CHAPTER 4

Identity:
Who Do You Think You Are?

Before you can assess your Mojo—that positive spirit—toward what you are doing now—that starts from the inside—and radiates to the outside—you have to determine who “you” are. How do you define yourself?

Ask me this question concerning my profession—and my answer is simple and immediate: “I help successful people achieve positive, lasting change in behavior.” That’s a ten-word description of how I see myself as a professional that’s so indelible it may as well be tattooed on my forehead.

I didn’t always define myself this way.

When I was fourteen, I was “one of the boys” back in Kentucky. That’s how I saw myself. A few years later, I was the first member of my family to graduate from college. By my late twenties, I had a Ph.D. in Organizational Behavior from UCLA under my belt and a teaching position at Loyola. I saw myself as a researcher and professor. It wasn’t until my forties—more than half the average person’s lifetime—that I could even approach a self-definition as pithy as “I help successful people achieve positive, lasting change in behavior.”

Now, tell me: Who do you think you are?

Take your time. It’s not a test with one correct answer. On the other hand, it’s the kind of question that ends up stumping the vast majority of people.

Identity is a complicated subject, and we make it even more complicated when we’re not sure where to look for the best answer. Many people hurtle back to their past—to signal events, memorable triumphs, painful disasters—in order to define themselves. Some rely on the testimony of others—a boss or teacher’s good review—as a means of defining themselves. Still others project themselves into the future, defining themselves as who they would like to be rather than who they actually are.

Let’s take the complexity out of the question. Let’s make it simple—so we can understand our identity and, in turn, do something about it.

At its core, our identity is determined by two dynamics complementing and competing with one another.
One vector represents the interplay between our past and our future. I spend a lot of my time admonishing clients to stop clinging to their past—and certainly to stop using the past as an excuse for current or future behavior—but there’s no getting around the fact that much of our sense of self is determined by our past. How could it not be? Then again, if we want to make positive changes in our lives, we also need some sense of a future self—not the person we think we were but the person we want to become. This tug of war between our past and future selves, not surprisingly, can leave heads spinning as we veer between the comfort of our past self and the unknown promise of a future self.

The other vector tracks the tension between the image others have of us and our self image. It’s the different weight we assign to what others say about us and what we tell ourselves.

Each of the four boxes created by this matrix represents one of four different sources of our identity. Each of these four sources of our identity combines to influence our Mojo.

1. Remembered Identity

In the lower-right-hand corner, where self and past collide, lies our Remembered Identity. How
do you know who you are? Because you remember events in your life that helped form your sense of self. It’s not so important whether these are glorious moments in your autobiography or events you’d rather erase; what’s important is that you can’t forget these touchstones. For better or worse, they’ve left an impact—and when you write a profile of yourself, these moments inevitably get reported.

The good news is that successful people, with robust senses of self-worth, tend to mine their past for the shiny diamonds, not the lumps of coal. They do this, in part, out of self-protection. After all, who in their right mind would gorge on painful or embarrassing episodes from his or her past, let alone allow these episodes to define his or her identity? The trouble is, the further you go back into your past, the greater the chances that your Remembered Identity doesn’t match up with who you are today. The world is full of people who aced their teenage years, but is there a sadder commentary about an adult than “he peaked in high school”?

Likewise, the workplace is full of people who made mistakes in their past, but those errors do not necessarily pinpoint with any accuracy who they are now.

I remember asking one of my more self-effacing clients—a man with amazing achievements—to itemize his pluses and minuses as an executive.

“Well, I’m not very good at follow-up,” he said.

“How do you know that?” I asked.

“My biggest screw-ups in business occurred when I didn’t pay attention to my customers,” he said. “I didn’t check up on them as much as they’d like. I didn’t return phone calls promptly. I didn’t always do what I promised to do, at least not in the timely manner they expected. And sometimes I lost customers because of that.”

I glanced down at the feedback I had gathered about the man from his direct reports and colleagues. He was a capable leader, with several thousand employees under his command. He had a few behavioral issues that needed to be dealt with, but “bad at follow-up” was not on the list.

“When was the last time a customer gave you negative feedback for poor follow-up?” I asked.

