Can we put the question of Existential Intelligence for Strategic Leadership?

Abstract

The roots of the word existential are existence and exist. To exist means to live and so, to think about your existence means to think about your life and perhaps Life itself. In those moments when we are thinking about the meaning of our individual lives or the greater purpose and mission of our group, we are engaged in existential thinking. In this paper, we attempt to define and explain the existential intelligence. The initial motivation has been given from the original work of Howard Gardner on Multiple Intelligences, in which he firstly introduced the term. Additionally, the basic ideas of the philosophical movement of existentialism offered the foundations for the development of our thinking. The importance of existential thinking and its possible implications for leadership are also discussed.

Search terms: existential intelligence, strategic leadership, authenticity

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is the exploration of the concept of existential intelligence and its impact in strategic leadership.

- The first purpose of this paper would be to attempt to support that it is worthy to research and define the concept to existential intelligence.
- Secondly, we will try to define it and
- Finally, we will discuss propositions concerning the relation between existential intelligence and strategic leadership

As the given title suggests, our purpose is to arise the subject of existential thinking as an important component of human endeavor and to initiate a discussion concerning the fundamental questions of human existence.
Over the past 20 years, the field of strategic management has become increasingly concerned with top-level managers and their effects on strategy formulation and firm performance. Upper echelons theory is rooted in Child’s (1972) notion that top management’s decisions and choices impact firm performance. The theory has received considerable attention from a number of researchers who have developed and expanded it under the rubric of strategic leadership (Canella & Monroe, 1997; Finkelstein & Hambrick, 1996; Hambrick & Mason, 1984). The essence of the theory is that when facing complex and ambiguous situations, leaders make choices in the basis of their values, beliefs and behavioral inclination (Finkelstein & Hambrick, 1996; Hitt & Tyler, 1991).

Implicit in the above argument is the idea that organizations could be considered as a reflection of values, cognitions and emotions of top managers. Although many researchers have discussed the importance of personal values as desirable modes of behavior in the study of charismatic leadership (Bass, 1985; Bass & Steidlmeyer, 1999; Egri & Herman, 2000; Gardner & Avolio, 1998), there are still issues that have left unexplored despite their potential effect on the upper echelon leadership area.

Indeed, it can be argued that the field of strategic management has systematically ignored to engage in studies that concern the exploration of the origins of personal values and beliefs of the leaders. What’s more, the number of the studies that investigate the role of universal values, such as freedom, equality in leadership development is even lessened. An exception to this above normality is the work of Howard Gardner (1997) who argued that when leaders have questioned themselves about the meaning of life, the intricacies of existence and have provided answers to these fundamental questions (what he called existential intelligence), they are more
likely to apply and transport this meaningfulness at work, which in turn results in increased levels of motivation and sense of well-being.

*Can we put the question of the Existential Intelligence?*

Despite the avoidance of the majority of scholars to engage directly in a quest of definition and exploration of the concept of existential intelligence, there is a great deal of literature that uses the basic ideas of existentialism in the development of several theories. These theories integrate the precursor notions of existentialism with a number of assertions advanced in several psychological theories of motivation and leadership. Following is a brief overview of these main theories along with an epigrammatic analysis of the basic notions of the philosophical movement of existentialism.

The starting point of this overview will be an introduction to the fundamental ideas of existentialism. Existentialism is a philosophical movement in which individual human beings are understood as having full responsibility for creating the meanings of their own lives. The emphasis is put on *individual existence, freedom and choice*. A central proposition of existentialism (and especially in the Sartrean) is that existence precedes essence, that is a human being’s existence precedes and is more fundamental than any meaning which may be ascribed to human life; man defines reality. This is an inversion of a more traditional view, which was widely accepted from the ancient Greeks to Hegel, that the central project of philosophy was to answer the question “what is a human being?” (i.e. what is the human essence). Other tenets associated with existentialism are *angst, subjectivity of values* and *authenticity*. Angst is the main characteristic of existence itself, when we face our contingency and the irrationality of our facts and choices.
One theory that has implied the presence of existential thinking is Maslow’s Motivation Theory (1943, 1970) and especially what it concerns the self-actualizing personality. According to Maslow (1970), human behavior is motivated by a set of basic needs, which can be ordered in a hierarchy, such that from all the non-satisfied needs, the one which is the lowest in the hierarchy will be the most active (Heylighen, 1992). When all the lower needs (physiological, safety, love and belonging) are satisfied, we are left with the highest need, the need for self-actualization. The most striking features of self-actualizing persons are the accurate perception of reality (i.e. the ability to perceive people and events accurately and understand people in a fair minded way), the ability to remove themselves from the turmoil and keep calm in the chaos, the desire to self-improve and derive satisfaction from personal development. Moreover, it has been argued that self-actualizers tend to experience life in an intense and also to have high degree of creativity (Heylighen, 1992; Maslow, 1943; McCrae & Costa, 1984). Self-actualizers are considered to be eager to undergo new experiences, learn new ideas and skills, and try out new things. To sum up, self-actualizers can be thought of as people who see ethics as process of self-realization.

Moreover, it can be argued that the recently developed theory of empowerment includes notions of existentialism and/or existential thinking, such as attribution of meaning, choice and subjectivity. Hence, if we take a closer look at the four dimensions of empowerment (Spreitzer (1997), we will see how these principles are implemented: (1) meaning: an individual feels a sense of meaning when an activity counts in his value system. Empowered individuals derive personal significance from their work, (2) competence: empowered individuals have not only the needed skills and abilities but also the confidence that they can perform successfully, (3) self-determination: empowered individuals have a sense of responsibility for and
ownership of their activity, as their behaviors are expression of themselves rather by the environment, and (4) impact: it is the individuals’ belief that they can affect or influence organizational outcomes.

