values shaped an authentic and life-long concern for aligning personal core values with goals. Over time, the values became deeply rooted to a level that now espouses unwavering conviction in self and cause.

“For me, it’s been basically a lifetime of being a person concerned about environmental and social activities that surround us. As a teenager, I was influenced by the
alternative movement [environmentalism]. That set the stage for things I did throughout my life.

It does feel good to have been [in this business] early but it comes from an honest place. It didn’t come from a marketing angle. It comes from a true, honest place of having concerns about the people and the environment.

For me, running a triple bottom line business is natural – why would we do it any other way? There’s no other way of doing it.

It’s important to lead by example. By my doing it and showing and speaking those actions consistently – I think people appreciate that. I set the tone and I don’t give up.

You can’t put a spin on what we’re doing. It comes back to values and right fit. Time goes by and I know we need to get our message out better but I’m not going to compromise for some slick marketing angle to do that. It’s got to be the real thing.

It’s not about being the biggest but about being the best at what we do – that’s my goal. It’s about the quality of our coffee and sustaining our values.

I won’t compromise values for money but I will compromise money for values.

It satisfies me to help, knowing that I’ve been able to help other people improve their lives” (M. McLeod, personal communication, February 4, 2009).

“Our philosophy on social responsibility and sustainability has never been written in words. In the past, we just kind of did it because it was who we were – part of our values. But we just decided that it is time to share that because those values have been with us from the beginning.

Our mission in and of itself is the magnetism of our entire business. It really isn’t that hard – if it is part of your values then it will come through in your business – it will happen
organically. We lead by example and are true to who we are – being authentic” (M. Shaw, personal communication, February 10, 2009).

“I was born and raised on a sustainable farm that employed a lot of my father’s organic principles. When I was a boy I used to help my dad plant corn in the fields, and he used to tell me, ‘always leave the earth better than you found it.’ So if that isn’t a metaphor for life and conducting oneself in an ethical way, then nothing is.

When I was twenty-three, I went to India to think about right livelihood. When I came back after seven months, I started my own business. And the premise of that was to create right livelihood – a livelihood that would be in a respectful environment, would do some good to society, and help people improve their health and eating habits.

We have a great basis – a philosophical basis that underscores everything that we do in our company. I have a set of very strong personal values that I believe in and hopefully, the work is an outcome or expression of those values. If the values are not stemming from the person who calls the shots and runs the company, then how do you expect it’s going to percolate through the entire culture? It’s got to come from top down and from bottom up.

We were running our business according to the triple bottom line without knowing it. We didn’t know the term until the last few years and when we heard it, well it really made a lot of sense so we embraced it. Originally I just thought it was a right livelihood -- being respectful of people, helpful to your customers and doing something beneficial for the earth. And if you didn’t have a profitable enterprise you wouldn’t be in business for very long.
Ah well, I am not working as many hours anymore as I used to. That’s the only thing that has changed. I mean I am still the same individual, the person with the same values and ideals” (A. Stephens, personal communication, March 10, 2009).

“I have always been motivated by an interest in environmental stewardship. My professional interest has always been guided by doing something that has something related to environmental conservation or protection. I also had the mindset that within a capitalist society, the only thing that can make a change is changing the way the market operates. So I created a business that offered alternatives; a business structure that offered a different model, a different way of doing business. We follow a model called the triple bottom line. I wanted to affect change in the market place and that’s why I created Frogfile” (G. Yaron, personal communication, May 9, 2009).

“I do it because it’s intuitive -- because there is a problem, there is a solution, and the solution is a solution for much greater things than just finding the use for waste material. There is a social element to it and a much larger environmental aspect. So, intuitive is more of an umbrella term for so many pieces of this puzzle. It makes sense to me and it speaks to me. That’s what’s really intriguing about it and that’s what drives me” (S. Boase, personal communication, April 29, 2009).

