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Define Your Personal Leadership Brand in Five Steps

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by Norm Smallwood | Comments (34)

You probably already have a personal leadership brand. But do you have the right one?

The question is not trivial. A leadership brand conveys your identity and distinctiveness as a leader. It communicates the value you offer. If you have the wrong leadership brand for the position you have, or the position you want, then your work is not having the impact it could. A strong personal leadership brand allows all that's powerful and effective about your leadership to become known to your colleagues, enabling you to generate maximum value.

What's more, choosing a leadership brand can help give you focus. When you clearly identify what you want to be known for, it is easier to let go of the tasks and projects that do not let you deliver on that brand. Instead, you can concentrate on the activities that do.

So how do you build a leadership brand? My co-author Dave Ulrich and I came up with these five steps.

1. What results do you want to achieve in the next year?

The first thing you should do is ask yourself, "In the next 12 months, what are the major results I want to deliver at work?" Take into account the interests of these four groups:

- Customers
Investors
Employees
The organization

Dave and I once worked with a very talented and hardworking executive we'll call Tricia. Her successful performance in several varied roles at her organization — she'd been an auditor, a process engineer and a customer-service manager — earned her a promotion into a general manager position,

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charging her with running one of the company's largest businesses. To succeed at her first large-scale leadership position and meet the complex set of expectations she would encounter in it, she knew she needed to become more deliberate about the way she led others. In short, she knew she needed a new leadership brand, and asked us for help in forging it.

We advised Tricia to begin by focusing on the expectations of those she was working to serve, rather than on what she identified as her personal strengths. Leadership brand is outward focused; it is about delivering results. While identifying innate strengths is an important part of defining your leadership brand, the starting point is clarifying what is expected of you.

## 2. What do you wish to be known for?

Tricia knew she was seen as technically proficient and hardworking, but somewhat aloof. These traits, she realized, added up to a leadership brand that would not take her very far in her new role.

With that in mind, Tricia picked six descriptors that balanced the qualities that came naturally to her with those that would be critical in her new position. She then tested her choices by sharing them with her boss, her peers, and some of her most trusted subordinates. She simply asked them, "Are these the traits that someone in this general manager role should exhibit?" Their responses helped her refine her list to ultimately include the following traits:

- Collaborative
- Deliberate
- Independent
- Innovative
- Results-oriented
- Strategic

## 3. Define your identity

The next step is to combine these six words into three two-word phrases that reflect your desired identity. This exercise allows you to build a deeper, more complex description: not only what you want to be known for, but how you will probably have to act to get there. For example, calmly driven differs from tirelessly driven. Experimenting with the many combinations that you can make from your six chosen words helps you crystallize your personal leadership brand.

Tricia combined the six descriptors into the following three phrases:

- Independently innovative
- Deliberately collaborative
- Strategically results-oriented

She tested this with several colleagues, neatly pulled together what came easily to Tricia ("independently innovative" and "strategically results-oriented") with what she could accomplish through disciplined effort ("deliberately collaborative"). Tricia was satisfied that it aptly described both the kind of leader she was and the kind of leader she was becoming.

## 4. Construct your leadership brand statement, then test it.

In this step, you pull everything together in a leadership brand statement that makes a "so that" connection between what you want to be known for (Steps 2 and 3) and your desired results (Step 1). Fill in the blanks:

"I want to be known for being \_\_\_\_\_ so that I can deliver \_\_\_\_\_."



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Tricia's leadership brand statement read: "I want to be known for being independently innovative, deliberately collaborative and strategically results-oriented so that I can deliver superior financial outcomes for my business."

With your leadership brand statement drafted, ask the following three questions to see if it needs to be refined:

- *Is this the brand identity that best represents who I am and what I can do?*
- *Is this brand identity something that creates value in the eyes of my organization and key stakeholders?*
- *What risks am I taking by exhibiting this brand? Can I live this brand?*

After going through this exercise, Tricia was satisfied that she had crafted a personal leadership brand that was appropriate for her new role and within her power to live and make real.

## 5. Make your brand identity real

Espoused-but-unlived brands create cynicism because they promise what they do not deliver. To ensure that the leadership brand you advertise is embodied in your day-to-day work, check in with those around you. Do they see you as you wish to be seen? If you say you are flexible and approachable, do others find you so?

After Tricia defined her personal leadership brand, she shared it with others. She let people know that she was evolving as a leader and invited their feedback, especially on her efforts at working collaboratively.

The exercise of forging a leadership brand and the day-to-day discipline of making it real, Tricia said, helped her stay focused on the most important challenges of her new role.

To be sure, your leadership brand isn't static; it should evolve in response to the different expectations you face at different times in your career. In our work, we have seen that leaders with the self-awareness and drive to evolve their leadership brands are more likely to be successful over the long term — and to enjoy the journey more.

*Norm Smallwood is co-founder of [The RBL Group](#), a strategic HR and leadership systems advisory firm. He is author, with Dave Ulrich and Kate Sweetman, of the 2009 Harvard Business Press title, [The Leadership Code: Five Rules to Lead By](#) and with Dave Ulrich on the 2007 title, [Leadership Brand: Developing Customer-Focused Leaders to Drive Performance and Build Lasting Value](#) (Harvard Business School Press, 2007).*

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