Identity Workspaces:
The Case of Business Schools

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We introduce the concept of identity workspaces, *defined as institutions that provide a holding environment for individuals' identity work. We propose that institutions offering reliable social defenses, sentient communities, and vital rites of passage are likely to be experienced as identity workspaces. The fluidity of contemporary corporate environments and the movement toward individually driven careers has generated an increased need for identity work, while concurrently rendering corporations less reliable as spaces in which to conduct it. As a result, we posit that business schools are increasingly invested with the function of identity workspaces. The conceptual framework presented here provides a lens to better understand how and why business schools are called upon to fulfill a function of growing importance—developing management education that goes beyond influencing what managers know and do, and supports them in understanding and shaping who they are.*

Over the last decade, management scholars have engaged in significant debate about the purpose of business schools, with some expressing substantial concerns about the values held by these schools (Gioia, 2002); their theories (Starkey & Tempest, 2005); and their pedagogical methods (Donaldson, 2002; Ghoshal, 2005), as well as about their impact on graduates' careers (Pfeffer & Fong, 2002). The master's of business administration (MBA), the most popular of business degrees, has come under particular scrutiny (Bennis & O'Toole, 2005; Gosling & Mintzberg, 2004; *Management Learning*, Sept. 2007), and executive education courses are receiving increasing attention (*Academy of Management Learning & Education*, Sept. 2007). In his comprehensive study of the evolution of business schools, Khurana (2007) notes that "the times seem ripe for reopening the question of what exactly this institution is for, what functions we as a society want it to perform, and how well it is performing them" (5). Our work here addresses this question by highlighting an as yet unarticulated function that business schools can and do fulfill: hosting participants' identity work.

We begin by introducing the concept of *identity workspace*, defined as an institution that provides a "holding environment" (Winnicott, 1975) for identity work. In developing this concept, we draw on and establish a bridge between two conceptual and empirical research streams: the literature on identity work in sociology, social psychology, and organizational behavior, and the literature on systems psychodynamics. We suggest that individuals are likely to invest an institution with the function of an identity workspace when it provides a coherent set of reliable social defenses, sentient communities, and vital rites of passage. These three mutually reinforcing elements allow an institution to be experienced as a holding environment, that is, a social context that reduces disturbing affect and facilitates sense making, by individuals engaged in the pursuit of identity stabilization (consolidating an existing identity) or in identity transition (acquiring a new one). Second, we argue that the identity workspace concept can be harnessed to understand the relatedness between corporations, managers, and business schools. We posit that business schools have been drawn to occupy a widening psychological distance between corporations and their employ-

ees—a distance created by profound changes in psychological contracts underpinning work relations. As the commitment between corporations and individuals becomes increasingly transient and instrumental, it is harder for the former to be relied on as identity workspaces. As a result, managers working in fluid and unstable sectors are likely to entrust business schools with the task of providing alternative identity workspaces.

The conceptualization of business schools as identity workspaces complements traditional views of business schools as producers and disseminators of managerial knowledge. As they continue to serve the functions more traditionally associated with them, we argue that business schools also serve as identity workspaces for an increasing number of managers. In articulating this function, we aim to provide a conceptual instrument to better understand the expectations, needs, and experiences of a growing number of participants in management education. Our work here contributes to a burgeoning body of literature that draws attention to the emotional and processual aspects of management learning and education, and presents them as inextricably linked to managers' identities. The conceptualization and argument presented here hold practical relevance for business school instructors, administrators, and participants. All can benefit from recognizing and understanding why identity work is a legitimate motivation for—and for some individuals a paramount aspect of—attending a business school course.

IDENTITY WORK AND IDENTITY WORKSPACES

The dynamics underpinning the formation, consolidation, and changing of an individual's identity are of growing interest in the field of organization studies. This area traditionally had been the province of clinical and developmental psychologists concerned with understanding how identity evolves over the life course in response to stages of human development (Erikson, 1980; Kegan, 1982; Levinson, 1978) and social factors, such as the adoption and shedding of roles and group memberships (Deaux, 1991). More recently, organizational scholars have turned their attention to the unfolding of identity in a range of professional settings (Beyer & Hannah, 2002; Ibarra, 1999; Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2007; Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2006; Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006). The concept of identity work describes the activities that individuals undertake to create, maintain, and display personal and social identities that sustain a coherent and desirable self-concept (Snow &

Anderson, 1987; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). This work, which is both intrapsychic and social in nature (Kreiner et al., 2006), involves individuals crafting, protecting, and modifying their views of themselves, as well as gaining social validation for those views. Being successful in these endeavors sustains one's sense of personal agency, continuity, coherence, and self-esteem.

Identity work is an ongoing process; however, it is undertaken most intensely and consciously during specific junctures and transitions (Van Maanen, 1998). It has been documented in situations in which individuals transition into a new professional role (Ibarra, 1999; Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2007; Pratt et al., 2006) or organization (Beyer & Hannah, 2002); negotiate a balance between their occupational and personal identities (Kreiner et al., 2006; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Van Maanen, 1998); exit a role (Ebaugh, 1998); or experience identity threat (Elsbach, 2003; Snow & Anderson, 1987). Identity work is more frequent and necessary in fast-changing social contexts in which individuals are constantly pressured to confirm or adapt their self-concepts vis-à-vis fluid social configurations and multiple discourses (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Such is the case in many contemporary work environments, where crafting and holding on to a coherent identity has become more problematic than in the past (Alvesson & Wilmott, 2002; Sennett, 1998, 2006). The studies just mentioned enhance our understanding of predicaments that generate a need for identity work and strategies that individuals employ in those situations. Less work to date has focused on the settings in which identity work takes place (e.g., Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007; Greil & Rudy, 1984; Pratt, 2000). We enrich this stream by proposing the concept of *identity workspace*, defined as an institution that provides a holding environment for identity work.