“The printing business is part of my life and history. I grew up in it and I saw and came to understand the realities of the toxic environment and social health challenges early on -- employees with headaches, disposing of toxic chemicals down toilets and so on. I also had a long-time interest and concern for the environment through family relationships. So I wanted to clean up the printing industry” (B. Schindel, personal communication, February 19, 2009).
“The values part is such an integral part of our DNA. It is just such a core part of who we are that it infiltrates every single decision we make, whether expressly or not” (M. Jantzi, personal communication, June 5, 2009).

**Attribute Two: Belief in Cause and Passion for Cause**

The second emerging theme is that of true belief in and passion for the cause. The exemplars were first and foremost driven by something they believe in, that they are passionate about, and then they found a way to blend it with business. Motivated by meaningful work and guided by their values, they found a way to translate their passion and conviction into a workable business model.

“I never thought, maybe I’ll go and do something else. It just never occurred to either of us. So, we just hung in there. We just did it. We believe in it as if it could happen and as if it could work. We believe in the material that we publish. We are different from other publishers who are publishing to affect their bottom line. Yes, we have to pay attention to the bottom line but we are publishing material we believe in.

I think the books speak for themselves. The kind of books that we have selected and the kind of authors that we work with -- the niches that we travel in -- you can almost look at the books and see our perspectives reflected” (J. Plant, personal communication, May 1, 2009).

“Being a coffee lover, the entrepreneur in me was looking for something exciting to do so I started to really look into it and mix the desire and passion for coffee with business and values.

You’re looking at a producing country and you’re able to help them out. Magical to the consumer, coffee touches the lives of many, many people. And then the coffee itself
can be a vehicle to talk about sustainability, fair trade, and all those important values. It really is a powerful tool and it is interesting to watch the evolution of it. We were one of the first ones in Canada offering organic fair trade coffee and it all happened from a little island off the coast of British Columbia – and we were actually able to do that!” (M. McLeod, personal communication, February 4, 2009).

“What keeps me going is a belief in the mission – a desire to grow this business and prove that it’s a viable model -- to create the opportunities and options for people beyond just the lower mainland (G. Yaron, personal communication, May 9, 2009).

“I do what I do because I just love it! I love the end result! The other day I saw a song that one of the kids from the wilderness school had created to get into the program – and I thought this is why I do this – I do it so that opportunities like this exist” (T. Cormode, personal communication, February 6, 2009).

“We have a true passion for what we do and our message. And then there’s the obvious thing of having a high quality product with a great guarantee that we stand behind. If the product wasn’t any good then we wouldn’t be selling it.

It’s important you’re really passionate about what you do and the mission of the business. For us, that’s what has kept us going and things have worked out. Business is such a hard thing to do so if you’re just in it to make lots of money (unless that’s your only motivation) then it is hard to get through tough times” (M. Shaw, personal communication, February 10, 2009).

“When the whole movement of natural and organic foods began back in the sixties, my peers and I were all really young with long hair and really long ideas – we wanted to go
and change society. We were revolutionaries, you know, and people thought we were kind of crazy. Maybe we were, maybe that’s what it takes.

I think we provide a very valuable service, not only to our customers, but also to our people that work with us, and in a broader sense to the world itself because what we are doing is beneficial to the environment” (A. Stephens, personal communication, March 10, 2009).

“We felt in our heart and our gut that this is the right thing to do. It was very tough. At the time, [ten years ago], it was gutsy to spend money we didn’t have on sustainable technology but we were so committed. We simply think it’s the right way of doing things” (E. Henry, personal communication, May 6, 2009).

Attribute 3: Resolute in Mission and Consistent across Mission

The third theme revealed an unyielding commitment for the mission of the business or organization characterized by constant firmness and determination. The exemplars portrayed the ability to work hard, focus, and remain consistent in light of challenges or temptations, and showed the skill to follow through and persevere when bankruptcy is near, when customers challenge their actions, or when the good opinions of other people threaten to distract. I noticed how the tone of the voices of most exemplars heightened in sincerity as they spoke of these matters.

“You have to consider all steps along the way of business in order to be sustaining. It starts with production and goes all the way to the consumer. Each step of the way needs to be done correctly.