Turning our interest to leadership literature, we can see that existential issues have also been sporadically used in various leadership styles. Spiritual leadership is probably the best example to give. Although spirituality is defined in many ways, it is clear that, whether attributed to a divine work or the thoughts and beliefs springing from the human soul, spirituality is not about knowledge and skills, but identity, purpose, and heart. A leader who understands these distinctly personal components of an organization can encourage the development of trust and vision to “cultivate optimal change, creativity, common cause, and optimal actualization of opportunity” (Spitzer, 2000, p. 13). People are more likely to feel connected to their work—and therefore be motivated—when they get the message from leaders that their understandings about life (or meaning systems) can inform how they approach professional roles and responsibilities. Moreover, leaders who consider themselves spiritual can set an example for associates through their everyday actions. For instance, approaching work tasks and colleagues with humility and respect (values to many types of spirituality) not only provides important models for how others should conduct themselves, but also establishes a tone, or ethos, that can pervade an organization.

These same attributes are also associated with transformational leadership. According to Avolio and colleagues (2004), transformational leadership goes beyond followers’ needs, which can be met through transactional rewards, to deeper issues of follower development that move followers from concerns for mere existence to concerns associated with achievement and growth.
Perhaps the most obvious connection between existential thinking and leadership is by the concept of authenticity. Authenticity in leadership is about making choices based on being fully conscious of the impact of these choices on one’s self, on others, and on what can be done, and to always act to maximize the dignity, integrity and accomplishments of all (Branson, 2006). At the first level, consciousness adds depth to the leader’s normal patterns of thinking. As explained by Frattaroli (2003, p. 343) “the mind can account for the contents of consciousness – thoughts, impulses, emotions, memories, fantasies, personality patterns- but not for the consciousness that experiences and finds meaning in these contents and can discern the difference between thought, impulse, emotion, fantasy and personality. This is the consciousness of the souls and where the person finds the true self”. Consciousness at this level ensures that the leader is not controlled by personal desires, the influence of others, or the need to do everything asked of them in a perfect way. This level of consciousness nurtures the possibility that the leader can make autonomous conscious choices so that they will be free to direct their lives from the very centre of their self-reflective moral consciousness. At the second level, the leader’s consciousness becomes the vehicle not only of self-discovery but of self-actualization.

Multiple intelligences theory

In Frames of Mind, Gardner (1983/1993) proposed a novel notion: that the psychological construct “intelligence” should be viewed in more ways than simply through the dry and statistical analytical lenses of IQ-type formalized tests, tests so formalized, normalized and standardized for most schooling systems. Gardner views his intelligences as “potentials-presumably, neural ones- that will or will not be activated, depending upon the values of a particular culture, the opportunities
available in that culture and the personal decisions made by individuals and/or their families, schoolteachers, and others (Gardner, 1999c, p.34).

Gardner expanded his MI theory to the studies of leadership in *Leading Minds* (1995) and *Intelligence Reframed* (1999). In *Intelligence Reframed*, he investigated crucial intelligences for leaders (p.125). Usually, leaders who can use several intelligences together are more effective in leading a group. At first, leaders are gifted in linguistic skills, so they are more likely to be good at telling stories. Secondly, they have a strong sense of interpersonal intelligence, so they are sensitive to desires and fears of other people. Thirdly, because they have a good intrapersonal sense, they are well aware of their own strengths, weaknesses, and goals; this aspect attracts other people because they sense reliability in the leaders. Lastly, leaders who are able to address existential questions are the most effective for motivating and mobilizing people.

Despite the fact that Gardner has speculated a direct connection between leadership and existential intelligence, only a few researchers have tried to investigate the nature of this connection. The most dominant study would be that of Kluwer and his associates (2000). Their basic argument is that a more inclusive, holistic and peaceful approach to management is needed if business and political leaders are to survive in highly competitive and demanded times. The authors use diverse value-perspectives (Hindu, Catholic, Humanist) and a variety of disciplines (philosophy, ethics, management studies, psychology and organizational sciences) to extend traditional reflections on corporate purpose and focuses on a self-referential organizational-existential search for meaning identity and success (Kluwer, Boston, Dordrecht & London: 2004).
2. In search of a definition of existential intelligence

Existential intelligence was proposed by Gardner (1999) as a possible ninth intelligence in his book *Intelligence Reframed*. After carefully distinguishing the existential ability for “…exploring the nature of existence in its multifarious guises” from spiritual awareness, which is defined as a “state of being” rather than a “computational” set of skills, Gardner concludes that scientific evidence does not support its inclusion as one of the multiple intelligences because it fails to sufficiently meet several essential criteria (i.e. cerebral specification and clearly defined cognitive components).

However, Professor Gardner has offered a preliminary definition as “individuals who exhibit the proclivity to pose and ponder questions about life, death and ultimate realities”. He also suggests that “existential intelligence involves having a heightened capacity to appreciate and attend to the cosmological enigmas that define the human condition, an exceptional awareness of the metaphysical, ontological and epistemological mysteries that have been a perennial concern for people of all cultures” (Gardner, 1999).

Despite this avoidance on Gardner’s part to definitely commit existential intelligence, there are many who have accepted the presence of this intelligence as fact and have attempted to clarify what it might look like if it were part of the MI array (e.g. Sinetar, and Torrance, 2001). Shearer (2001) in his effort to develop a measurement of existential thinking distinguished four domains related to existential inquiry:

1) religious: to consider the meaning of life and one’s relationship to death, God, faith and purpose
2) philosophical: to contemplate fundamental issues and questions about existence and reality

3) artistic: to explore themes and issues regarding the meaning of life in a work of art

4) Scientific: to use scientific methods and perspective on issues fundamental to human life.

Recently, there have been some attempts within the cognitive psychology to identify the place of this particular type of thinking in the brain. Thus, there is some evidence that existential thinking is located in specific regions in the right temporal lobe (Shearer, 2002). The 2007 Shift Report points out “In light of recent research findings in the field of neurotheology, existential intelligence may soon be considered by proponents of this theory (i.e. MI theory) as a legitimate category of intelligence (p. 60)”.