Our conceptualization of identity workspaces rests on two assumptions based on the research mentioned above. Both apply whether the purpose of identity work is stabilizing an existing identity (Beyer & Hanna, 2002; Kreiner et al., 2006) or transitioning into a new one (Ibarra, 1999; Pratt et al., 2006). The first assumption is that by definition individuals cannot conduct identity work in isolation (Kreiner et al., 2006; Snow & Anderson, 1987). The second is that identity work is stimulated by moments of identity destabilization and experiences of uncertainty, confusion, and anxiety (Alvesson & Wilmott, 2002). These moments motivate attempts to restabilize an identity rendered fragile, or to transition toward a new one. Identity work can, therefore, be facilitated by a holding environment that supports the individual in the

cognitive, emotional, and social process of elaborating, experimenting with, and consolidating the meanings associated to the self. Looked at this way, one of the reasons for individuals' psychological investment in organizations, that is, for organizational identification, is the possibility of using them as a holding environment for identity work.

We use the term *workspace* to mean a *physical as well as a social and psychological space*.[1] The term implies that the function of identity workspace is not a property of the institution, but rather that individuals (more or less consciously) invest a certain institution with this function. An institution may intend to be an identity workspace, but not be entrusted by individual members to "hold" them, that is, to soothe their distress and facilitate their sense making. The same institution may serve as an identity workspace for some members and not for others.[2] We propose that three components make an institution likely to be invested with this function: social defenses, sentient communities, and rites of passage. These were first conceptualized in the systems psychodynamics literature, to which we now turn.

SYSTEMS PSYCHODYNAMICS

The term *systems psychodynamics* refers to an intellectual framework pioneered by social scientists at the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations in London, who conjugated open systems and psychoanalytic theories in their scholarly writing and consulting practices (Jaques, 1955; Menzies, 1960; Miller & Rice, 1967; Trist & Bamforth, 1951). Scholars and practitioners employing this framework pay particular attention to the way in which the emotional needs of individuals and groups shape structures, processes, and cultures in a social system and to how these structures, processes, and cultures, in turn, shape the emotional experiences of the same individuals and groups. By taking into account both conscious and unconscious aspects of individual and collective behavior, the systems psychodynamics framework enables theorizing,

research, and intervention on the "emotional, relational and political dimensions of organizational experience which often remain unconscious or are considered undesirable" (French & Vince, 1999: 4). While systems psychodynamics scholarship is still an emerging field of social science (Gould, 2001), it features a burgeoning body of research and applied work in the domains of management education (Hirschhorn, 1990b); group relations training (Miller, 1989; Rice, 1999); executive coaching (Brunning, 2006); organizational consultation (Gould, Ebers, & McVicker Clinchy, 1999; Gould, Stapley, & Stein, 2004; Neumann, 1999; James & Huffington, 2004); organizational identity and learning (Bain, 1998; Brown & Starkey, 2000), leadership (Obholzer, 1996; Stein, 2005, 2007a); and understanding organizational (Smith, 1989; Stein, 2000, 2004, 2007b); and societal phenomena (Fraher, 2004; Khaleelee & Miller, 1985; Long, 1999; Miller, 1999).

An interactionist perspective has been deemed most appropriate for theorizing and research on the "change journeys" of individuals within organizations in general (Woodman & Dewett, 2004), and on socialization and identity work in particular (Jones, 1983; Kreiner et al., 2006). Systems psychodynamics provides such a perspective by investigating the ongoing effect of individuals on organizations and vice versa, "working simultaneously from 'the inside out' and 'the outside in' with neither perspective being privileged" (Gould, 2001: 4). By focusing on the ongoing dynamic interaction of individual *and* social, cognitive *and* emotional, conscious *and* unconscious factors, the system psychodynamics perspective is particularly well suited to enriching our understanding of identity and identification. Finally, the systems psychodynamics perspective suggests that institutions exist not just as collections of tangible assets, but also as more or less conscious images in the minds of insiders and outsiders. It is to these "institutions in the mind" (Shapiro & Carr, 1991) that we often relate, it is these images that often imbue our organizational experiences with meaning, and it is them that we identify and disidentify with. In general, the term *identity workspaces* describes one such form of relatedness between individual and institution. It is individuals' investment in certain organizational structures, discourses, communities and rituals, driven by a need for identity work, that makes an institution an "identity workspace" in the minds of some of its members. In particular, our conceptualization of identity workspaces integrates four elements of the systems psychodynamics framework: social defenses, sentient communities, rites of passage, and holding environments—the latter of which we use as an

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[1] This use of "space" is in keeping with its use in the psychodynamic literature. It attempts to describe "an intermediate area of experiencing, to which inner reality and external life both contribute" (Winnicott, 1975: 230).

[2] This view is aligned with research and theorizing that acknowledges individuals as active agents in the process of identity construction rather than passive recipients of organizational socialization and discourses (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). It receives further support from the empirical finding that even organizations purposefully designed to change the identity of their members succeed with only a portion of individuals (Greil & Rudy, 1985; Pratt, 2000).

overarching concept. We draw on these four because of their links to identity and identification in existing systems psychodynamic literature.

Social Defenses

The construct of social defenses against inherent human (Jaques, 1955) and task-related anxiety (Menzies, 1960) is central within systems psychodynamics (Gould, 2001; Long, 2006). *Social defenses* are collective arrangements—such as an organizational structure, a work method, or a prevalent discourse—created or used by an organization's members as a protection against disturbing affect derived from external threats, internal conflicts, or the nature of their work (Halton, 1994).[3] Jaques (1955) was impressed by the extent to which institutions were used by individual members to reinforce their defenses, and postulated that people create or join organizational structures and cultures for both the manifest aim of accomplishing the organization's task, and the latent one of defending against anxiety. Once co-opted as social defenses, organizational features can become problematic—as individuals rely on, attach to, and seek to maintain them even when they are no longer effective in accomplishing the organization's task.[4] Therefore, while they allow the organization to hold together, social defenses limit the organization's ability to change and learn, distort its relation to the environment, and constrain its members' capacity for creativity (Bain, 1998; Halton, 1994; Hirschhorn, 1990a; Long, 2006).