I am always trying to keep true to the course. I guess I’m the guy who is steadily moving forward – I just keep chugging. If there’s a problem, I find a way to fix it. If
challenges come by, I find a way to overcome them. Part of it is finding a very strong vision to do and run the business well. It’s a lot about my doing it and showing and speaking those actions on a regular basis and staying on course. Closing problem gaps quickly before they escalate – having systems for that -- it all helps with efficiency and trust. You could have all the values in the world, but if the operations are poor, then people aren’t going to be satisfied.

You really have to be prepared to put in the time. I was working 20 hours a day for the first couple of years. You really have to learn, figure things out and learn more. You need to dig deep and don’t take things for granted.

If you really want to do it, then you have to step up to the plate and actually do it. You cannot compromise. Or pick one piece and do that well. Stick to it and be clear about that one channel and do it well” (M. McLeod, personal communication, February 4, 2009).

“I’ve always been committed to the long-term – having a long-term vision. A lot of Western businesses are set up with the objective to sell out. But there is another paradigm and that’s to build it for generations. So our focus has not just been on the idealistic side of the business, but also on the bottom line and managing our cash flow and resources properly. So we did emphasize making a profit, but did not compromise our ideals” (A. Stephens, personal communication, March 10, 2009).

“I will go beyond the call of duty to support my team in achieving their endeavours.

You’ve got to persevere and believe. There have been numerous times when we’ve run tight with cash flow. But if I focus on worrying too much about that then I am not doing my job. So to do my job I need to focus on the job and persevere, and then these things work themselves out. I keep believing that we’ve got a great organization and I keep
working hard. I cannot lose focus” (T. Cormode, personal communication, February 6, 2009).

“We have created a mandate and are not wavering from it. We decided it had to be green, it had to be dynamic, and everything had to be online. We didn’t want to start out one way, with paperwork, documents, and everything else, and then have to switch it all over to another system later on. We have to stick to the mandate we’ve created for ourselves, and we have to always focus on our goal” (B. Schindel, personal communication, February 19, 2009).

“We are always trying to figure out how we can build on this model so that it will work for the long-term. Having this longer-term view has really helped us to always focus and push the status quo.

We often talk about the “SPUD” way which we often also equate to the hard way, because we always try to do more than any of our counterparts. We are always working hard, and trying to figure out how we can push the envelope” (D. Van Seters, personal communication, March 13, 2009).

“It’s about being consistent. When you get into this business you accept a lifestyle -- if you don’t believe, it will show through. I think it’s about ensuring that our product offers a consistent message. We are selling an environmentally responsible package. It wouldn’t make sense for me to drive a hummer -- it wouldn’t make sense for us to be in a big high-rise tower and having banks of people and computers. My clients tell me, ‘We buy from you because you’re so committed; you’re so passionate about it’” (S. Boase, personal communication, April 29, 2009).
“Social and environmental impact is so ingrained in our business now – it’s just part of how we operate. We are committed to the core” (E. Henry, personal communication, May 6, 2009).

“I am always trying to understand in a business what its real value is. I don’t mean value in dollars. I mean why it should exist, why it deserves to exist. So what is really the business cause? What’s the bigger thing in it?” (R. Safrata, personal communication, May 11, 2009).

Attribute Four: Like-minded Relationships and Transparent Relationships

A fourth emerging theme shows the importance of relationships; relationships with like-minded individuals, long-term relationships, as well as open and transparent relationships. The ecopreneurs placed a lot of emphasis on acknowledging that without nurturing and caring for people, from the supply chain to employees to customers and everyone in-between, they would not have gotten as far. It is interesting to note that many ecopreneurs described the necessity of being open and transparent in relationships as either a way of being authentic or trustworthy, or to build credibility. Some also said that being open and transparent helps educate employees and customers alike so that they can make better decisions.

“We engage in a discussion with our customers, people, and the general public. We talk about our products and why people have issues with their bodies. And we really love that discussion – we like to engage people in that conversation about what it is about being green and drawing a line in the sand.