Even if existential thinking has failed in so far to be thought of as intelligence, this fact does not diminish its importance as a fundamental element of the history of humankind. Traditionally, in all cultures around the world, human beings in their continual endeavor to know more and accomplish greater feats, have an inherent desire to add value to existence. Their intrinsic need for establishing self-worth in combination with their desire to create a legacy have a growing influence on the subconscious to actualize; this transpires in the consciousness as questions like “why are we here?”, “what is the purpose for being here?” and “is there a meaning towards life?”. Additional questions, which are both fundamental and timeless, questions that every era must answer anew include: what is real? What is meaningful? What is possible? How do we know what we know? How then shall we live? We might say that existential thinking allows us to intuit the invisible, outside world.
It has been written that man’s search for meaning is the primary motivation in his life and not a secondary rationalization of instinctual drives. “This meaning is unique and specific in that it must and can be fulfilled by him alone; only then does it achieve a significance which will satisfy his own will to meaning” (Frankl 2003; 120). Jerome Bruner in his book Acts of Meaning (1990) writes that “if people were not able to apply meaning systems to life -what he calls ‘framing’- we would be lost in murk of chaotic experience and probably would not have survived as a species in any case.

Consequently, with a view to operate a combination of the most basic existentialism principles and Gardner’s intelligence theory, we suggest the following definition for the existential intelligence:

*Existential Intelligence is the ability to generate and develop a system of responses (i.e. a comprehensive frame) to the basic existential questions/ issues concerning the self and the cosmos.*

More specifically, we suggest that existential intelligence consists of two basic elements:

- Beliefs about self and cosmos
- Values about self and cosmos.

Following is a schematic representation of the suggested definition, where the two pairs of reality are presented on two axes. The horizontal axis presents a matrix comprised of “values” and “beliefs” and the vertical axis a matrix of individual and collective realities. These two axes form four domains as shown in Figure 1, namely components A, B, C, D.

*Figure 1*

The matrix of the four components of existential intelligence
Before moving to an analysis of each dimension of existential intelligence mentioned above, it is essential to make clear the difference and the relationship between the two theoretical concepts of “values” and “beliefs”. In an extensive and careful consideration of value-related factors, Jacobs et al (1962:23; as stated in Beyer) defined beliefs as “existential propositions held by individual human beings regarding the structures and operation of the social and physical universe and one’s place in it”. Values, on the other hand, concern what should be; they are “the normative standards by which human beings are influenced in their choice among alternative courses of action which they perceive” (Jacob et al, 1962:10). Similarly, Kluckholm (1951: 395) defined values as conceptions of what is desirable, held by either individual persons or groups, that influence courses of action and outcomes of action. A value judgment thus involves an interplay between the cognitive and affective elements of the value system to which an individual judge is more or less committed (Jacob et al. 1962; Kluckholm, 1951).

As far as the relationship between values and beliefs concerns, diverse assumptions have been made. For example, consistency theory predicts that strongly held beliefs and values must be brought into harmony or balance (Heider, 1958; Zajone, 1960). It follows that values and beliefs are correlated and may thus be hard

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to distinguish them empirically. Indeed, some definitions of ideologies include values with beliefs (Blau, 1977) and definitions of values sometimes include beliefs with preferences (Blau et al., 1979). However, despite what might common sense indicates, the predicted correlation between beliefs and values may not be equally strong for all ideologies or for all values. Since this last argument is particularly important for understanding the issues presented later on in this paper, we will display an explanation of this peculiar phenomenon as analyzed in the writings of Beyer (1978). People subscribe to more than one ideology and have more than one set of values. Also parts of different ideologies or sets of values tend to contradict or conflict with parts of others. Some parts of people’s ideologies and values evoke stronger, and some evoke weaker intensities of belief and preference. Weaker ideologies and values may create enough tension to arouse people’s needs to balance them, with the result that correlations between weakly held ideologies and values are likely to be low.

2.1. Component A: Beliefs and self

The first component refers to beliefs that one holds for himself/herself and thus is related directly to self-concept. It is suggested that an existential intelligent person will embrace those beliefs that are related to the answers that he/she provides to the basic assumptions (i.e. existence, life, birth, death, life after death, etc) and eternal truths (i.e. freedom, meaning, equality etc). Regardless of the nature of these answers, an existential intelligent person is considered to have higher sense of purpose and higher sense of meaning compared to a person that is not often questioning about these matters.

Adopting the theoretical statement that the self-concept is characterized as a complex dynamic phenomenon (e.g. Epstein, 1973; Gergen, 1967; Kelly, 1955; Mead, 1934; Rosenberg, 1979, Turner, 1978), it is inferred that in the course of time and
depending on life-events, self-concept will never be crystallized. This is especially important for the current analysis, because it is argued that the responses provided to existential questions will be continually changing. To make our point more emphatically, some people think about existential questions more than other people. Most of us are content with our own opinions and don’t worry about how other people think about these topics. This is until we are confronted with dramatically different world-views and must make an effort to understand or resolve these differences. Examples of these dramatically different world-views could be death of someone beloved, suicide by someone we knew, natural disasters, birth of a child, becoming parent etc. All these events may potentially change the way we view ourselves and our mission in life.

We should bear in mind, though, that everyone is not reacting with the same way in these existential issues. For example, we see people appreciating the gift of life and other don’t; we also see people trying to enhance their quality of life in order to maintain their existence in this world and other who believe that life should be lived in its extremes, regardless of the risks. All these different views could imply that people are free to choose how to define their existence. The link between freedom of choice and self-concept is implicit in the writings of existentialists who argue that people are considered to be free to choose among different alternatives. Consequently, the individual is responsible for all the choices it makes, regardless of the consequences (e.g. Kierkegaard and Nietzsche). Existentialists also focus their philosophy in the sense of meaning. This derives from the answers to the basic questions in life. In more detail, people who found what the meaning of their existence is, they tend to have more specific goals than those who have never tried to solve the issue of our life in time and space.
2.2. Component B: Values and self

The content of this component could concern the ideal self, how the individual would like to be. Following the definition of values mentioned above, the ideal self is a concept that is related to what is desirable and therefore, a direction to a future state is implied.