For example, in her landmark study conducted in a training hospital, Menzies (1960) observed that a depersonalizing method of ward rotations and task allocations allowed apprentice nurses to avoid the anxiety of working closely with very sick patients while, at the same time, generating secondary (i.e., substitute) anxieties: frustration, alienation, and stress. She postulated that the nurses' unacceptable feelings of anxiety related to working in close contact with the dying were unconsciously suppressed through, and projected into, the structuring of work. The depersonalizing rotations provided a kind of "lesser evil"—both an escape from, and an acceptable outlet for, the disturbing anxiety. Since then, a closer look at seemingly rational structures, processes, and discourses in many organizations has revealed the operation of social defenses aimed at "dealing with," without "thinking about," complex or disturbing experiences (Hirschhorn, 1990a). While early research on social defenses focused on single organizations, common features of organizations that pursue a similar primary task (e.g., all hospitals, therapeutic communities, schools) can also function as social defenses. Bain (1998) describes these as "system domain defenses." To continue with our example, if depersonalizing systems of ward rotations and task allocation were standard hospital practices throughout a region, then nurses would be able to utilize them for defensive purposes regardless of the hospital they were working in, as they would have found similar systems across organizations. In short, the availability of similar social defenses in organizations within a "system domain" allows individuals to move from one to the other without needing much adjustment.

The theory of social defenses is usually employed to explain the emergence of irrational structures, the ossification of inefficient ones, or resistance to organizational change. While most accounts focus on these negative aspects of social defenses, what interests us here is Jaques' (1955) original hypothesis that defense against anxiety is "one of the primary dynamic forces" (496) that pulls individuals to organizations. Within this lies a theory of organizational identification. Halton (1994) argues that social defenses can sometimes be healthy in the sense that they help individuals cope with stress and develop through their work. Building upon Jaques' formulation and Halton's insight, we highlight one such healthy function of these socially constructed arrangements. We argue that social defenses not only provide a restrictive binding mechanism and corral unwanted feelings, but also they help individuals to organize their experience coherently in a way that is tolerable and socially legitimized. Like individual defense mechanisms, and as their collective counterpart, social defenses facilitate adaptation and

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[3] The concept builds on psychoanalytic theories of individual defense mechanisms, i.e. operations used by individuals to reduce or eliminate threats to their integrity and stability, such as splitting an object into "good" and "bad" aspects; projection of aspects of the self onto an external object; or introjection of external objects into the self (see Laplanche & Pontalis, 1973).

[4] Social defense theory (SDT) finds resonance in the social psychology findings of terror management theory (TMT), positing that humans are driven to create cultural worldviews as a protection against the existential terror generated by awareness of death's inevitability (for a review, see Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Goldenberg, 2003). Both theories concur that anxiety is inherent to the human condition and suggest that individuals create and sustain consensual social realities in order to buffer themselves against consciously experiencing it. The difference between the two theories lies in locating the source of anxiety in the past (SDT) or in the future (TMT). Social defense theory posits that suppressed anxiety is related to infantile experiences; TMT posits that it is related to the awareness that we shall inevitably die. A more detailed comparison of the two theories rests beyond the scope of this paper.

relatedness between self and environment—albeit at a price—and contribute to the construction of individual and collective identities. They provide shared systems of meanings that help us avoid the question, "how do I feel?" but also help us address the question "who am I?"

Sentient Communities

Building on the work of Fenichel (1946), early systems psychodynamics scholars drew a distinction between task and sentient systems (Miller & Rice, 1967). The distinction points to the existence, in any organization, of a system aimed at the accomplishment of the organization's task and one aimed at satisfying the emotional needs of individual members. These two systems can overlap to varying degrees, and they can sustain or undermine each other. In defining a "sentient system or group" as one "that demands and receives loyalty from its members," Miller and Rice (1967: xiii) considered commitment, identity, and affiliation as alternative terms to "denote the groups with which human beings identify themselves, as distinct from task groups, with which they may or may not become identified" (xiii). We take a small step in positing that among important sentient groups are the professional communities that individuals invest in, relate to, and identify with. Identity is not simply a collection of individual attributes and social affiliations; it is a "lived experience of belonging" (Wenger, 2000: 239). Sentient communities provide the context for this experience of belonging in both fantasy and practice. The process of relating between individual and sentient community often begins when an individual is not yet a full member. Many medical students, for example, begin to experience belonging to the community of "physicians" and fantasize about their future identity, even though they are far from acquiring it fully. This fantasized belonging reassures such students that they have a future identity and motivates them to work toward achieving it. In addition, sentient communities provide references for "social comparison" (Festinger, 1954)[5] and comprise relationships that can offer feedback and serve as

"emotional anchors" in the process of personal learning (Higgins & Kram, 2001: 278).

Sentient communities often comprise, but are different from, support and advice networks. While individuals may draw support and advice within their sentient communities, they can rely on the community for self-definition even if they don't interact directly with many of its members. Furthermore, sentient communities do not necessarily overlap with the communities of practice that emerge in organizations among groups of people tackling a similar task. Communities of practice are characterized by joint enterprise, mutuality, and a shared repertoire of communal resources (Wenger, 1998). They are based on mutual engagement in some kind of practical work. The concept of "sentient community," on the other hand, highlights a process of relating as much as a formal or informal social structure. It brings belonging and identification to the foreground, rather than joint activity, support, or advice. Sentient communities can support accomplishment of the organization's task as much as impede it. Returning to the example of medical students, as they progress through their careers, their belonging to the sentient community of doctors will often result in the development of a professional network (i.e., other doctors known more or less well) and the acquisition of membership in a community of practice (i.e., specialists who work in the same department). These smaller, more embodied and interactive communities will, in turn, reinforce and refine their sense of belonging to the broader sentient community of "physicians."

Rites of Passage

The study of rites of passage predates the emergence of systems psychodynamics theory, yet it belongs within its realm, as it links social structures and processes with individual psychodynamics. The term was coined by Van Gennep (1960), and is used to describe "well established ceremonial events that manage major role transitions within a social system" (Trice & Morand, 1989: 398). Traditional rites of passage—such as initiation rituals—facilitate the transition from one social status and life stage to another. They transmit current knowledge and cultural norms, impart moral principles, and instill a sense of belonging while providing a vital container for major life transitions (Campbell, 1972). They are spaces in which individuals, with the assistance of elders and peers, can shape and discover who they are—or, better yet, who they are *becoming*. Van Gennep (1960) noted that rites of passage consistently comprise three stages—separation, liminality, and incorpo-

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[5] Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory (SCT) postulates a drive for self-evaluation, which moves individuals to join (or leave) referent groups if they can satisfy (or not) that drive. Miller and Rice's (1967) description of sentient groups emphasizes the satisfaction of individual's emotional needs, such as belonging and defense against anxiety. The two sets of drives are not mutually exclusive. In keeping with a systems psychodynamic theory we emphasize the latter here. A more detailed comparison of the two theories is beyond the scope of this paper.

ration—and Eliade (1995) and Campbell (1972, 1994) confirmed that the main patterns and dynamics of rites of passage did not change across centuries and civilizations. The reason is that such rites respond to and resonate with a universal human need. At times of transition and potential growth, we still seek guidance, stimulation, and comfort in enclosed, structured, and socially acknowledged rituals.