“It’s been a while, at least ten years.”

“Then why do you still insist you’re bad at it?” I asked.

“I always remembered being bad at follow-up,” he laughed.

That’s where Remembered Identity can cheat us in establishing our Mojo. There’s nothing wrong with harkening back to the past to sort out your strengths and weaknesses. But cling too
tightly and you might be getting it all wrong, creating a dark blurry picture of someone who doesn’t exist anymore.

2. Reflected Identity

In the lower-left-hand corner, where the past and other people’s opinions meet, is Reflected Identity. Other people remember events in your past and they remind you of them, sometimes constantly. It’s one thing for the executive above to admit to poor follow-up. But if his boss or wife or customers tell him the same thing, it reinforces the picture he already has of himself. You might know this as feedback. Feedback from others is how we shape our Reflected Identity.

As a professional who relies on feedback as a tool for helping people change for the better, I would never disparage its value. But I will mention that not all feedback is offered in good faith or in the most forgiving spirit.

It could be the spouse who keeps dredging up your one or two failures as a mate. It could be the colleague who never misses an opportunity to remind you of one of your workplace disasters. It could be the boss whose only impression of you is some less-than-brilliant statement you made in a meeting, which he repeats like a leitmotif whenever your name comes up. (I gave feedback to one manager who repeatedly derided one of his top lieutenant’s work habits, all because the subordinate refused to schedule an early morning phone call with the boss over a holiday weekend. I regarded this as an admirable display of work-life balance, but the manager saw it as evidence of the man’s 9-to-5 mentality and, therefore, a lack of commitment.) While some of our feedback may be quite fair, some of it may be part of the towel-snapping give-and-take of a lively corporate environment, where humor and piquant one-liners play key roles. But in an environment where we tend to become what other people say we are, the wrong kind of feedback can be self-limiting and pernicious.

People who keep reflecting your worst moments back to you—with the implication that these moments are the real you—are no different than the friend who sees that you’re on a diet trying to lose weight and yet insists, “C’mon, you can loosen up for one day. Have a second helping of cake.” They’re trying to suck you back to a past self, someone you used to be, not who you are or want to become.

Yes, there’s value in paying attention to your Reflected Identity—but healthy skepticism is called for here as well. At its worst, your Reflected Identity may be based on little more than hearsay and gossip. It may enhance your reputation or it may tarnish it. But either way, it’s not necessarily a true reflection of who you are.
Even if your Reflected Identity is accurate, it doesn’t have to be predictive. We can all change!

3. Programmed Identity

In the upper-left-hand corner is Programmed Identity, which is the result of other people sending messages about who you are or will become in the future. When I was growing up my mother imprinted me with two immutable notions—(1) I was smarter than all of the kids in the neighborhood and (2) I was a slob. The first notion, I now realize, was part of my mother’s natural desire to have a successful son. The second was the distillate of my mother’s own incredible need to be tidy and clean. After years of hearing this from my mother, I grew up with an outsized (and frankly delusional) faith in my own brainpower, and I was an incredible slob. My mother had programmed me to believe these attributes were integral components of what made me me. It wasn’t until I started understanding the dynamics of identity that I began to realize: (1) I wasn’t always that smart and (2) I didn’t have to be a slob.

By the time I got to graduate school, I was shocked—shocked!—to learn that my professors and fellow students also had mothers, fathers, and other important people telling them how smart they were, and, to my dismay, they seemed to be smarter than me. I had to rethink my mother’s programming. I also, if only to improve my odds on getting a date, worked on not being such a slob.

Even in its most extreme forms, there can be a lot that is positive about Programmed Identity. For example, the Marine Corps excels at forging new identities for its recruits—and it does so in the relatively short span of eight weeks at boot camp. That’s where new recruits are literally drilled into thinking of themselves not only as soldiers but as members of a unit—so that they have their comrades’ backs at all times and perform fearlessly under the stress of combat. It’s the reason Marines get “Semper Fi” tattoos and regard being a Marine as part of their identity for life. It’s the reason that wounded soldiers who’ve been sent stateside for medical attention want to get back to their unit as soon as they’re healed; they want to be a part of something bigger than themselves. That’s how they’ve been trained. The Corps is at the core of their identity.

