

July 2009

## Authentic Identity: The Essence of How Successful “Ecopreneurs” Communicate

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### Recommended Citation

Schauch, Chantal B. (2009) "Authentic Identity: The Essence of How Successful “Ecopreneurs” Communicate," *The Journal of Values-Based Leadership*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 2 , Article 3.

Available at: <http://scholar.valpo.edu/jvbl/vol2/iss2/3>

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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.*

— Mickey McLeod, February 4, 2009

## **Authentic Identity: The Essence of How Successful “Ecopreneurs” Communicate**

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### **Introduction**

According to a recent report commissioned by the Suzuki Foundation in 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 traditional “bottom line” of maximizing profits. Fostering the long-term development of their people and organizations is critical for continuous adaptation to the

changing environment, thereby enhancing the ability to 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 John Elkington (1997) argued twelve years ago. To be considered sustainable, companies need substantial performance shifts using "triple bottom line" (TBL) metrics, a concept that supports the three dimensions of economic, social, and environmental values (Dixon & Clifford, 2007; Elkington, 1997; Henriques & Richardson, 2004).

## **The New Entrepreneur**

Enter the "ecopreneur." Unlike archetype entrepreneurs motivated predominantly by the bottom line, ecopreneurs are basically entrepreneurs who aspire to grow profitable, sustainable businesses while changing the world through quality improvement of life and environment (Dixon & Clifford, 2007; Linnanen, 2002). Ecopreneurs are particularly well suited to act both as role models and catalysts of change because they take proactive steps towards triple bottom line practices.

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 Bob Willard (2002) explains in *The Sustainability Advantage*, 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.

## **Authentic Identity**

This qualitative study relied on identifying exemplary ecopreneurs in various industries across North America – with particular 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 individual journeys, 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 Jim Kouzes' and Barry 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 enterprises plays a considerable role in this endeavour, and assisting aspiring ecopreneurs to do so is critical.

## **Developing Identity**

The study of ecopreneurs and ecopreneurship is a relatively young discipline which emerged in the 1990s (Shaltegger, 2002; Schaper, 2002), and only gaining true momentum in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century with authors, such as Robert Isaak (2002), Lassi Linnanen (2002), Stefan Schaltegger (2002), Michael Schaper (2002), and Liz Walley and David 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). In addition, and maybe through the recommendations and works of Michael Schaper (2005), practical guides for ecopreneuring and case studies are emerging, five of which are presented in his work. Nonetheless, this review of the literature reveals and supports David Gibbs' (2009) critique that "it is heavy on speculation and extremely light on empirical evidence." It also confirms his 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 understand human thought and action (Jung & Hecht, 2004). The Oxford English 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). Yael 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 Steven Hitlin (2003) explains is something individuals experience as fundamental or distinctive to their being. Further, Hitlin notes that what we consistently think about over time is what makes up our personal identity. Joshua Guilar (2008) is more explicit in this notion by saying "people become who they are through communication" (2008, p. 7). Eura Jung and Michael 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 1990s in an attempt to integrate communication in the study of identity (Hecht, Warren, Jung, & Krieger 2005; Jung & Hecht, 2004). This theory 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 & Michael 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). Steven 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. Joshua 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. 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). 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 exemplars were chosen in accordance with a pre-determined criterion based on Bob 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 the 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. I started to interview in batches of four, and after interviewing a total sample size of 13 ecopreneurs, 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 (Charmaz, 2006, p. 113).

During the interview process, one exception occurred which distracted my focus slightly. Even though the overall focus of the study centered 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, particularly since I am a consultant and contractor specializing in working with ecopreneurs and had some preconceptions as to what the data might reveal. Table 1 lists the 13 ecopreneurs interviewed for this study. 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**