Rites of passage are enactments of a social systems' current mythology (Campbell, 1972), ideologies, and values (Trice & Beyer, 1984). Through them initiates do not just learn the cultural narratives that sustain the social group they are about to enter; they become part of those narratives. "In philosophical terms," Eliade writes, "initiation is equivalent to a basic change in existential condition, the novice emerges from his ordeal endowed with a totally different being from that which he possessed before his initiation, he has become *another*" (Eliade, 1995: x). Fundamental to rites of passage is the presence of significant others as witnesses and fellow travelers, as these rites serve both technical and expressive functions; while they instruct the individual, they signal his or her change in status (Trice & Beyer, 1984; Trice & Morand, 1989). On reentering the larger society, the individual has gained a new identity, one that can project him or her through a new social role or stage of life. Rites of passage only have such power as long as they are vital, that is, imbued with a current "mythology"—a coherent system of narratives and symbols that is shared and meaningful within a social system. When the narratives and symbols that a rite enacts become outdated, the rite loses its vitality and becomes an empty repetitive sequence, no longer able to touch and transform individuals (Campbell, 1972).

While the study of rites of passage originated within the disciplines of anthropology and sociology, the concept has been used in organizational studies by scholars investigating culture (Trice & Beyer, 1984); role transitions (Ashforth, Kreiner, & Fugate, 2000); career transitions (Mayrhofer & Iellatchitch, 2005); organizational and occupational socialization (Halier & James, 1999; Trice & Morand, 1989); symbolic consumption (Schouten, 1991); and management education (Dubouloy, 2004). Trice and Beyer (1984) provided several examples of contemporary rites of passage, including military and managerial training.

Holding Environment

Addressing the intrinsically social nature of human development, Winnicott (1975) highlighted the fundamental importance of holding environments for children's healthy development, as well as for the effective practice of psychoanalysis. In Winnicott's formulation, the primary holding environment is the "good-enough mother," who provides the child with a containing and attuned presence, responds to the child's physical and psychological needs, withstands his or her aggression without retaliating, and protects the child from excessive disturbance and debilitating anxiety. This kind of physical and psychological presence, Winnicott argued, helps the child to slowly develop the capacity to handle the emotional turmoil and puzzling experiences that human life inevitably entails. Winnicott suggested that the competent psychoanalyst serves a similar function for the analyzand by providing a holding environment in which the disturbance related to past traumas or developmental blocks can be articulated and worked through. Through the experience of being held well enough, the child and the analyzand learn that it is normal to be confused and fall apart at times, that others can be relied on for help, and that even in difficult moments it is legitimate to hope for light at the end of the tunnel. This is not just cognitive learning. It is an embodied, emotional kind of understanding. Holding environments are spaces in which cognitive and emotional turmoil give way to meaning.

Winnicot developed the concept of the holding environment in the context of dyadic relationships: between mother and child, psychoanalyst and analyzand. This concept has, however, been applied to a variety of contexts and levels of analysis (for a review, see Kahn, 2001). It is not only children who need holding environments to progress between stages of human development. The identity development of adolescents benefits from the availability of a *psychosocial moratorium*, that is, a socially sanctioned period during which "the individual through free role experimentation may find a niche in some section of his society, a niche which is firmly defined and yet seems to be uniquely made for him" (Erikson, 1980: 120). Kegan (1982) notes that "there is not one holding environment in early life, but a succession of holding environments, a life history of cultures of embeddedness" (116). Nor is psychotherapy the only holding environment available to adults for processing disturbing experiences. Kahn (2001) argues that it is common for individuals to need holding environments in the context of work organizations. This need "occurs when organization members experience potentially disabling anxiety at work. It occurs among adults who generally function at reasonably high levels. And it occurs throughout

organizational life, although it is not usually labeled as such" (263).

Despite its popularity with scholars and practitioners in organization studies (Heifetz, 1994; Kets de Vries & Korotov, 2007; Kahn, 2001, 2004; Van Buskirk & McGarth, 1999), there is no commonly shared definition of a holding environment, and little theoretical work parses out its elements or links it explicitly to identity work. While recognizing that the unit of holding can be a group or an organization (Kahn, 2001), accounts of holding environments often highlight interpersonal behaviors, such as positive reframing, encouragement, and the anticipation or rehearsal of difficult situations (Kets de Vries & Korotov, 2007). We define a *holding environment* as a social context that reduces disturbing affect and facilitates sense making. This definition has the advantage of being valid across levels of analysis, roles, and life stages, and is consistent with previous work that outlines holding environments' provision of containment and interpretation (Shapiro & Carr, 1991). *Containment*, a term first used by Bion (1970), refers to the holding environment's ability to "absorb, filter or manage difficult or threatening emotions or ideas—the contained—so that they can be worked with" (French & Vince, 1999: 9), and *interpretation* refers to its supply of "ideas that provide connections, meanings, or a way of comprehending previously unrelated experiential data" (Shapiro & Carr, 1991: 5). Both containment and interpretation reduce disturbing affect and facilitate sense making. We propose that social defenses, sentient communities, and rites of passage allow an institution to function as a holding environment for identity work. Skeptics may argue that holding ultimately remains an interpersonal affair—a gift of comfort and sense making that an individual (a parent, a therapist, a leader, a consultant, a coach, a mentor, a friend) offers to another individual, alone or within the context of a group. We disagree. We contend that interpersonal and institutional holding are distinct, yet often interrelated. The "holding" provided by, say, a senior colleague's word of support and advice, is different than that provided by a fair organizational system of rewards and promotions that a manager trusts. Nevertheless, the quality of interpersonal holding is undoubtedly influenced by the broader institutional holding of social structures, processes, and cultures. The need for interpersonal holding may be felt more strongly, and its availability valued more highly, in the absence of reliable institutional holding. The former may temporarily compensate for the latter, but cannot ultimately substitute for it.