Your Programmed Identity has many sources. It can be influenced by the profession you enter, or the culture you grew up in, or the company you work for, or the entire industry you work in, or the people you select as your trusted friends. Each of these can shape your opinion of yourself, some more vividly than you may realize.
Not long ago I met up with an old friend from graduate school whom I hadn’t seen for years. I remembered him as a quiet, earnest academic type who liked nothing more than dreaming up clever social experiments and writing research papers about them. Then he decided he needed more money than a life in academe would provide, so he became a trader on Wall Street. I caught up with him a few years into his new career, and the change in his personality was impossible to ignore. He was very aggressive and clearly cared a lot about making money.

“You’ve come a long way since the psych lab,” I said, trying to make a joke about the “new” person sitting in front of me.

“It’s the culture,” he said. “Everyone in my company is there for only one reason: to make money. I was told that in order to succeed in this environment, I would need to become like everyone else. I guess that I have.”

In other words, he didn’t disagree that he was a changed man, or that this change was not all positive. He simply gave himself a free pass by defining his new personality by his industry “programming.”

And therein lies the flaw in our eager acceptance of our Programmed Identity. It can become a convenient scapegoat for our behavioral mistakes.

I was once hired to work with a Greek-American executive whose scores on showing respect for colleagues and subordinates were abysmal. As I reviewed his coworkers’ feedback with him, his first comment was, “I don’t know if you’ve ever worked with men from Greece before—”

I cut him off and said, “I’ve worked with a lot of men from Greece, and most of them were not perceived as mean or disrespectful. Don’t blame your problems on Socrates!” In effect, he was blaming his supposed cultural heritage—his alleged programming—for his acting like a jerk.

Through the years I’ve become a connoisseur of people using their “programming” as an excuse. I’ve heard overbearing people who always need to get their own way blame the parents who spoiled them and gave them everything they wanted (Blame My Parental programming). I’ve heard overweight people blame their inability to shed pounds on their genetic makeup (Blame My Genetic programming). I’ve heard bigots blame their intolerance on the hateful small-minded town where they were raised (Blame My Neighbors’ programming). I’ve heard aggressive don’t-get-in-my-way salespeople blame their boorish behavior on their company’s ruthless Darwinian culture (Blame My Company’s programming).

At some point, usually when we’ve suffered an unambiguous Nojo moment for the second or third time (e.g., getting fired or passed over for a promotion again) it finally dawns on us that maybe we can’t lay all our problems on our programming. That’s when we stop turning to the
past and to others for our sense of self and look to our...

4. Created Identity

In the upper-right-hand corner of our matrix, where self and future meet, is your Created Identity. Our Created Identity is the identity that we decide to create for ourselves. It is the part of our identity that is not controlled by our past or by other people. The most truly successful people that I have met have created identities to become the human beings that they chose to be—without being slaves to the past or to other people. This concept is the beating heart of Mojo.

In my job as an executive coach, I help my successful clients achieve positive, lasting change in behavior. As I have grown older, I now realize that I often should be helping them change their identity—the way they define themselves. If we change our behavior, but don’t change our identity, we may feel “phony” or “unreal,” no matter how much we achieve. If we change our behavior and change the way we define ourselves, we can be both different and authentic at the same time.

I am not naïve. I don’t believe that we can become anything that we want just because we choose to do it. I am never going to be a professional basketball player. No matter how many positive thoughts I may have, LeBron James and Kobe Bryant have little to fear. We all have real physical, environmental, or mental limitations that we may never be able to overcome. My extensive research has indicated that we will all get old and die. We cannot wish physical reality away with “positive thinking.”

On the other hand, I am amazed at what we can change if we do not artificially limit ourselves. In my own work, I have seen leaders make massive positive changes, both in the way that they treat others and the way that they see themselves. Everything that follows in this book is based upon these experiences and my belief that most of us can change both our behaviors and our identities.

Our Created Identity allows us to become a different person. We can change to fit changing times. We can change to achieve higher goals.

I had a wonderful experience in meeting a person who has radically changed his identity over the years when, at dinner one night, I happened to be seated next to Bono, the lead singer of the Irish mega-band U2.