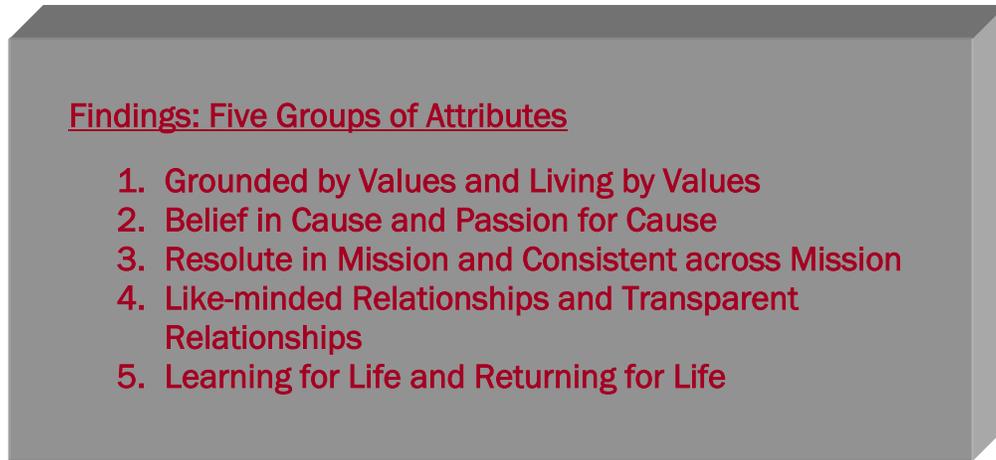
Ecopreneur	Company	Industry	Size	Location
<b>Sustainability Stage 5</b>				
Boase, Shannon	Earthcycle Packaging Ltd.	Alternative Packaging	2-5	Vancouver, BC
McLeod, Mickey	Salt Spring Coffee Co.	Organic Coffee	80	Salt Spring Island, BC
Jantzi, Michael	Jantzi Research Inc.	Social Investment & Analysis	25	Toronto, ON
Plant, Judith	New Society Publishers	Publishing	11	Gabriola Island, BC
Reed, Florence	Sustainable Harvest International	Non-profit	60	Maine, USA
Schindel, Brian	Green Printer Online	Printing	4-5	Burnaby, BC
Shaw, Madeleine	Lunapads International	Online Retail	6	Vancouver, BC
Stephens, Arran	Nature's Path	Organic Food	400	Richmond, BC
Van Seters, David	SPUD	Online Retail Grocery	200	Vancouver, BC
Yaron, Gil	Frogfile Office Essentials	Office Supplies	4-15	Vancouver, BC
<b>Sustainability Stage 4</b>				
Cormode, Tim	Power To Be Adventure Therapy Society	Non-profit	6-10	Victoria, BC
Henry, Eric	TS Designs	Textile & Printing	22	North Carolina, USA
Safrata, Robert	Novex Delivery Solutions	Freight Services	125	Richmond, BC

### **Findings: Five Attributes**

The transcribed stories and comments and the quotes selected thereafter were inspiring. The language and tone of the interviewees were full of poise and confidence. They embody their beliefs and give meaning to their actions. This was evidenced by the emerging themes. Five groups of common attributes (themes) were identified across the exemplars. This section

introduces each group and presents quotes for each segment to demonstrate the richness of character.

**Table 2: Identification of Common Attributes**



***1. Attribute One: Grounded by Values and Living by Values***

The most dominant theme derived from the data collected pertains to 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. [...] I won't compromise values for money but I will compromise money for values.*

— Mickey McLeod, February 4, 2009

*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.*

— Madeleine Shaw, 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.[...] 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.*

— Arran Stephens, March 10, 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.*

— Shannon Boase, April 29, 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 no.*

Michael Jantzi, June 5, 2009

## ***2. 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 these ecopreneurs truly believed in and that they were passionate about, and ultimately found a way to blend it with business. Motivated by meaningful work and guided by their values, they found a way to translate their passions and convictions 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.*

— Judith Plant, 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!*

— Mickey McLeod, 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.*

— Gil Yaron, 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.*

— Tim Cormode, February 6, 2009

*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.*

— Madeleine Shaw, 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.*

— Arran Stephens, 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.*

— Eric Henry, May 6, 2009

### ***3. Attribute Three: 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 loomed, customers would challenge their actions, or others' opinions threatened to distract. 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. [...] 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.*

— Mickey McLeod, 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.*

— Arran Stephens, March 10, 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.*

— Brian Schindel, February 19, 2009

*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.*

— David Van Seters, 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.'*

— Shannon Boase, 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.*

— Eric Henry, May 6, 2009

#### ***4. 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 progressed to their respective points of achievement. 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 simply to build credibility. Some also said that being open and transparent helps educate employees and customers alike so that they can make better decisions.

