Overview of Research and Findings

This project uses a longitudinal case study of a global social enterprise, Digital Divide Data (DDD), to examine how integrative leadership is enacted in hybrid organizations that have multiple, conflicting identities. DDD seeks to break the cycle of poverty in Southeast Asia by hiring disadvantaged Cambodians and Laotians into a business that provides IT outsourcing services to clients in the United States and abroad. The organization thus has a hybrid identity (Albert and Whetten, 1985); it is both a business seeking profits and growth and a mission-driven organization seeking to have a social impact on the lives of disadvantaged people. To be successful, their leadership faces the challenge of integrating across both their social and financial identities.

To explore how DDD’s leaders simultaneously enact both their social and financial identities, we collected and analyzed data from interviews, observations and archival data. We interviewed 24 DDD board members and senior managers, which we tape recorded and transcribed. We observed two meetings; a meeting of DDD’s North American management team (September 2009) and a meeting of DDD’s Board of Governors (June 2010). We further collected over 900 pages of archival documents including 15 board packets of about 40 pages each distributed to board members prior to their meetings, 20 internal strategic planning documents, and 13 external and marketing and communications documents, including newspaper articles, book excerpts, case studies, and website materials.

We find that DDD board members and senior managers experienced the organization’s social and financial identities as in tension, but that over time they learned to accept these tensions and developed strategies for pursuing the organization’s dual objectives. In the language of paradox theory, they came to see the social and financial elements of the organization’s identity as paradoxical—simultaneously in tension and in harmony (Lewis, 2000) Tensions between DDD as a business and DDD as a mission-driven organization manifest in two areas. First, there were tensions of strategic growth, between exploiting current operations by improving performance in existing locations and exploring future opportunities that would allow the organization to bring its social mission to new locations. Second, there were tensions of strategic implementation, between attending to social objectives by hiring disadvantaged employees and managers and attending to financial objectives by hiring employees and managers with higher skills who could help improve organizational efficiency.

DDD leaders responded to these tensions with an integrative approach. They accepted the underlying conflict between the elements of the organization’s identity, but they also attended to and resolved specific challenges that arose in the course of making decisions about strategic growth and strategic implementation. To do so, they displayed flexibility in the way that they
linked DDD’s hybrid identity with particular strategic decisions. That is, decisions could be framed as advancing the social mission identity at one point in time or by some subset of actors, and framed as advancing the business identity at a later point in time or by a different subset of actors. We call this process *identity adaptability*. Identity adaptability seems to emerge through a set of learning and problem solving behaviors. DDD board members and senior managers connect a particular identity element with a particular decision, but then adapt this connection by exploring, experimenting and reflecting.

Our research has several implications for understanding integrative leadership. First, our research explores integrative leadership in the context of paradoxical identities, and it articulates the challenges of attending to contradictory, yet interrelated identities. We find that in hybrid organizations such as DDD, leaders benefit from attending to the organization’s multiple identities simultaneously, and yet doing so raises tensions, conflicts, inconsistencies and complexity. DDD leaders do not resolve the underlying tensions, but rather accept and engage them. We thereby contribute to research on paradoxes and integrative leadership by suggesting that effectively attending to synergies simultaneously involves recognizing and attending to distinctions and conflicts. Second, our model of identity adaptability suggests that engaging tensions involves dynamic strategies. In contrast to literature that explores how hybrid identity organizations attend to a specific incident, our longitudinal data allows us to understand how leaders are adaptable and flexible in response to immediate challenges, while maintaining their commitment to the underlying tensions.

Center for Integrative Leadership funds have been used to cover the costs of interview transcription and travel to the research site.

**Work Products to Date**


**Next Steps and Additional Work Products Expected**

- Oct/Nov 2010 - Collect additional data
  - Observe board meeting in Cambodia
  - Obtain additional archival documents
  - Conduct second round of interviews with DDD Board of Governors and managers
- Winter 2010/2011 - Refine emergent theoretical model
- Spring 2011 - Write research paper and submit to top-ranked management journals for publication
- Fall 2011 - Extend research on integrative leadership to a broader sample of hybrid organizations
Work Cited