IDENTITY WORKSPACES: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Having defined identity workspaces as institutions that provide a holding environment for identity work, we proposed that three elements contribute to their fulfillment of this function: social defenses, sentient communities, and rites of passage. Let us review how each sustains the psychological and social adjustments underpinning identity work, integrate them within a conceptual framework, and address its relevance for management learning and education.

By supplementing and reinforcing individual defense mechanisms, social defenses facilitate identity stabilization. Conversely, their disruption destabilizes individuals and renders identity work both necessary and problematic. Therefore, the more an institution's social defenses are experienced as reliable, the more the institution is likely to be experienced by individuals as an identity workspace. Sentient communities sustain a sense of belonging, whether in fantasy or in practice. By providing feedback, targets of social comparison, support and encouragement, they facilitate either identity consolidation or identity transitions. Conversely, the loosening of sentient communities poses a threat to identity formation and maintenance. Therefore, the more an institution's members (or subsets of members) are experienced as a sentient community, the more the institution is likely to be experienced by individuals as an identity workspace. Rites of passage are socially sanctioned events that, when vital—when infused by a society's current mythology—facilitate the process of exploring and experimenting with meanings associated with the self during identity transitions. Conversely, the absence of rites of passage, or their loss of vitality and meaning, deprives individuals of institutionalized processes for transitioning between identities. Therefore, the more an institution's rites of passage are experienced as vital, the more the institution is likely to be experienced by individuals as an identity workspace.

These three elements are partially overlapping, and if coherent, they are mutually sustaining. Social defenses provide the social structures and cultures that are enacted in rites of passage, which, in turn, inculcate and reinforce them. Rites of passage can be harnessed as social defenses themselves, as they are ritualistic social processes. Sentient communities sustain rites of passage by lending them legitimacy and by providing an audience and fellow initiates. Rites of passage, in turn, generate commitment to the community and develop a sense of camaraderie among its mem-

bers. Social defenses offer sentient communities the collective arrangements that allow them to avoid unsettling affect and to share a system of meanings. Sentient communities, in turn, sustain social defenses by giving them collective validation and by taking them for granted. The dynamic interaction of the three elements creates a holding environment that sustains individuals' pursuits of identity stabilization or identity transition. Individuals aiming to stabilize a fragile identity may be more attracted to the social defenses provided by identity workspaces, whereas individuals aiming to make an identity transition may be more attracted to their rites of passage. Sentient communities will be important to individuals in both situations; however, they are likely to be sought out for validating feedback and social comparison in the former case, and for support and encouragement in the latter.

Our first core proposition here is that individuals are more likely to invest an institution with the function of an identity workspace when it provides a coherent set of reliable social defenses, sentient communities, and vital rites of passage. Conversely, individuals are less likely to invest an institution with the function of an identity workspace when its social defenses are unreliable, it offers little access to sentient communities, and rites of passage are either absent or no longer felt as vital. Hence our second core proposition: Members who cease to experience one institution as an identity workspace will be motivated to seek an alternative one.

A burgeoning body of research has begun highlighting the link, and overlap, between management learning and education and identity work. Complementing traditional scholarship concerned with the production, transfer, and practical utility of management knowledge, this research stream focuses instead on *learning as becoming* (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and examines the processual, existential, and emotional aspects of management learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Thomas & Linstead, 2002; Willmott, 1997) and education (Sturdy, Brocklehurst, Winstanley, & Littlejohns, 2006). The concept of identity workspace in general, and the two core propositions articulated above in particular, provide a useful theoretical framework to understand where management learning that influences and contributes to managers' identity work is likely to be conducted. They predict that managers whose workplace is no longer experienced as an identity workspace will be motivated to seek an alternative one to "hold" their identity work. In the following, we examine the shifting relatedness between individuals, corporations, and business

schools in light of the framework and propositions presented so far. We shall argue that while changes in contemporary corporate workplaces generate an increased need for identity work, these workplaces are less likely to be experienced as identity workspaces by an ever-increasing portion of their employees. It is in this situation that holding environments are most needed and also most difficult to create and sustain (Kahn, 2001). As a result, these individuals are likely to invest business schools with the function of identity workspaces.

BUSINESS SCHOOLS AS IDENTITY WORKSPACES

The last 3 decades have witnessed significant change in the nature of the psychological contract and relation between individuals and their employing organizations—from one based on longterm reciprocal loyalty to one based on short-term reciprocal interests (Rousseau, 1990; Robinson, Kraatz, & Rousseau, 1994). A decrease in reciprocal commitment and trust has been accompanied, or perhaps caused, by the crumbling of traditional systems of social defenses, such as stable organizational hierarchies, clear career paths, and discourses praising long-term employment (Khaleelee & Miller, 1985; Khaleelee, 2004; Miller, 1999). The shift has also brought about the dissolution of strong social ties and sentient communities at work in favor of short-term, superficial, and instrumental forms of relating (Sennett, 1998). Frequent changes and superficial work relations, in turn, cause a decrease in social coherence and generate doubts about the motives of senior organizational members, which undermine the vitality of organizational rites of passage (Halier & James, 1999). The extent to which stable jobs and career progressions have disappeared may be debated (Cappelli, 1999; Jacoby, 1999b); however, even skeptics acknowledge that risk and uncertainty have been shifted by corporations onto the shoulders of individual managers (Jacoby, 1999a). Scholars argue that the shift has been most salient in the middle ranks of organizations (Osterman, 1999) and in the faster-moving sectors of the knowledge economy (Alvesson, 2001; Sennett, 2006). Therefore, in the remainder of this article, it is these managers whom we shall use as an example of the more general theoretical argument outlined above. We posit that, as a consequence of the shifts in the psychological contract, these individuals are less likely to experience employing organizations—and work relationships within them—as holding environments in which they can, or wish to, entrust their evolving identity.

It is our hypothesis that business schools have

benefited from the shifting relatedness between corporations and these individual employees, becoming a third, equidistant entity that provides something of interest to both sides. When corporations look for help with employee socialization, motivation, and retention—and individuals look for reliable holding environments to facilitate identity work—business schools proffer help with both. They offer, to the corporate side, laudatory case studies, inspirational executive programs, and motivated graduates, and to the individual, a whole set of reassuring management tools as well as the promises of lasting networks of like-minded people, a space for development, and the sanction of citizenship in the global corporate world. These provisions make them likely candidates for being invested with the function of identity workspaces by individuals seeking management learning in support of, or as a form of, identity stabilization or identity transition.