*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. [...] 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.*

— Madeleine Shaw, 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.*

— Mickey McLeod, 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. 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.*

— Arran Stephens, March 10, 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.*

— Florence Reed, 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.*

— Eric Henry, 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.*

—Judith 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.*

— Shannon Boase, 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 common goals. [...] 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.*

— Tim Cormode, February 6, 2009

## ***5. 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. [...] 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.*

— Mickey McLeod, 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.*

— Madeleine Shaw, 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.*

— Gil Yaron, 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.*

— Arran Stephens, 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.*

— Eric Henry, 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.*

— Shannon Boase, 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.*

— Robert Safrata, May 11, 2009

## **Communicating through Authentic Identity**

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). Phillip Vannini and Sarah 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 experiences 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 the daily execution of their activities and business operations. What is apparent from the findings as they relate to identity is that the ecopreneurs' businesses or organizations are actually a reflection of themselves. Their life's work to establish and sustain their businesses or organizations is consistently in line with whom they are as individuals, what is important to them, and how they can best share it with the rest of the world. Steven 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 identities because they have to walk the talk in every decision made and action taken. The exemplars have elected to take careful steps to ensure they are aligned with the four levels of identity. They ensure that their businesses or organizations align 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, most profoundly, they do not deviate from their course. Most importantly, because their businesses or organizations are reflections of who they truly are, they strive to make every decision at every level consistent. They not only pursue this type of uniformity in decision-making 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 has revealed, *authenticity* as part of the exemplar ecopreneur's personal identity is significant and ostensibly inseparable. According to Joshua Guilar (2008), the Greek etymology of "authenticity" translates 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 Andrew Weigert (2009), are also indications of authenticity. Furthermore, the ecopreneurs emphasized the importance of nurturing their relationships as a key success factor, which Martin 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 Bill 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 demonstrating a dedication to lifelong personal growth. 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**

Eura Jung and Michael 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. Phillip Vannini and Sarah Burgess (2009) explain that knowing ourselves means recognizing when our actions align or contradict who we are and for what we stand. A greater sense of awareness enables better alignment and multiplies the chances 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, possess the requisite 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 are to using authentic identity as a successful means to communicate.

## **Recommendation for Further Study**

My study, analysis, and discussion have centered on the learning of stage five ecopreneurs. However, I did include three interviews with stage four ecopreneurs. The only difference seemed to be that they did not originally start out as TBL businesses or organizations. Further studies need to be conducted with stage four ecopreneurs to confirm this notion. Additionally, this study is limited in scope as it focused solely on successful ecopreneurs — some of the best case scenarios. To supplement this research and further the understanding of how ecopreneurship can be fostered, it is necessary to also disseminate the stories and lessons learned from those would-be ecopreneurs who were unsuccessful in launching their businesses (Schaper, 2005).

## **Recommendation and Conclusion**

At the end of each interview, the exemplars were queried as to how they would advise aspiring ecopreneurs. Their answers confirmed what they already revealed in their accounts which embodied 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. “The instrument of leadership is the self, and mastery of the art of leadership comes from mastery of the self” (Kouzes and Posner, 2007, p. 344). As reiterated by various exemplars, ecopreneurs must always conduct more research and always work harder and do their homework; they can never neglect to peel back several layers to see what is underneath. Just as Phillip Vannini and Sarah Burgess (2009) argue, we are all self-aware to some extent, but the levels vary. As this study shows, the more we can strive to increase our awareness, the better able we are to narrow our identity gaps and to achieve 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 revealed by this research. 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). 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). As one of the early pioneers and leaders of ecopreneurship in Canada opined:

*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.*

— Michael Jantzi, June 5, 2009

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## **Author Biography**

Chantal Schauch, MA, BCom, is a social entrepreneur, communications consultant, and Founder and President of ImmerseUs Communications in Vancouver, British Columbia ([www.immerseus.com](http://www.immerseus.com)).

Specializing in strategic communications, network cultivation, partner relations, and project management, she works with select entrepreneurs, businesses and non-profit organizations on ventures and initiatives for social and environmental change. Chantal has extensive communications experience in a variety of industries including financial services, insurance, venture cap, sustainable packaging, post-secondary education, personal development, and non-profit. One of her current highlight engagements is the network cultivation across Greater

Vancouver for the Robert Bateman Centre at Royal Roads University and associated sustainability initiatives. Prior to founding her own company, Chantal held positions with PricewaterhouseCoopers, CIBC World Markets, Travel Underwriters, and the Thomas Group of Companies, including LifePilot.

With a core value of learning for life, Chantal holds a Master of Arts degree in Professional Communication from Royal Roads University, a Bachelor of Commerce degree in International Business with Distinction from the University of Victoria, a Marketing Management Certificate in Public Relations with Honours from the British Columbia Institute of Technology, and the Canadian Securities Course Certificate.

As an active member of her community, Chantal is the Executive Director for LifePilot, a member of the Board of Directors with Power to Be Adventure Therapy Society, and has been a member of the nominations committee for the Courage to Come Back Awards since 2008. Chantal was a member of the Management Committee for the Todd Thomas Institute for Values-Based Leadership at Royal Roads University in 2008, and served on the Board of Directors of the Vancouver Chamber Choir in 2005 and 2006.