



Cultivating YOUR LEADERSHIP Brand

By Joanne L. Smikle, Ph.D.

One of the things that I often hear people in just about every department, every division and every industry say is, “I want a seat at the table!” I especially hear this from HR leaders. This request begs one very simple question: Why would decision makers want you at the table? What image have you conveyed that would inspire their confidence that you have something valuable to add to the decision-making process? What do you bring to the table?

Answering these questions in an affirmative way assumes that you have paid close attention to cultivating and advancing your leadership brand. Let’s begin with a clear definition of “leadership brand.” It is the image that you convey, the reputation that you have earned. Cultivating the brand starts with deciding what you want to be known for. Do you want to

be known for the innovations you launch, for the unique expertise you bring, for being able to create sustainable collaborations? Begin your own branding process by developing internal clarity about the essence of your unique brand.

Once you have clarity on how you want to be branded, it is time to identify the skills, competencies and experience required to advance your brand. What skills have you developed through your career? Identify the skills that support your intended brand. After you have done that, it is time to research the skills that you need and plot a course for developing them.

Let me provide an example. A client, the learning and development manager for a large health care organization, was frustrated that the senior leaders in human resources and organizational development almost never sought her opinions and insights when

crafting strategy for their functions. As she began working through the questions about skills, she realized that having been a trainer she had exceptional design and delivery skills but she had yet to build the ability to connect the training function she managed to the larger organization’s success. She realized that she needed to develop a clear understanding of where the organization was headed and how her department, how her function could better support the larger strategy.

That is where her learning began. She was able to develop an understanding of strategy, the ability to communicate her function’s role in advancing that strategy and, equally important, the ability to teach her team about the value that they brought to the larger organization. She found that once she was more conversant in the things that mattered to her senior leadership, they were more willing to listen to her and consider her insights and ideas.

After you have developed clarity on your brand, you then have to conduct what I refer to as “brand alignment.” Creating brand alignment requires you to conduct an honest assessment of the self. Does your language reflect your brand? Do you speak in a way that supports a brand that is bright and intelligent? Pay attention to your language choices. It is unwise to be overly colloquial in business environments. It is also unwise to try to sound impressive with high-brow language that requires



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the listener to pull out their dictionary. This should not need stating, but I will state it anyway: vulgar, profane language does not support a refined brand.

Another component of brand alignment is “the look.” Even in the world of virtual meetings it is important to maintain a professional appearance. Neat hair. Neat clothing. Neat office. If you are going to use one of the background screens make sure that is not distracting. Also, make sure that you don’t pixilate each time you move. While the backdrops have become very popular, they are not as impressive as an actual office. Create a home office environment that makes it clear that you mean business. The look moves from personal appearance to the appearance of your workspace.

Frankly, I struggle with the appearance of the workspace. My office looks like a paper bomb exploded. I have had to work hard on straightening things up so that I have a neat bookcase as a backdrop. A colleague made a great suggestion. She advised me to put the awards that I have received on the bookcase so that they are visible right behind me. Her thought is that they are subtle reminders that I have accomplishments that have been recognized, an important component of my brand.

Another friend taught me how best to position my camera so that it is focused on my face and shoulders not half of my torso. I’ve also learned how to position and fine tune my lighting so that I am not in shadow. All of these details support brand alignment in the virtual world.

After addressing brand alignment, it is time to launch, promote and advance the brand. This means participating differently in meetings. Speak up if you’ve been shy. Be well prepared so that you can ask informed, insightful

questions. Get comfortable finding and using your voice. Disagree in a way that is respectful. And don’t be afraid to disagree. Demonstrate curiosity about other perspectives and perceptions. All of these actions will go a long way in advancing your leadership brand.

Launching, promoting and advancing the brand requires an analysis of your network. I ask clients to identify what they want to be known for, who they want to know them and why. This is a first step in network expansion. The next step is to clearly define your unique contributions in your department, your organization, your profession. It is important to know what you bring so that you can confidently put it out there.

Analyzing your network includes more than just thinking about who you want to know *you* and why. It also requires figuring out who you want to know and why. Who are influencers in your company? How can you connect with them in a natural way that is not obsequious? What can you add that will be valuable in their work?

The same questions apply to people that you want to connect with in your larger profession or industry. I asked a research physician to make an exhaustive list of people who she wanted to make aware of her recently published research paper. Then send it to them. This activity was a great way to open doors based on a shared interest in an area of academic medicine. It also allowed her to reestablish dormant relationships and build connections with new colleagues. What contributions are you making that you need to let people know about inside your company and industry? Don’t be shy about sharing your contributions. Others will likely benefit from them. You are contributing to the body of useable knowledge.

Most important to cultivating your leadership brand is knowing how you want to define your brand. Developing this clarity on the front-end is essential. Once you have clarity about the brand you want to embrace and advance you are able to move to skill development. Your brand has to be supported by competence and confidence. Skill-building, which is a never-ending process, is vital to every personal brand. Understand that your intellectual curiosity is important in building knowledge and having a truly credible brand.

Next, brand alignment. Every element of your persona should be a clear, consistent reflection of your brand. This runs from your language to your look to your surroundings. Finally, advancing the brand requires an examination of your network. Once you’ve examined it you will, no doubt, want to refine and expand your connections. Understand that networking is as much about what you can do for others as it is about what they can do for you. As our world evolves, so too must our leadership brands. ■

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