Social Defenses in Business Schools

Hirschhorn (1990b) and Krantz and Gilmore (1990) have offered vivid examples of how business school courses, or elements within it, can be co-opted as social defenses against upsetting experiences. They illustrate several cases in which large organizations commissioned management programs at a leading business school in order to, unconsciously, avoid addressing complex and divisive issues. Senior executives, faculty, and participating managers shared the irrational hope that by acquiring and practicing better management knowledge and skills, they would be able to avoid unsettling interpersonal experiences common in their managerial roles or divisive substantial issues within their organization. It is revealing that instructors who questioned the belief that models and techniques would suffice to deal with those experiences and issues, and invited the class to an open discussion of both, were met with resentment. This is not surprising in courses whose implicit aim is defensive in nature. From the perspective of equipping participants to deal with disturbing experiences in managerial roles, or of hosting debate on complex and divisive organizational issues, these courses may be thought of as a failure. Looked at as a social defenses, however, they may well have succeeded. Besides providing techniques and discourses that promised to keep disturbing affect at bay, the courses also conferred status, implying that participants could aspire to a future identity as senior managers (Hirschhorn, 1990b). The effect is that while colluding in the avoidance of disturbing experiences inherent in their

managerial work, these courses reinforced participants' managerial identities.

Corporations often commission executive education courses at times of transition, turmoil, or after large-scale changes. While the manifest purpose of these courses is to increase managers' effectiveness, we posit that they often serve a latent one as well—providing a surrogate for the organizational social defenses just dismantled. From this perspective, organizations can be seen as co-opting business schools as an alternative "container" for managers' difficult experiences (Bain, 1998), the aim being to stabilize managers' identification with the organization. Different considerations need to be made for courses that managers elect to attend as individuals, and strive to get into, such a master's in business administration. There one can often witness the operation of a form of "manic" social defense (Hirschhorn, 1990a; Klein, 1959), that is, a collective belief that through the mastery of 1 or 2 years of study and activity, students will gain control not just over organizational performance and career development, but over their whole life (Sturdy, Brocklehurst, Winstanley, & Littlejohns, 2006).[6] In this case, the course is used as a social defense by individuals aiming to gain control over their organization, and possibly to resist organizational identification. Work methods, concepts, practices, and discourses learned within an MBA are often constructed as applicable across a wide range of corporations, social groups, and national cultures. In doing so, they provide potential "system domain defenses" (Bain, 1998), that is social defenses that can be relied upon regardless of the organization one joins in the corporate system domain. Individuals needn't reorganize their defenses when their organizations change, or when they change organizations.

A widespread feature in management education that sustains its use as a social defense is the commodification and decontextualization of management and leadership. One often encounters in business school classrooms the widespread conception that management and leadership consist of a mixture of science and art and can be acquired and exercised semi-independently from primary task, organization, and social context. Manage-

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[6] There is evidence that even participants in company-specific executive programs—despite the courses' overt agenda to situate the learning process within the organizational context—may use them for similar purposes and experience them as "a project of individual development, of individual badging and an individual achievement that might assist in promotion and general career development" (Legge, Sullivan-Taylor, & Wilson, 2007: 450).

ment, leadership, and people skills are often reduced to commodities for sale at business schools (Petrieglieri & Wood, 2005; Wood & Petrieglieri, 2004). This is reflected in the ubiquitous request for business education to provide practical tools that can be immediately put to work, and in the transformation of management development into a flourishing industry (Crainer, 1998) in which "the traditional teacher-student-curriculum triumvirate" is reconstructed into one of "producer-consumer-commodity" (Welsh & Dehler, 2007: 405). Splitting leadership and management, that is, drawing a sharp distinction between the two and idealizing the former while devaluing the latter, has been described as a social defense (Gemmil & Oakley, 1992; Krantz & Gilmore, 1990). We posit that an additional psychological gain in splitting and de-contextualizing management and leadership—with management becoming a profession rather than an organizational role and leadership a collection of individual attributes and skills rather than a function in a social system—is that it reduces the potential for identity fragility. Insofar as being a manager or a leader is a desired part of one's identity, then one can acquire and hold on to that identity even if corporations may no longer be relied on as its source. The necessity arises, in those cases, for an institution to function as a reliable partner in the process of stabilizing that identity. While it might be risky to rely on and identify with the corporation that sponsors my business school course, I can still trust the skills and identities acquired in the course to support my career—wherever I find myself next. In fact, because I cannot fully trust my current employer, I might be more likely to trust the school even if my company is footing the bill. In short, the commodification of management and leadership contributes to managers' identity work by stabilizing a potentially fragile managerial identity.

Sentient Communities in Business Schools

Another aspect that allows business schools to function as identity workspaces is the possibility they offer for individuals to develop loyalty to, and identify with, long-lasting sentient communities. These can be micro-communities, such as a close group of classmates, or macro-communities, such as organized alumni networks. Both of these are often stable, independent of one's current employer, and usually reciprocate the degree of investment put into them. They provide an experience of belonging despite whether one develops and uses a network or a community of practice within them. They partake in the same culture and

sustain similar social defenses, first socially constructed in the classroom and then reinforced and reshaped by alumni magazines, ongoing events, reunions, and refresher courses. Sentient communities developed within business schools can function as cross-organization "career communities" that support individuals' career progress (Parker, Arthur, & Inkson, 2004). They comprise relational environments that "send us powerful messages about who we are and how we are valued. They shape our expectations about what our careers can be, or ought to be" (Gersick, Bartunek, & Dutton, 2000: 1026). Such messages can serve a dual function in facilitating identity work. On the one hand, they can provide reassurance, feedback, and targets for social comparison that help individual members stabilize their identity. Think of an MBA graduate who, during a period of insecurity about deserving or being able to achieve partnership in a consulting firm, receives reassurance from her former classmates that she is, indeed, worthy of that promotion; receives feedback from and compares herself with another classmate that works in a similar role; and draws comfort from belonging to a community where she can readily access both. On the other hand, sentient communities can motivate individuals to pursue identity transitions: think of a group of classmates who, during an MBA, inspires or pushes one of its members to explore alternative career paths—and encourages him in the process.