We reflect on blog posts and ask our customers to comment. We encourage them to go back to original comments and comment on those.
We really try to communicate the big picture and the details to our employees so that they understand and can develop appreciation for the challenges of running a business. It makes them feel a little bit more bought into what we’re doing. It also empowers them to make good business decisions, because they’re the ones who get the inquiries from people about donations, free product and advertising.

Our relationships with our customers are more like a conversation. We know about their lives, what they’re doing, and what they’re feeling. A sense of community around our customers, suppliers and partners is very important” (M. Shaw, personal communication, February 10, 2009).

“When we interview people we always ask them about what they think about organic and fair trade, their attitude, to find out about their values. It is much easier if people understand and believe in what we’re all about. If you don’t get the right people on the team, then instead of moving forward you’re stuck in debate.

To gain more trust and respect from my employees it’s been important for me to be more respectful of people and trying to set a better example of how to move forward and just communicating with people of why we’re doing something and the importance of doing it. Not just saying ‘let’s do it,’ but communicating the reasons of why we’re doing it.” (M. McLeod, personal communication, February 4, 2009).

“We always try to remove barriers that may exist between different departments and we have pretty good open communication. We put a concerted effort into being transparent and improving two-way communication.

We have a very passionate, very loyal group of customers. I think one of the things that has drawn them to our brand is that they feel we are very authentic. They appreciate
our commitment and our dedication to organic. We always try to share our values and they trust them.

We wouldn’t be anywhere without our staff, our sales associates, our people. It’s one big virtuous circle. We wouldn’t be in business if it weren’t for the farmers, and none of us would be here if it wasn’t for the bounty of the earth. About a year ago, we bought our first organic farms in Saskatchewan. Not to cut out the farmers but to actually embrace them. So we partnered up with two organic farm families in the region to actually farm the land, and then we’d do a crop sharing. They’d take two-thirds of the crop and we would take one third of the crop and then buy the rest. It’s been a happy relationship thus far.

So taking care of all the people involved, from suppliers to customers to your employees – you have to take care of them – they make your company run” (A. Stephens, personal communication, March 10, 2009).

“The biggest and the best way we have grown and still do is through customer referrals. Building that trust through consistency and a more interactive approach has been key for us. And of course, we do all kinds of things like participating in local community events, doing cross promotions with online networking groups and such.

I feel we have been able to attract a high calibre of staff members because of our social mission” (D. Van Seters, personal communication, March 13, 2009).

“I think one of the key factors to our success has been the long-term nature of the assistance and the focus on hiring local people, and just the human interactions of connecting our US staff with our Central American staff and the families and the supporters here in the US. Either giving them the opportunity to directly see the work...
that’s been happening or doing the best job to convey the work to them through words and pictures” (F. Reed, personal communication, May 25, 2009).

“We found so many advocates along the way. Our interests in renewable energy, community gardens and what have you – it connects us to the community in a different way. People want to do business with us not just because of our products but also because of the way we do business.

We hire people who can do the job but also who understand what we do. We get a lot of good quality people because of how we do our business” (E. Henry, personal communication, May 6, 2009).

“In our office, we have tried to work on the philosophy that if you can’t hire family, you make the people you work with family. We cultivate the kind of relationships where we care about each other’s lives. So we have the motto in our office that family is first, work is second. For example, if people need to deal with sick children or an ill parent, they don’t need to take the day off without pay.

The publishing business is all about relationships. It’s truly the case. The customer comes first all the time. At least the customer will think that’s the case. In fact, the staff comes first. But our suppliers as well” (J. Plant, personal communication, May 1, 2009).

“I am really big into truth. Truth in advertising, truth in fairness, and truth in everything you do. It’s how I manage my relationships with my employees, with my investors, with my customers. People know when you’re lying and people know when you’re untruthful – you’ll fail” (S. Boase, personal communication, April 29, 2009).