The notion of ideal self as part of self-concept appears in the literature in diverse forms. Briefly, the concept of the “ideal self”, the individual’s view of “how I should be”, was central in the work of Rogers (1951), who claimed that the individual’s self-regard depended on the discrepancy between the actual self and the ideal self. Gordon (1968) analyzed the retrospective, current and prospective elements of the self, and Schutz (1964) has discussed the tenses of self, noting the difference between the Present Tense (acts in progress) and the Future Present Tense, which includes anticipated or imagined acts. Similarly, Levinson (1978) has described “the Dream” and has been concerned with the imagined possibilities of the self as motivating forces. The Dream is a personal construction that contains the “imagined self” associated with a variety of goals, aspirations and values, both conscious and unconscious.

More recently, Marcus and Nurius (1986) have presented in the American Psychologist an interesting article concerning this particular domain of self-knowledge, namely possible selves. They defined possible selves as that type of self-knowledge that pertains to how individuals think about their potential and about their future (Markus and Nurius, 1986). Possible selves are the ideal selves that we would very much like to become. They are also the selves we could become and the selves we are afraid of becoming. The authors suggested that an individual’s repertoire of possible selves can be viewed as “the cognitive manifestation of enduring goals,
aspirations, motives, fears and threats. Possible selves provide the specific self-relevant form, meaning, organization and direction to these dynamics. As such, they provide the essential link between the self-concept and motivation”.

These possible selves are individualized or personalized, but they are also distinctly social. The authors first suggest that possible selves are important because they function as incentives for future behavior (i.e. they are selves to be approached or avoided), and second, because they provide an evaluative and interpretive context for the current view of self. A focus on possible selves is broadly construed as an effort to tie self-cognition to motivation, but as a consequence it also relates self-cognitions to self-feelings or affect. Affect is generated in one of several ways. First, each identity or self-conception has a particular affect attached to it. Second, affect derives from conflicts or discrepancies within the self-concept. To the extent that individuals can or cannot achieve particular self-conceptions or identities they will feel either positively or negatively about themselves.

In a similar vein, Roberts and colleagues (2005) presented a theory of how individuals compose their reflected best-self portrait (RBS), which they define as changing self knowledge structure about who one is at one’s best. Although the authors have used as basis of their theory the concept of ideal self, they suggest that the RBS portrait is slightly distinct from the ideal self and the hoped-for possible self in that it is based on qualities and characteristics that the person currently has, as opposed to those the individual wishes or hopes to possess. While one’s strengths (i.e. competencies, talents, values, personality attribute) lie at the core of one’s RBS, the RBS portrait also incorporates a characterization of the state of being at one’s best. In this state of being, an individual actively employs strengths to create value, actualize one’s potential, and fulfill one’s sense of purpose, which generates a constructive
experience (emotional, cognitive or behavioral) for oneself and for others (Roberts et al., 2005). Oftentimes, the state of being at one’s best is characterized by being true to oneself (Palmer, 2000; Quinn & Quinn, 2002), or authentic (Harter, 2002) and high performing (Spreitzer, et al, 2005).

2.3. Component C: Cosmotheory

The third component of the existential intelligence could be the existence and development of a Cosmotheory. Cosmotheory is defined as the ability of individuals to perceive, pose and approach the most fundamental questions about the Cosmos. It can be argued that the way the individual approaches these questions depends on the mediation of the “other”, i.e. family, social groups, colleagues and so on. Borrowing Sartre’s words, “the man who discovers himself directly in the cogito also discovers all the others, and discovers them as the condition of his own existence (…). Thus, at once, we find ourselves in a world which is, let us say, that of inter-subjectivity; it is the world that man has to decide what he is and what others are (Sartre).

The assumptions and beliefs that compose a Cosmotheory are considered to be essential for the realization of an individual’s own “being” and “becoming” and also for its place in the world. Cosmotheories are formed by answering questions that are referred to the appearance of life in the universe, the possibility of metaphysical powers beyond the known world, nature, and relation to other human beings.

These kinds of questions along with their implications for people in general are studied mainly by the field of philosophy (without undermining other disciplines such as theology or sociology). Nevertheless, we argue that, due to their apparent importance in understanding the “core” elements of our existence, a multidisciplinary approach might seem surprisingly fruitful. For example, the fear of death or the perception of an end is connected to existential angst, which results in conscious or
unconscious set of thoughts, ideas, attitudes or behavior that affect well-being, psychological health, goal setting, and maybe career choice.

Moreover, studies on spirituality highlight the importance of these questions in the well-being of human communities, natural ecosystems and future generations (Grof, 1998; Zsolnai, 2004). What is important here is the ability of people to develop a set of assumptions and beliefs or an articulated system of images (schemata) about the social order and the organization of human activities.

Taking these ideas as a starting point, research can be spread out to different domains. For example, Choshal and Bartlett (1997) raised the following philosophical question “why do companies exist” and argued about the difference between the old (companies exist because markets fail- companies are seen as value appreciation) and new philosophical view (company should be viewed as a value creator) to this question. Accordingly, in leadership studies the theory of McGregor (1960) that concerns the assumptions about the attitudes of the individual about its work is well-known.

2.4. Component D: Ideal Cosmos.

The fourth component of existential intelligence could be the ability of the individual to create an image of the ideal cosmos. This image is actually comprised of a system of societal values which concern the structures, the functions, the purpose of the society and the relation between these elements. Sartre thought of values as (1992) deriving their meaning from an original projection of myself which stands as my choice of myself in the world. Taking into consideration this stance of the famous existentialist, our personal values about the cosmos refer to the way we would like the world to be.
These values can formulate an integrated ideology which is composed by values like justice, fairness, equality, loyalty, transparency, peace, altruism, human rights and social welfare. Moreover, the individual can have values concerning specific parts of the society such as the organizations or various social teams. Studies on organizational culture (e.g. Bendix, 1956; Chatov, 1973; England & Lee, 1974) suggest the necessity to research on ideologies, cultures and their influence on social institutions (e.g. business, governmental organizations etc). Accordingly, leadership theories suggest that these values are in the basis of transformational (Bass, 1990; Burns, 1978; Hunt, Boal & Dodge, 1999), charismatic and in the recently defined type of authentic leadership (Avolio et al, 2004). For instance, the well-documented notion of vision as a central feature in leadership practices can be thought of as an existential component. Vision is considered as a picture of how we want to actualize the meaning in tangible ways. “It is a way of perceiving the specific direction our spirit longs to go” (Senge, 2007; retrieved by www.dialogueonleadership.com). So, leadership can be conceptualized as the act of articulating and acting in pursuit of a vision that flows from our commitment to a higher purpose.