Kets de Vries and Korotov (2007) report a compelling example of a business school course putting great attention on developing a sentient community among participants—and its effects on their evolving personal and professional identities. In the course, 20 selected executives meet four times in the course of one year (3 times over 5 days and once for 3 days). Each articulates and pursues a personal learning goal, during and in between residential modules. Cases, lectures, questionnaires, 360-degree feedback and other traditional pedagogical methods are subordinated to the development of a reflective learning community among participants. The community is the main medium in which individual participants' development and identity work takes place. Individuals take turns to tell others their life story, and listen—in silence—to the community's reflections, associations, and recommendations. Participants continue offering each other reflections and feedback as the program progresses, and increasingly, take charge of the space by offering more direct and pointed challenge, encouragement, guidance, and examples. Need for faculty intervention decreases accordingly. While this may be an extreme case,

experienced instructors and participants alike note that the development of a sense of community in class is a key factor for a program's success and for the development of individuals in it.

Rites of Passage in Business Schools

Business school courses—long residential ones, in particular—involve many elements of rites of passage described by Van Gennep (1960), Campbell (1994), Eliade (1995), and Turner (1995). These include a dramatic separation from the past; movement to a secluded ground; collective isolation; a disorienting transition involving a series of ordeals, ceremonies and instructions; and finally a reintegration into the social structure with a different role. These elements of rites of passage allow individuals to experiment with identity and build new connections as they transition into a new stage in life, a new role, or a different social group. Many managers approach their business school experience with the same mixture of awe, uncertainty, and anticipation that characterizes individuals entering an initiation rite. On the basis of a quantitative study, Long (2004) concludes that most participants attend executive education "mainly for personal reasons, not organizational ones" (711). Participants often hope that the course will grant them acceptance in a select community, that it will generate confidence and vision, and that it will help transform their professional and even personal lives, both opening doors toward a new identity and shedding light on career doubts (Ibarra, 2003; Kets de Vries & Korotov, 2007). When they look back to the courses' most prized outcomes, participants seem less concerned with theories and tools learned than with the acquisition of fluency in the language of management and with an increased sense of self-confidence. These, in turn, legitimize their adoption and enactment of a managerial identity (Sturdy et al., 2006).

The findings cited above suggest that business school courses are experienced by participants as vital rites of passage, imbued with the contemporary business community's "mythology." As such, courses facilitate identity transitions by allowing participants to experiment and reflect upon the meanings associated with the self. Ibarra (2003) reports the case of a literature professor who spent her MBA investigating various corporate job opportunities—both with classmates and in job interviews. Many MBA students apply to a wide range of jobs and companies, only to conclude that they are not interested in many of them. Seen under the lens of rites of passage, these individuals are not unfocused or lacking in vision and decisiveness.

They are engaged in experimentation as is common in the middle stage of such rites. Sometimes, the timeless sequence of rites of passage is applied overtly in the design of management education, as in the 2-week leadership development program described by Wood and Petriglieri (2005). Pre-program *preparation* includes readings and writing a "personal and professional identity narrative." The program begins with an *orientation* stage where case studies, minilectures, and roleplays are used to begin exploring leadership, offer participants conceptual frameworks to do so, and entice them into the *experimentation* stage. In this central part of the program participants have the opportunity to practice and reflect upon their own behavior within a series of problem-solving activities. Each activity is videotaped and followed by a debriefing facilitated by a faculty consultant/ coach. After 2 days of activities, a retreat and video review allow participants to take stock—and primary responsibility—for their learning. Classroom presentations and one round of interpersonal feedback conclude this portion. *Integration* occupies the last program phase, focused primarily on making sense of participants' experiences and strengthening the links between their program learning and home situation.

DISCUSSION

We have introduced the concept of identity workspaces and proposed that reliable social defenses, sentient communities, and vital rites of passage make an institution likely to provide a holding environment for identity work. We argued that managers in fluid organizations and fast-moving sectors of the economy are less likely to rely on their corporate employers for the provision of social defenses, sentient communities, and rites of passage. As a result, they are likely to invest business schools with the function of identity workspaces and use their courses to stabilize a fragile identity or transition toward a new one. Our work here contributes to three streams of literature— identity work, systems psychodynamics, and management learning and education.

Our contribution to the identity work literature is the conceptualization of identity workspaces. Scholars in this area have called for work that focuses on "stabilizers and antidotes to the 'external' turbulence and fragmentation of the organizational world" (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003: 1189). Such turbulence makes individuals' identity more fragile, and stirs up scholars to raise such questions as "How are middle managers becoming?" (Thomas & Linstead, 2002: 89) or "How can a human

being develop a narrative of identity and life history in a society composed of episodes and fragments?" (Sennett, 1998: 26). By arguing that managers in turbulent sectors of the economy are likely to co-opt business schools' courses as identity workspaces, our work both helps to answer such questions and points toward a research setting where further answers may be elaborated.

We make four contributions to the systems psychodynamics literature. First, we reinforce the link between four of its conceptual elements—social defenses, sentient communities, rites of passage, and holding environments—and identity work stabilization and transition processes. Second, we articulate how the first three mutually sustain each other and contribute to an institution's availability as a holding environment for identity work. Third, we propose a definition of holding environment that applies across levels of analysis, roles, and life stages. Finally, we argue that systems psychodynamics provides an interactionist perspective that is eminently suited to the study of identity work. Dubouloy (2004) noted that managers use business school courses to escape the loneliness they experience in their work environments. Other authors have begun incorporating Winnicott's (1975) concepts of "transitional space" and "holding environment" in their description of how management education facilitates professional and even personal transitions (Ibarra, 2003; Kets de Vries & Korotov, 2007). We contribute to this stream of literature by describing the social dynamics that lead business schools to be increasingly utilized as identity workspaces, and by parsing out the elements that allow them to provide a holding environment for identity work.

The third body of literature we contribute to examines the processual and emotional aspects of management learning and education. Upon submitting this paper, we were surprised to discover that "identity" did not feature in the key-word menu on the *Academy of Management Learning and Education* website. Its absence reflects how only recently scholars have begun drawing explicit links between management learning and education and identity work. We offer a theoretical framework and argument for bringing identity processes to the fore in this literature. We suggest that the more fluid the corporate environment, the more management education and learning become closely related to, and potentially overlapping with, managers' identity work. While we do not argue that all business schools are, or should be, identity workspaces for all participants, we do argue that managers are increasingly likely to invest business schools with the function of identity

workspaces. Finally, we provide examples and illustrations of how management education courses, or some of their elements, are used as social defenses, sentient communities, and rites of passage.