“For us to achieve a more consistent environment, it does require significant partnership to work together to make those things happen. I believe a huge part of
sustainability is partnerships and collaboration. We listen and we spend a lot of time with our community partners to find out what their needs are and working more effectively towards achieving a common goal.

I think that long-term impact requires a good and consistent message that gets sent to our team that this is the way we operate. We want to give staff the ability to be independent thinkers, give them the ability to do what’s necessary for the best interest of the organization, and allow them to do it in a way that feels right. For us this contributes enormously to our success because we have the team that wants to be there because of that. They like the fact that there is some free reign there to have those opportunities. I don’t need to know where they are. If they are not there then I know they are doing what they need to be doing – I trust them. Trust is huge and one of our main values. I believe this also defines long-term impact” (T. Cormode, personal communication, February 6, 2009).

**Attribute Five: Learning for Life and Returning for Life**

The fifth and last common theme that emerged among the ecopreneurs interviewed was their continuous drive for personal growth and improvement and their urge to educate and share with others. They periodically expressed that when leading sustainable businesses, it is important to always educate people and share with them so they understand the significance of actions. I observed during the interviews that most ecopreneurs were very keen to teach me more about their practices and history of their respective industries. It was fascinating to watch them do so with utter poise and expertise. The recurring words were, “research, you have to do your homework, you need to know the facts, and you have to look beyond the first layer if you want to survive this way of business.” They were also very forthright in talking about their personal learning curves along the way, and some of the personal leadership and management challenges
they encountered. I felt a strong sense of personal accountability and responsibility coming from all of them. I also felt they were highly aware of their strengths and weaknesses and constantly trying to improve their abilities to reach the next level of personal and professional development.

“It’s been a huge learning curve for me. I had to learn how to be a manager and owner. That was certainly a challenge for me. I have always been self-motivated and driven by passion. So there was no problem on a personal level but I had to learn how to draw that out in others.

The beauty is now when I’ve got an idea, I throw my idea out there and there are different sets of people with years of experience and different expertise so they can bring their perspectives to the table; a great filter. One of the things I did in the past was pile too many things onto the plate all at once and people simply can’t deal with all of that. That’s the classic entrepreneur way of doing things. So I’m learning how to do that better. And having this group to help make decisions is great. It feels so much more of a relief to have that.

I want to do more public speaking to continue to grow as a person and be able to share. I think it is important. I think I can do a lot” (M. McLeod, personal communication, February 4, 2009).

“We informally mentor tons of fledgling women entrepreneurs. If we can be supporting other women in enterprise and make capitalism work for them, that gets us excited” (M. Shaw, personal communication, February 10, 2009).

“What distinguishes us from other businesses is that we educate, and we provide awareness and alternatives. We don’t just want to sell office supplies” (G. Yaron, personal communication, May 9, 2009).
“Any kind of resistance that comes from employees is because they don’t really understand. So I think the training we do really helps. We present information that speaks to the values that are most common to people, things that help them understand why what we do is applicable to their area. We help them understand how important their contribution is.

We felt that our biggest role would be that of educators, because there was so much ignorance with respect to organic and natural foods.

We are doing what we can to educate farmers, policy makers, and the public” (A. Stephens, personal communication, March 10, 2009).

“Sustainability is a journey not a destination. We had to spend a lot of time on making people understand that our product is not more expensive because we are making more money but because we’re measuring external costs that typical businesses in the textile industry didn’t have to measure, i.e., the social costs of outsourcing and laying off people, or the environmental costs of shipping stuff all over the globe” (E. Henry, personal communication, May 6, 2009).

“We were the first one on the market, and everyone now asks our competitors how they compare to us. It makes me feel really good because it tells me that I have done my job right. I hope that I have educated my customers and the industry enough so that they know the questions to ask my competitors” (S. Boase, personal communication, April 29, 2009).

“I have a presentation of my philosophy that I now go out with and teach to businesses. I speak to them in their language. I speak to them in a business person’s
language and that way I can teach them that doing all those green things simply makes good business sense.