2.5. The synthesis of the components: existential identity?

As has been implied throughout the analysis of each quadrant, there is an intercorrelation between and among them. To make this point more explicit, the remaining part will be focused on the nature of this interrelation and how the later could result in the formulation of an existential identity. For example, how an individual thinks about his/her ideal self is highly dependable on the way he perceives himself/herself currently. Furthermore, it is suggested that beliefs and values about cosmos are also interrelated; the formulation of a Cosmotheory can affect our visionary world.
In our attempt to pose the fundamental issues that concern the notion of existential intelligence, we could introduce four criteria with which we could contribute to a better understanding of the definition and the evolution of the concept.

Taking this thought a bit further, we argue that existential intelligence is characterized by the following properties. Firstly, the development of existential intelligence is related to the scope, that is the range of the big questions for which the individual generates and develops assumptions/beliefs and values. Moreover, additional properties could be clarity (how clear and solid the answers about the basic questions are), strength (how sure the individual is about the answers he/she gives to the basic existential questions), and consistency between values and beliefs (whether a harmony between values and beliefs is attained, so that an articulated and comprehensive image about the self and the cosmos is obtained). As follows, these properties can be characterized by intensity and frequency. Therefore, an existential intelligent person will engage in existential thinking frequently and intensively; this thinking is more likely to be characterized by «high» scope, «high» clarity, «high» strength and «high» consistency.

To make this point more explicit, an existential intelligent person is someone who often engages in thinking about the meaning of life and has the skills in understanding the philosophical dimensions of everyday life. He/she is a skilled philosophical thinker who can explain the nuances in different philosophical views. Additionally, he/she enjoys the challenge of critiquing differing theories about life and discussing different viewpoints and assumptions.

Taking into account the above suggestions and the work of Brandon Shearer on the development and validation of a scale for existential thinking, we propose the notion of existential identity. We use Schlenker’s (1985) definition of identity as “a
theory of an individual that describes, interrelates and explains his or her relevant features, characteristics and experiences”. Thus, existential identity is supposed to be the “core” identity, meaning that it is on the basis of all identities (i.e. personal, interpersonal or social) and perhaps inherent to all human beings. Existential identity may incorporate the meaning systems that we use to describe the enigmas of life and also all the common features that people display at some time in the life-span (i.e. fear of death, questions on religion, vanity of existence, nature of love).

For example, meaning systems provide a relatively unified psychological framework for making sense of and interpreting one’s perceptions and experiences. While the “existential intelligent” are more likely to be aware of their personal meaning systems, the rest are just as strongly guided in their thoughts and actions by meaning systems that are often unconscious and taken for granted (so, characteristic of existential intelligent people is that are being more aware of the meaning systems). People bring meaning systems to bear not only upon more ethereal topics but also upon the stuff of everyday routine and even seemingly mundane. “What does my work mean to me?” and “how does my work relates to my values?” are perhaps two of the most common questions people of themselves when assessing a particular line of work or job position. Most people need to know that their work can fit into their meaning systems.

Before we move on to a proposition of the observed characteristics of an existential intelligent person, it is essential to make clear what we mean by the existential identity. We suggest that existential identity is a particular type of self-knowledge that is shared amongst all individuals but is not available for thinking at any one time. Rather, it a working self-concept that derives from the set of self-conceptions. Existential identity can be viewed as a continually active, shifting array
of available self-knowledge. This array changes as individuals experience variations in internal states and social circumstances (i.e. in connection with the ideologies mentioned above). In the lack of any theoretical and empirical evidence, it is suggest-at least for the purposes of this paper- to be understood as a self-identification process. The latter is defined as a process of “fixing and expressing one’s own identity, privately through reflection about oneself and publicly through self-disclosures, self-presentations and other activities that serve to project one’s identity to audiences” (Schlenker, 1985).

3. Existential intelligence and observed traits

3.1. Authenticity

Our first proposition is that existential intelligent people will tend to display more authentic behavior comparing with those who do not engage in existential thinking frequently. In this part, we will introduce authenticity and through the various definitions displayed to associate it with existential issues. The construct of authenticity is captured well by the injunctions of ancient Greek philosophers to “know thyself” and “to thine own self be true” (Harter, 2002). As these phrases suggest, the essence of authenticity is to know, accept, and remain true to one’s self. Rather than conceiving authenticity as an either/or construct, it is best to recognize that authenticity exists on a continuum and that the more people remain true to their core values, identities, preferences and emotions, the more authentic they become (Erickson, 1995; Heidegger, 1962).

The norm of authenticity is central to existentialism and is also the basis on which many contemporary authors have built the development of the movement. Authenticity refers to a kind of transparency with regard to one’s situation, a recognition that an individual can be responsible for who he/she is. The possibility of
authenticity is a mark of my freedom, and it is through freedom that existentialism approaches questions of value. With personal freedom in its entirety, individual governs the kinds and types of choices made. Self-appraisal is a key factor in determining how much of the self has been learned. In making authentic choices, one may face alienation due to the absurdity of these dilemma situations.

Furthermore, authenticity is supposed to be the norm of self-identity, tied to the project of self-definition through freedom, choice and commitment. Someone’s “identity” can be discovered by what Sartre calls “existential psychoanalysis”. By understanding what an individual’s pattern of behavior reveals, one can uncover the “fundamental project” or basic choice of oneself that gives distinctive shape to his/her own life.

Recently authenticity has been defined as “owing one’s personal experiences, be their thoughts, emotions, needs, wants, preferences, beliefs, processes captured by the injunction to know “oneself” (Harter, 2002). Thus, authenticity involves owing one’s personal experiences and acting in accordance with one’s true self. Authentic behavior involves “valuing and achieving openness and trustfulness in one’s close relationships” (Kernis, 2003).

