



Self-Advocacy & Promotion

Superpowers many leaders are reluctant to develop

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Self-advocacy and self-promotion are two superpowers that often get a bad rap. People confuse self-advocacy with aggression and self-centeredness. They confuse self-promotion with self-aggrandizement. This article provides a much more accurate view of both. It also offers strategies for development in both skill sets.

Let's begin with self-advocacy. It is embedded in healthy, mutually respectful, mutually beneficial relationships. It is a component of a powerful, professional brand. It is a foundation of sustainable personal and professional success.

I think of self-advocacy as knowing what you want and why you want it. This means that you have clarity on both your intent and the underlying values that drive you. The next element of self-advocacy is knowing what you do well and where you excel. Once you have these elements firmly set in your mind, you can put them together in action.

The first action step is to articulate your position, needs and desires. This means asking for what you want. Do not assume that people — whether colleagues, family or friends — know what you want. You have to say it. Often you will need to say it more than once for people to take you seriously.

How do you ask for what you want? Directly and without equivocation. Here is an example. A colleague, Ann, was buying a commercial property and had very specific desires about how the space would be divided and utilized. She was taking on a partner in the business expansion, and rather than clearly stating her desires for space allocation and utilization, she began the process by telling her partner that he would have two spaces. She did not specify his allotted square footage or location, and he, of course, wanted the prime spaces. Who wouldn't?

As they moved through the process, it became uncomfortable because Ann was not being clear about what she wanted and her reasons why. It took a while, but she eventually sat down with the space plan and her partner. She explained her needs and desires. She also reminded her partner that she had invested 70% of the capital required for the purchase.

Once she advocated for herself, they were able to move into more productive discussions about space utilization. Ann was feeling bullied, but she eventually had to admit that there was no bullying involved. The big issue was that she had never stated her position, desires and needs.

Her idea of bullying is an interesting dilemma that arises in discussions of self-advocacy. Is it really bullying if one person is comfortable using his (or her) voice, being assertive and



asking for what he needs while the other person isn't? I think not. When we assume a passive stance, we have to own the results of not demonstrating self-confidence and self-assuredness. We have to own the results of not being heard because we have not spoken.

Let's move on to self-promotion. It is not boasting and bragging. It is not putting the self above others. It is not self-centered, self-absorbed behavior. Self-promotion is the ability to identify our own individual successes, those of our teams and those of our organizations. Once those successes are identified, we are then able to share and discuss them.

Notice that I mentioned others — specifically your team and your organization — as components of self-promotion. That is because the most effective self-promoters advance more than themselves. They are concerned about making sure that the contributions of others are highlighted.

What specific skills are components of savvy self-promotion? The first skill is all about your defining personal brand. Before you can message about your accomplishments, you have to be certain that you have a well-defined brand. What do you want to be known for? Who do you want to know about you and your accomplishments? What distinguishes you from everyone else in your industry? These are important questions to answer related to your unique brand. After you have refined your brand, you can move deeper into an approach to self-promotion.

The second skill is to be clear on the story or message that you want to present and the reasons for putting that information out. Do you want to let people know about a specific contribution you are making in your industry? For instance,

you may have created ways to identify and maximize nontraditional sales channels. That benefits you, your company and the industry at large. That is important information to share.

Your messaging needs to be consistent with your brand. This alignment is important in self-promotion. Creating a consistent image enables you to both advocate for and promote yourself. Let me provide an example of a misalignment between messaging and brand. This misalignment demonstrates weak self-promotion.

An aspiring nonprofit executive put a post on LinkedIn with her new headshot. The content of the post was all about her reluctance to have photos taken, her indecision about what to wear and other blathering about the cosmetic aspects of getting a professional headshot. She also posted about her exceptional photographer. None of these things matter when you are trying to move into a CEO position in the nonprofit world.

Her mentor suggested she post substantive content on social media so that she could be perceived as a serious player in the nonprofit world. Her mentor advised her to think very

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seriously about crafting messages that the people she is trying to connect with will take seriously. She also advised her to follow the “less-is-more” rule. Trivial daily posts are not nearly as powerful as fewer posts that are interesting and substantive.

The third point about self-promotion is that it is not only accomplished on social media; it is accomplished in day-to-day business interactions, in meetings, and in civic and social engagements. You can

both participate in and create opportunities to share the news about what is going on in your world. Use what may seem like unremarkable conversations to share a little about what you are accomplishing and to learn about what others are doing. Remember, self-promotion is not a one-way street. It is an opportunity for mutual advancement.

One of the biggest turn-offs is for a person to hijack a conversation by talking incessantly about what they have done, who they are and who they know. That is not self-promotion. It is an ego gone wild.

Closing Thoughts

Self-advocacy and self-promotion are superpowers many leaders are reluctant to develop and employ. But they are powers that are mislabeled and misunderstood. Self-advocacy is simply using your voice to assert yourself and have your needs met. This does not mean you are trampling on others. It does mean that you are taking care to have your needs met.

Self-promotion is a wonderful way to celebrate yourself and others. It is a way to keep people informed of your accomplishments. It is also a great way of connecting with others who are on similar trajectories. Self-promotion is an important way to contribute your knowledge and accomplishments for the betterment of your team, your company and your industry.

As you think about self-advocacy and self-promotion, understand that they are the foundation of a powerful personal brand. As you develop and refine them, you become better able to manage your messages and create the image you desire. Do not shy away from these superpowers. Use them fearlessly. ■

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