I had to keep trying to find ways to get people to understand from their hearts. That meant listening—listening with empathy and responding to their fears, their anxieties, and their excitement. I had to start with stage one to allow them to understand what I understood about the environment, and what I was doing” (R. Safrata, personal communication, May 11, 2009).

Discussion

Communicating through Authentic Identify

The more we understand who we are at the core, our identity, and the more we are aware of how our experiences are influencing our identity, the more accountable we can be for our actions, and the more objective we can be in our relationships (Covey, 1989). Vannini and Burgess (2009) argue that while we are all self-aware to some extent, the degree and accuracy of our self-awareness will differ. The ecopreneurs studied demonstrated an extremely high level of awareness of their self as expressed by the five common groups of attributes and the quotes given. They have clear and deeply rooted values that are coupled with sincere passion for their cause and unwavering commitment for their mission. They understand the importance of relationships and that nurturing relationships is a key factor in contributing to their success. Furthermore, they are not afraid of transparency in all their interactions. They have a need for continuous growth and improvement, and at the same time want to share their experience and knowledge with others because educating and giving back is important to them. In addition, they are self-motivated and driven by meaning. Ultimately, they strive to make a positive contribution
beyond their existence. I would argue then that these five groups of common attributes shape a larger concept of *authentic identity*.

*The Role of Identity*

The Communication Theory of Identity provides an interpretive framework of how identity relates to the study’s findings and how the findings in turn, lend support to the premise of CTI. The findings revealed that the role model ecopreneurs continuously strive to make their actions align consistently across the four levels of identity: alignment with themselves, in relationships, within and across stakeholder groups, and in their daily execution. What is apparent from the findings as they relate to identity is that the ecopreneurs’ business or organization is actually a reflection of themselves. Their life’s work to establish and sustain their business or organization is consistently in line with who they are as individuals, what is important to them, and how they can best share it with the rest of the world. Hitlin (2003) says that it is a commitment to our values that shapes our personal identity. The more the ecopreneurs’ develop their businesses or organizations, the more it reaffirms who they are at the core, and the more it forms their identity because they have to walk the talk in every decision they make and every action they take. Therefore, and as seen with the examplars, they take careful steps to ensure they are aligned with the four levels of identity. They ensure their business or organization aligns with their core values, they take every opportunity when building relationships with others to share their ideals, passion, and knowledge, they hold themselves accountable across all stakeholder groups, and they do not deviate from their course. Most importantly, because their business or organization is a reflection of who they truly are, and not a separate entity, they strive to make every decision at every level consistent. They not only do it because it is the right thing to do, but because it is truly the only way they know how to do it.
The Role of Authenticity

As introduced in the literature review and as the data reveals, authenticity as part of the exemplar ecopreneur’s personal identity is significant and I would say inseparable. According to Guilar (2008), the Greek roots of the word authenticity translate to self and teaching oneself or others. The high awareness of self and the need for learning and returning for life are evident in the findings, as are the qualities of self-motivation and meaning, which according to Weigert (2009), are also indications of authenticity. Furthermore, the role model ecopreneurs emphasized the importance of nurturing their relationships as a key success factor, which Buber (1965) says is integral to achieving an authentic self. He contemplates that we all have the possibility to attain authentic human existence through continuous self-discovery and invention, and through the help we as individuals give each other in our relationships. These findings are consistent with George’s (2003) idea of authentic leadership. The attributes he lists include leading with purpose, meaning, and values, being consistent and self-disciplined in all actions, being unwilling to compromise on values, and being dedicated to lifelong personal growth. He says authentic leaders “are more interested in empowering the people they lead to make a difference than they are in power, money, or prestige for themselves” (George, 2003, p. 12).