Authenticity also defines a condition of self-making. Thus to be authentic can also be thought as a way of being autonomous. The inauthentic person, in contrast, merely occupies such a role, and may do so without commitment. Some writers have taken this notion a step further, arguing that the measure of an authentic life lies in the integrity of a narrative, that to be a self is to constitute a story in which a kind of wholeness prevails, to be the author of oneself as a unique individual (Nehamas, 1998; Ricoeur, 1992). If authenticity is the category by which I am able to think about
what is means to exist, then the account of authenticity cannot neglect the social, historical and political aspects of that existence.

Authenticity consists of knowing what being true to oneself means (self-awareness) and expressing oneself truly (self-regulation) (Lerner & East, 1984). According to Kernis (2003), authenticity can be characterized as reflecting the unobstructed operation of one’s true, or core, self in one’s daily enterprise. He describes four components of authenticity: awareness, unbiased processing, action and relational orientation. The awareness component refers to having awareness of, and trust in, one’s motives, feelings, desires, and self-relevant cognitions. It also includes, but is not limited to, being aware of one’s strengths and weaknesses, trait characteristics and emotions. A second component of authenticity involves unbiased processing of self-relevant information. It involves not denying, distorting, exaggerating or ignoring private knowledge, internal experiences and externally based evaluative information. Instead, it involves objectivity and acceptance of one’s positive and negative aspects, attributes and qualities. The third component refers to behavioral authenticity, specifically whether people act in accord with their true self. According to Kernis (2003), behaving authentically means acting in accord with one’s values, preferences, and needs as opposed to acting merely to please others or to attain rewards or avoid punishment through acting “falsely”. The fourth component is relational in nature, and involves valuing and achieving openness and truthfulness in one’s close relations.

*Proposition 1: Existential intelligent people are more likely to be authentic*

3.2. Mindfulness
Although, the role of existential thinking on mindfulness has not been explored, one could reasonably assume that existential thinking can facilitate mindfulness. In other words, an existential intelligent person would engage more in mindful techniques than an individual who does not have this tendency. To justify this proposition, an introduction to the basic ideas of mindfulness and its relation to self-awareness follows.

Mindfulness is a relatively new concept in organizational theory (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2006). Langer (1989) defined mindfulness as a state of alertness and lively awareness that is manifested in active information processing, characterized by the creation and refinement of categories and distinctions and the awareness of multiple perspectives. In Langer’s model (1989), the rich awareness associated with a mindful state is expressed at the individual level in at least three ways; active differentiation and refinement of existing categories and distinctions; creation of new discontinuous categories out of the continuous streams of events that flow through activities; and a more nuanced appreciation of context and alternative ways to deal with it. By remaining alert to potential changes in their situation, mindful individuals are more adaptive and responsible to shifts in their environments. This fosters a rich action repertoire with which to successfully address the unknown (Fiol & O’ Connor, 2003); it also generates energy, clearheadness and joy.

Although mindfulness has been conceptualized as distinct to self-awareness (Brown & Ryan, 2003), insofar as it involves receptive attention to internal psychological states, we expect it to be associated with self-attunement, understanding and clarity of thoughts and emotions. Mindfulness is likely to facilitate conditions of open awareness that can be especially valuable for choosing behaviors that are consistent with one needs, values and interests (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Brown & Ryan,
2003). It can be argued, then, that the absence of mindfulness in an individual would be associated with lower levels of self-awareness.

At this point it is essential to note that mindfulness is separate to the concept of flow, which is “a state of optimal experience that is characterized by focused attention, effortless concentration, complete control, loss of self-consciousness, distortion of time and intrinsic enjoyment” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). However, typically, flow refers to rather particular, short-term “peak” experiences instead of a more pervasive and persistent state of mind, as is the case of mindfulness.

According to Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld (1999) “mindfulness is not as much about the quality of attention as it is about the conservation of attention. It is as much about what people do with what they notice as it is about the activity of noticing itself. Mindfulness involves interpretative work directed at weak signals, differentiation of received wisdom and reframing, all of which can enlarge what is known about what was noticed” (p. 90). Mindfulness can suffer when people are occupied with multiple tasks or preoccupied with concerns that detract from the quality of engagement with what is focally present. Mindfulness is also compromised when individuals behave compulsively or automatically, without awareness of or attention to one’s behavior (Deci & Ryan, 1980; Brown & Ryan, 2003).

Ultimately, it has been stated that mindfulness cannot be fully captured with words, because it is a subtle, non-verbal experience (Gunaratana, 2002). It is a way of relating to all experience-positive, negative, neutral- such that our overall level of suffering is reduced and our sense of well-being increases. To be mindful is to wake up, to recognize what is happening in the present moment.

Proposition 2: Existential intelligence will positively related to mindfulness
3.3. Motivation

It is suggested that existential intelligent people will be more motivated due to their higher sense of purpose. Purpose is longing-love for what the soul wants most to pursue in and through life. It can be argued that motivation will be initiated in response to the existential angst mentioned earlier. One possible response to the existential angst is what Ancient Greeks called Eros—the capacity to follow what is most intensely missing or unfinished in our lives. Eros can be associated with what nowadays scholars call intrinsic motivation, i.e. the prototypic manifestation of the human tendency toward learning and creativity.

Moreover, existential intelligent people are expected to exhibit higher levels of motivation due to the concept of ideal self. In other words, the pursuit of ideal self could be a strong motive, especially when a discrepancy with the current self is perceived.

Another possible response could be increased motivation to aid others. This might happen for at least two reasons. One, the self-infused attention presumable leads to a greater awareness of the discrepancy between one’s actions and relevant salient ideal (Duval & Wicklund, 1972; Wicklund, 1975). People who are highly conscious of themselves are theoretically disturbed by the difference between what they are doing or planning to do at that time, on one hand, and what they believe they ought to do, on the other (Berkowitz, 1987). Thus, if these persons think they could help those in need and are conscious of this ideal, their self-awareness should motivate them to adhere to this salient ideal. And two, according to Duval & Wicklund (1972), self-awareness promotes the belief that one has great personal responsibility for others.
Research has indicated that when comparing people whose motivation is authentic (i.e. intrinsic) and with those who are merely externally controlled for an action the former have typically more interest, excitement and confidence, which in turn is transformed in enhanced performance, persistence, and creativity (Deci & Ryan, 1991).