I didn’t know much about Bono at the time. As an “older guy,” I was a little embarrassed by the fact that I knew his name but was not familiar with any of his records (since they had been made after 1975). Someone told me that he was one of the top rock stars in the world. It was
interesting to me that a star of this magnitude was asked to speak—not about music—but about his ideas for making our world a better place.

Fortunately for me, he didn’t ask me about any of his records. We just talked about life. In a way, it shouldn’t have been surprising to me that Bono thought about his identity. Successful musicians, who can continue to fill arenas for three decades, finding new audiences while keeping old fans, are masters at creating and managing their identities. I guess if someone is plastering your image on posters, CDs, and T-shirts, you have to control your identity—or someone else will.

I learned a lot from Bono’s personal story. He is a wonderful example of a person who has been able to change his identity and—at the same time—remain true to himself.

In his early years, Bono’s identity was “regular guy,” just a bloke from Dublin who liked hanging around with his mates. From our conversation, it didn’t sound as if he had fully shed the “regular guy” identity—or wanted to. He apologized to me for using multiple variations on the “F-word.” (I assured him that his language did not trouble me. As a teenager back in Kentucky, I thought the “F-word” was the adjective that preceded most nouns.) For all of his fame and money, Bono still impressed me as a regular guy. He did not act pretentious. He was not overly sold on how wonderful he was. He was courteous enough to be concerned about possibly offending some white-haired, nearly bald guy that he had never met.

After defining himself as a “regular guy,” Bono became a “rock and roll fan.” Like many kids his age, he fell in love with music. He was animated in his discussion of the musicians who had influenced his life—and how much he enjoyed listening to them as a youth. He talked about how he still loved listening to new groups.

Bono’s next identity was “musician.” He described how he had made a commitment to his craft and how lucky he was to find something he loved to do. He talked about the innocent joy of forming a band with friends when no status or money was involved. It was clear from his description that he not only loved being a musician then—he still loved it. He doesn't make music just to make money—he makes music just to make music!

At this point, Bono was describing the familiar trajectory of every young boy who dreams of being a star. What happened next was a long shot. He went from being a “musician” to being a “rock star.” He clearly liked being a rock star. He enjoyed the life, the fans, and the access to influential people. He referred to himself as a “rock star” when we talked. I realized that he was using the phrase with a very useful detachment, as if it was the only way to accurately describe the one-in-a-zillion situation he found himself in. Beyond the view of an adoring public, he was still a regular guy, with a wife and four kids at home. But when he was in public, his identity was
clearly labeled “rock star”—and, without being arrogant, he was smart enough to recognize that this is an important part of his identity.

As much as he remained a sum of all his other identities—regular guy, rock 'n' roll fan, musician, rock star—it was evident that Bono was forging a new identity as a humanitarian, and that he was as professional and serious about this new identity as anything else in his life—maybe even more!

He recounted with deep feeling his experience of visiting Africa during the great famine of the 1980s. He talked about his lobbying of political leaders to reduce African debt. He talked about his desire to alleviate human suffering. There was no doubt that a big chunk of his remaining years would be devoted to doing whatever he could to make our world a better place.

As it turns out, my friend Richard Schubert was CEO of the American Red Cross during the great African famine of the 1980s. Richard gave me the opportunity to go on a volunteer mission to Africa at the same time Bono was there. This was—and still is—the most unforgettable trip of my life. In my nine days there I saw many people starving to death. I saw the hard work that was being done by wonderful humanitarians to save as many people as they could.

Tears came to my eyes as Bono described his experience during the African famine—and I remembered my experience.

Although I didn’t own any of his records, it turns out we did have something in common.

In his after-dinner speech, Bono did not take cheap shots at politicians, governments, or anyone else—even when several politically charged questions from the audience made the opportunity very tempting. He was clearly there to raise money, not to appease one side’s political views over another. His desire to help others far exceeded his need to be smart or fashionable. He is a man with a mission. He isn’t pretending to be a humanitarian. He is a humanitarian, and he is incredibly disciplined about how he presents this newfound identity to the world. His mission was clearly more important than his ego.