There are limitations to the conceptual framework presented here. First, it is most relevant for individuals in need of identity stabilization or seeking to make an identity transition. It neither applies uniformly to all participants, nor to all business school courses. Courses such as a master's of business administration and prolonged executive education programs may be most likely to be used as identity workspaces. The second limitation lies in the partial overlap between the three elements of identity workspaces. We can't predict when and why the same feature of a course, that is, a ritual element, may be used as a social defense by some and as a rite of passage by others. Third, future work will need to articulate individual factors in the choice and use of identity workspaces, and to develop a dynamic process model of identity work in identity workspaces. Despite its limitations, however, the conceptual framework and argument proposed here offer several avenues for future research and practical application.

Future research studies on identity workspaces—and on identity work within business school courses—may profitably focus on three areas. The first is gaining a clearer understanding of what properties enable courses to function as identity workspaces and facilitate identity work. Researchers could investigate which features of a business school—such as reputation, course length, location, design, social and workload intensity, and so on—facilitate and, conversely, which hinder participants' engagement in identity work. For example, how do various combinations of activities encouraging introspection and experimentation contribute to identity work? Do identity work dynamics occurring in intense, full-time, secluded courses differ from those that occur in, say, part-time courses that do not involve a prolonged separation from one's personal and professional context? The second area of potential future research involves the way in which individuals harness identity workspaces. What individual characteristics, previous experiences, initial expectations, and perceptions of a business school program contribute to participants' use of the program as an identity workspace? What drives them to seek identity stabilization or transition? Are there different kinds of identity work conducted within identity workspaces? If so, what are they? Third, we believe that the concept of identity workspace itself warrants further study. While we suggest that managers increasingly call upon busi-

ness schools to serve as identity workspaces, pointing to middle managers in the knowledge economy as a social group that appears most likely to do so, other institutions are likely to serve a similar purpose for different social groups. Ely and Meyerson's (2007) study of offshore oil platforms can be seen as an example of the functioning of an identity workspace. Within the platforms, organizational features and discourses intended to improve safety, as well as strong sentient communities, influenced the way employees constructed their masculine identities. The consultancy firm studied by Alvesson and Kärreman (2007) could also be described as an identity workspace for its employees. Within that firm, human resource management provided narratives and processes that made "organizational life easier for the individuals through structuring, supporting and constraining their identity projects" (720). What institutions function as identity workspaces within a "system domain," and whether identity work occurs faster or involves fewer struggles within them, are other interesting questions.

Systematic empirical work in these areas would have pragmatic value both for business schools as they work to improve the effectiveness of management development curricula and for individuals considering where to undertake their personal and professional development. It would answer the call that we "turn our research expertise on our own teaching methods and the institutions that employ us" (Cummings, 2007: 358). A longitudinal study of participants' identity work within an extended program, such as an international MBA, would also fill an important gap in existing empirical literature. The gap is between studies of management development that use exit interviews and questionnaires (such as Ballou, Bowers, Boyatzis, & Kolb, 1999; Sturdy et al., 2006), and longitudinal studies that focus on identity work in relation to gaining, holding, or exiting specific roles (e.g., Kreiner et al., 2006; Ibarra, 1999; Ebaugh, 1998; Pratt et al., 2006). Such study would exploit an ideal setting for examining the identity work of those individuals that are most likely to use business schools as identity workspaces, that is, managers engaged in individually driven and boundary-crossing careers (Arthur, 2008).

The concept of identity workspaces may help business school instructors, administrators, and participants to see familiar things differently or to become familiar with different things. For example, managers often report as the most prized outcome of attending a business school course an increase in self-confidence (Ballou et al., 1999; Sturdy et al., 2006). This can be interpreted as a consequence of having stabilized a fragile identity or having achieved a desired identity transition. The idea of business schools as identity workspaces provides a different viewpoint on students who appear less interested in a course's concepts and grades than in the opportunities for reflection and social experimentation attending it provides. It may also help understand why similar material is experienced as more or less "relevant." Perhaps the reason is not the material's inherent applicability, but whether students can co-opt it as a social defense. Most obviously, we suggest a reason for the popularity of MBAs and "leadership programs" with managers in fluid organizations—these managers are the most likely to seek an alternative identity workspace.

The conceptualization of business schools as identity workspaces can be useful to instructors who wish to address participants' identity concerns more directly. They may design opportunities for reflective introspection and social experimentation alongside more traditional lectures and case discussions; foster a sense of community within the class at work, not just in the informal spaces of a program, or; considering the timeless flow of rites of passage (separation–liminality–reintegration) in program design. However, the most important practical application of our work here may be considering, if not encouraging, participants' identity work as a legitimate part of attending a business school course. All too often admission committees, career counselors, and faculty assume that participants enroll in management education with a uniform aim—career advancement—and put great value in individuals' ability to present a polished, decisive narrative of where they came from, where they are, and where they want to go. Taking our argument seriously means acknowledging that participants may be motivated to attend management education because they feel they don't have, or have lost, a solid narrative that is credible or satisfactory to themselves and others. Hence they are looking for a workspace where the narrative that is identity can be consolidated or redrafted. Looked at this way, the current debate on the function of business schools may, perhaps, be interpreted from a different angle.

Scholars have argued that "the long-term viability of the Business School will depend upon the vigorous defence of its identity and its justification in terms of its contribution to knowledge" (Starkey & Tempest, 2005: 70) and that "it is the capacity for expanding horizons of understanding regarding the human condition that defines the crucial role of university-based executive education" (Harrison,

Leitch, & Chia, 2007: 336). We contend that in addition to contributing to the creation and sharing of relevant knowledge and expanding students' horizons, business schools need to embrace their function as identity workspaces. Perhaps what we are witnessing today is the adaptation of business schools to a broader mandate. Their primary task is being redefined and enlarged to include creating and transferring knowledge, teaching professional skills, and providing an effective holding environment for the personal, as well as professional, identity work of managers.

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