*Proposition 3: Existential intelligent people will display higher levels of intrinsic motivation*

### 3.4. Resilience

Resilience (Luthans, 2002) is defined as “the developable capacity to rebound or bounce back from adversity, conflict and failure, or even positive events, progress, and increased responsibility”. Resilience allows not only reactive recovery but also proactive learning and growth through conquering challenges (Youssef & Luthans, 2007). In other words, resilience may incorporate both negative setbacks and positive but potentially overwhelming events. Although resilience is just emerging in the organizational behavior literature, the field of positive organizational behavior has adopted a cross-disciplinary approach, drawing mainly from the ground of psychology. The capacity for resilience promotes the recognition and acknowledgement of the impact of both negative and positive overwhelming events, allowing the affected individual the time, the energy, and resource investment to recover, rebound and return to an equilibrium state.

In accordance with the above definition, it is suggested that existential intelligent people will display “high” resilience as a consequence of an understanding of the challenging nature of existence. Hence, an existential intelligent person is hypothesized to be more aware that existence is cyclical with positive and negative events succeeded each other.
Proposition 4: Resilience will be positively related to existential intelligence

3.5. Self-confidence

Existential intelligent people are thought to be more aware of their potentialities, weaknesses and strengths and therefore, we could assume that they will demonstrate advanced levels of confidence. Our level of confidence results from our specific experiences, and it develops through a cognitive sense-making process that we can influence. Research has shown a number of ways in which highly confident people think differently than those with less confidence. Confident people use their analytical thinking abilities more effectively in finding solutions; they set higher goals than less confident people; they make different choices of working associates, of projects; of the challenges they face (Hollenbeck & Hall, 2004).

What’s more, perceived self-efficacy refers to beliefs in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments (Bandura, 1997, p. 3). Over the past decade, research has shown that self-efficacy is related to various work-performance measures, such as the performance of managers (Wood & Bandura, 1989), the ability of newcomers to adapt to a new organizational setting (Saks, 1995), and the ability to acquire new skills (Mitchell, Hopper, Daniels, George-Falvy, & James, 1994). Efficacious people are likely to put forth sufficient effort to produce successful outcomes, while inefficacious people are likely to cease their efforts prematurely and fail at the task before them (Bandura, 1997).

Recently, Judge & Bono. (2001), proposed a higher order construct they termed core-self evaluations, or more simply, positive self concept. They defined core self-evaluations as basic conclusions or bottom-line evaluations that individuals hold about themselves. Self-esteem was considered to be the most fundamental
manifestation of core self-evaluations as it represents the overall value that one places on oneself as a person. Additionally, generalized self-efficacy (one’s estimate of one’s fundamental ability to cope, perform and be successful) was viewed as an indicator of positive core evaluations. In fact, research suggests that individuals with high self-esteem maintain optimism in the face of failure, which makes future success (and thus future satisfaction) more likely (Dodgeon & Wood, 1998; Locke, McClear & Knight, 1996). More generally, Korman’s (1970) theory predicts that high self-esteem individuals will engage in a broad array of behaviors and cognitions that reinforce their self-concept.

*Proposition 5: The existential intelligent people are expected to show higher levels of confidence.*

4. Existential intelligence and strategic leadership

Existential intelligence can offer rich implications for management and leadership. As Josep Mozano and Raimon Riben observe, the way we manage depends on the way we are. However, it can be argued that existential thinking is not something that we can tack on to management; if it is in our nature, we will bring it with us when we manage. The question is, then what type of leadership results from placing existential intelligence at the core of human condition.

As has been suggested earlier in this paper, the first realization of existential issues by a human being is often the subject of death. This realization can be induced by different experiences, including major accidents or illnesses, the death of a loved one, or the sudden awareness that a person is ‘next in line’ after the passing of their parents. For existentialists, this realization is not morbid; it springs for the dialectical
nature of existence, life being linked to death, growth to decay, the existence of every entity to its fragility and preciousness. This increased realization of the inevitability of death can lead a person to live a more authentic life in accordance with his or her values or sense or destiny (Pauchant & Morin, 2006).

While existentialists do emphasize this more individual nature of human life, they do not confuse individuation, the possibility to actualize one’s potential, with individualism, which fragments a person from his/her larger context. For them an authentic individual is not against cultural norms per se but has the ability to be critical of these norms. This more critical stance leads in turn to the realization that one cannot escape the responsibility of one’s choices in relation to social world, the natural world or even the spiritual reality. In our time, when business is becoming more and more global and bringing together people from different social, ethnic, cultural and religious background, this more critical stance, as well as the ability to show respect and tolerance for the background of others, is paramount. Furthermore, ethical, and moral behaviors are today enforced in both society and organizations by more strict laws, codes of ethics and corporate values statement.

In the field of strategic leadership, a stream of research often called “the upper-echelons perspective” (Carpenter et al. 2004; Hambrick & Mason, 1984) has highlighted the role of leaders’ personal schemas, values, experiences and other psychological factors for strategic decision making and organizational performance. The underlying premise of this type of research has been that senior executives confront so many stimuli, laden with so much ambiguity and complexity that their personal schemas, values and experiences greatly enter into their interpretations of situations and the choices they make and thus substantially affect organizational outcomes (Hiller & Hambrick, 2005). Because these psychological constructs are
unobservable, the theory posits that observable managerial characteristics are efficient proxies that provide reliable indicators of the unobservable psychological constructs. Many authors have supported that transformational and authentic leadership is important in the upper echelons perspective, because it is related to positive organizational performance.