After that dinner, I couldn’t help thinking how extraordinary Bono’s analysis of his identity was.

At first blush, it may not appear to be much of an achievement. After all, Bono is rich; he can afford to take a sabbatical from rock 'n' roll and pursue his humanitarian interests. Bono is also a celebrity, which provides him with a loud megaphone to voice his opinions. He’s also a successful creative artist, which automatically provides him with a large receptive audience for what comes out of that megaphone.

But on closer inspection, at least in terms of creating a new identity, Bono’s celebrity is a
double-edged sword. A lot of people are very hostile to the idea of celebrated people moving from their primary sphere of influence (e.g., movies, music, or sports) to an unrelated, more “serious” realm of public discourse. Think of all those stars—Angelina Jolie (on the left) or the late Charlton Heston (on the right)—who are mocked as much as they are admired for voicing a political opinion or trying to help people. Stick to your day job, they're told, as fans and media question their motives and commitment. Bono also faced the additional hurdle of being part of a large thriving enterprise, namely U2. What if his three lifelong band mates resented his utopian dreams or thought his mission threatened the band? These are not questions to be treated lightly. Bono not only had to create an identity for himself, he had to earn support from his fellow band members.

In that context, Bono’s self-transformation is actually amazing. He did not let his definition of who he was—attractive as the identity of “rock star” may be—limit his potential for what else he could become. Frankly, I’d argue that creating a new identity is more difficult for Bono because of his celebrity than it is for average civilians like you and me. We don't have as much to lose, or as firmly established an image to shed. And we don't have hundreds of thousands of fans questioning our right to do so.

More than anything, Bono’s example is inspiring. Many of us make the mistake of treating our identity as a fixed, immutable object. We believe it cannot be altered, at least not significantly. As a result, we never try to create a new identity. One of the greatest obstacles to changing our Mojo is here—in the paralysis we create with self-limiting definitions of who we are.

All of us do this in some way. The client who hangs on to the self-image that he’s bad at follow-up, long after it's true or meaningful, is literally living with a false identity. So is the boor who thinks his cultural heritage excuses his rough manner, although he’s only fooling himself with this fake ID. But the real damage is how these limiting IDs prevent us from changing—and becoming someone better than we used to be.

When we define ourselves by saying we are deficient at some activity, we tend to create the reality that proves our definition. I once heard a client claim that he made a bad first impression. As someone who was favorably impressed by his manner the first time I met him, I asked, “What do you do the second time that reverses the bad first impression?” The conversation that followed was surreal.

“I’m much looser with people the second time,” he said.

“Why?” I asked.

“I know them a little better, so I talk more freely, I joke around. I’m confident that I can charm
them.”

“Why can’t you do that the first time?” I asked.
“I’m shy. Being outgoing with strangers just wouldn’t be me.”
“And yet, that is who you are the second time,” I said. “Don’t you find that odd?”
“I’ve always been like that,” he said, as if that ended the matter, as if he was beyond forming a new version of himself with strangers.

This client was indulging in the most transparent form of self-limiting behavior, relying on crude circular logic to prove his point. He literally stopped trying to win people over on first meeting because he defined himself as being bad at first impressions. It boggled my mind. But many of us are no different. When we tell ourselves that we can’t sell, or are awful at speaking in public, or don’t listen well, we usually find a way to fulfill our prophecy. We literally groom ourselves to fail.

In summary, how do we know who we are? Our identities are remembered, reflected, programmed, and created. My suggestion to you is simple. First, review the various components of your current identity. Where did they originate? Then, review the matrix in the context of how you see yourself today—and who you would like to become in the future. If your present identity is fine with you, just work on becoming an even better version of who you are. If you want to make a change in your identity, be open to the fact that you may be able to change more than you originally believed that you could. Assuming that you do not have “incurable” or “unchangeable” limitations, you, like Bono, can create a new identity for your future, without sacrificing your past.

Your Mojo is that positive spirit toward what you are doing now that starts from the inside and radiates to the outside. To understand how you are relating to any activity, you need to understand your identity—who you are. To change your Mojo, you may need to either create a new identity for yourself or rediscover an identity that you have lost.