Narrowing Identity Gaps through Authentic Identity

Jung and Hecht (2004) encourage that finding ways to further the reduction of identity gaps will significantly strengthen both the applied and scholarly aspects of the Communications Theory of Identity. The finding of the overarching theme of authentic identity as the essence of how successful ecopreneurs communicate furthers CTI because it shows how it is possible for ecopreneurs to narrow identity gaps. Vannini and Burgess (2009) explain that knowing ourselves means recognizing when our actions align or contradict who we are and what we stand for. The
more we are aware, the more alignment we can achieve, and the more chance we have to affirm
and be true to our identity. They believe that without this level of awareness, the experience of
authenticity does not exist. Successful ecopreneurs then, have the awareness, ability and
willingness to constantly strive to remove contradictions and inconsistencies to narrow identity
gaps across the four layers of identity. They strive for congruence through seamless alignment of
identity in all interactions. The more consistency they achieve, the smaller the gap, and the closer
they get to having authentic identity as a means to communicate for success.

Recommendation for Further Study

My study, analysis, and discussion centred on the learning of stage five ecopreneurs. However, I did include three interviews with stage four ecopreneurs. Judging by the three
interviews conducted, the only major difference appeared to be that of the original motivation for
running a TBL business. Stage four ecopreneurs seemed to initially get into it because it made
good business sense. Further studies would need to be conducted with stage four ecopreneurs to
confirm this notion. In addition, I would emphasize that my study focused solely on successful
ecopreneurs, some of the best case scenarios. In order to add to my findings and further the
understanding of how we can foster ecopreneurship, I would agree with Schaper (2005), it is
necessary to also disseminate the stories and lessons learned from those would-be ecopreneurs
that were unsuccessful in getting their businesses off the ground.

Recommendation and Conclusion

At the end of each interview, I asked the exemplars what they would recommend to
aspiring ecopreneurs. Their answers confirmed what they already revealed in their accounts and
the five groups of common attributes that consequently emerged and formed the overarching
theme of authentic identity. In order to achieve authentic identity, ecopreneurs must fully
understand and live by their values, they need to believe in the cause and be absolutely passionate about it, they need to walk the talk consistently and with focus and conviction, they need to cultivate like-minded, transparent and long-lasting relationships, and lastly, they need to aspire to constantly learn and grow, and share their knowledge with others. Kouzes and Posner (2007) say, “The instrument of leadership is the self, and mastery of the art of leadership comes from mastery of the self” (p. 344). As reiterated numerous times by various exemplars, ecopreneurs must always do more research, they must always work harder and do their homework, and they can never neglect to peel back several layers to see what is underneath. Just as Vannini and Burgess (2009) argue, we are all self-aware to some extent but the level varies. As this study shows, the more we can strive to increase our awareness, the better able we are to narrow our identity gaps, and the closer we get to achieving authentic identity. Aspiring ecopreneurs must therefore strive for congruence among the four layers of identity, to continuously and consistently develop the understanding of themselves, their relationships with individuals and groups, and their actions.

Over 98 percent of companies in North America are small to medium-sized businesses and only a fraction of those are TBL businesses run by stage five ecopreneurs as studied in this thesis. Most of these businesses have neither the “money or resources, nor the time to adequately share their sustainability expertise and stories, even if they are exemplary. They need help” (Willard, 2005, p. 7). Therefore and as established by this study, understanding ecopreneurs and their practices, and adding to the scarce body of academic literature on ecopreneurship are critical because ecopreneurship, in light of the alarming economic and environmental outlook, is establishing itself as a considerable area of business activity and influence for a sustainable
future (Schaper, 2005). To end this discussion it would only be appropriate to leave the final words to one of the early pioneers and leaders of ecopreneurship in Canada:

Believe in what you’re doing, make sure you’re honest with yourself, pursue something that’s important to you, and surround yourself with smart, like-minded people. The bottom line for me is that I can’t imagine going through life not enjoying what I do. I mean, I just love this. I love being an entrepreneur, I love being in a business that aligns my values with what I’m doing on a daily basis, I love the fact that we’re making a difference, I love the fact that we’re able to make a difference and do well financially, and I love the fact that we can prove that a social purpose business can be successful. (M. Jantzi, personal communication, June 5, 2009)
References