The theory of transformational leadership sought to explain the unique connections between leaders and followers that result in extraordinary performance and accomplishments in both individual followers and entire organizations. (Bass, 1985; Yammarino & Dubinsky, 1994). Transformational leadership goes beyond followers’ needs, which can be met through transactional rewards, to deeper issues of follower development that move followers from concerns for mere existence to concerns associated with achievement and growth (Avolio et al. 1991). Furthermore, transformations leaders provide a sense of purpose, an articulated future-oriented and inspirational vision based on values and beliefs (Waldam et al, 2004). Additionally, Bass (1998) proposed a list of personality factors (e.g. locus of control, and consciousness), attitudes (such as optimism) and cognitions (such as moral reasoning) that could be associated with transformational leadership.

Recently, another theoretical approach that pays attention to the leader’s "inner-theater" is that of authentic leadership. Avolio at al (2004) define authentic leaders as “those who are deeply aware of their own and others’ values/moral perspectives, knowledge, and strengths; aware of the context in which they operate; and who are confident, hopeful, optimistic, resilient and of high moral character” (p. 802-803). According to Avolio et al. (2004) authentic leadership can incorporate transformational, servant, spiritual or other forms of positive leadership. The key distinction is that authentic leaders are anchored by a deep sense of self and know
where they stand on important issues, values and beliefs. They also act as role-models and convey to other, through both actions and words what they represent in terms of principles, values and ethics. Authenticity is a self-referential state of being (Sartre, 1943), it is self-contained and does not require the presence of another for its reality to become manifest (Chan et al., 2006).

Authentic leaders are not only true to themselves, but also true to their roles as leaders which also includes an element of being aware of social cues and followers’ needs, expectations, desires and feedback (Day & Kilduff, 2003; Kernis (2003). Because the authentic leader is self-aware (Gardner et al, 2005; Luthans & Avolio, 2003), he/she can react to environmental priming cues to make certain aspects of the true self more salient. Avolio and his colleagues (2004) especially highlight the role of self-awareness or personal insight of the leader as a key factor contributing to the development of authentic leadership. As originally defined, the self-awareness construct involves a cognitive state in which an individual focuses conscious attention on some aspects of the self (Duval & Wicklund, 1972). It says nothing about the degree of accuracy or inaccuracy of self-perceptions. According to Chan et al (2005) and Gardner et al (2005) self awareness arises by self-reflection about one’s values, beliefs, attributes and motives. Such self-reflection helps authentic leaders to know themselves and gain clarity and concordance with respect to their core values, identity, beliefs, emotions, motives and goals. Authentic leadership thus begins with knowing yourself deeply (Drucker, 1999).

Therefore, taking into consideration all the capacities, inclinations, goals, values, cognitive powers, traits and temperamental dispositions an existential intelligent person has, we can easily assume that existential intelligent leaders seem to satisfy in the most complete way modern organizations’ needs and expectations.
Existential intelligent leaders’ profile appears to introduce new dimensions in leadership and may be connected with organizational evolution. Within the frame of existential intelligence leadership, it is very important that leaders have positive values; they hold esteem for themselves and for their capacities and demonstrate their regard for their associates. It is a dynamic process, which may positively transform and/or develop followers into leaders themselves. It is true that positive organizational phenomena lead to enhance human well-being. Waterman (1993) links authenticity and well-being arguing that the eudemonic conception of well-being reflects people’s capacity to live in accordance with their true self and involves eudemonic engagement and introspective reflection.

**Discussion and Research Implications**

Taking into account the aforementioned analysis, existential intelligence should be considered as a synthesis of several abilities and traits. Firstly, existential intelligence demands a holistic or systemic approach, since the responses to “big questions cannot be given without such an intellectual thinking. Moreover, given the fact that existential intelligence is not a static representation of the self and the cosmos, but rather a dynamic evolution of them, it demands the ability of learning and mainly what Argyris & Schon (1978) name double and triple load learning. What’s more, the complexity, the ambivalence, the ambiguities, the contradictions, the paradoxes, and the difficulty of the responses to these big questions, intuitive thinking and judgment is required.

With the present paper, we wanted to highlight that it is especially important and particularly useful any attempt concerning the definition and further research on existential intelligence. The reasons are many and different. Firstly, from a theoretical perspective, these basic archetypical questions have come again to the front in order
to better understand them and elucidate their contribution to the well-being of individuals and societies. Besides, it should not be thought of as a coincidence that in the past decades, fields like Philosophical Psychotherapy and Philosophical Counseling have been elevated to remarkable scientific and professional areas.

Secondly, the contradictions and the big issues of humanity require a cross-disciplinary approach. In more detail, these issues were traditionally at the centre of philosophy, leaving at the margin important disciplines like economics, political science and maybe technology. Thirdly, it can be argued that existential intelligence could be placed at the basis of all the other intelligences that have been adequately researched, since the subjects that existential intelligence deals are placed at the basis of “being” and “becoming” of people and organizations. Additionally, existential intelligence can be studied under the concept of *phronesis*, as Aristotle defined and developed by many contemporary philosophers as the connection of the “instrumental”, moral and political rationality.

Finally, as far as leadership concerns, the reader must have noticed that specific propositions were avoided throughout the paper. The most important reason is that an empirical assessment of existential intelligence is important before any connections are considered safe. However, it is evident that existential intelligence could be at the core of the development of the will and the abilities that transformational, charismatic and authentic leadership require. Therefore, this paper attempted to go beyond the “doing” of leadership to better understand of the “being” of leadership. This approach combined several perspectives which have traditionally remained isolated in academic conceptualizations and intellectual life. For example, the philosophy of life (as an everyday activity reaching out to people irrespective of their background), the systems perspective (in its emphasis of the holism and
complexity of essential phenomena of human life), and finally the humanly tuned leadership for change that builds on the hidden dimensions of human subjectivity, existential situation and interaction.

If our approach of thinking was correct, then future research should be oriented toward the validation of the proposed intelligence taking into account the criteria that Gardner (1999) and other authors (Shearer, 2002) have suggested. Another possible research field could be the investigation of the relationship between existential intelligence and the aforementioned properties (i.e. scope, strength, clarity, consistency). Thirdly, the observed traits of existential intelligence can be researched in relation to well-being, career choice, and leadership potential along with the evolution of civilization, economics, and technology. Finally, existential intelligence should be conceptualized separately from other intelligences, such as spiritual, intrapersonal, interpersonal and emotional.

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