

The 4 essential building blocks of personal branding - and how to use them to succeed.

The foundations of a personal brand lie in who you are. A successful personal brand is built upon these foundations by consciously shaping and refining your skills, experience, conduct, personality and attitudes to influence perceptions and create opportunities with the right people.

When I speak about personal branding, I always start with Jean-Claude Van Damme. I refer to a 2013 Volvo Trucks commercial called 'The Epic Split' which features Van Damme performing gymnastic splits between two moving trucks. It has had over 30 million views.

Volvo very carefully chose the personal brand of Jean-Claude Van Damme to support their message. He fits the core values that Volvo stand for and are known for globally: safety, quality, protection, precision and technical ability. The same branding principles apply to CEOs and board members. Their personal values need to fit with their company's values, and this is why it is so important for them to understand the building blocks of personal and executive branding.



What are the 4 essential building blocks of personal branding?

If you dig a little a bit deeper into the construction of personal branding, especially of leaders, you can find four key building blocks. I define these as behaviour, outside image, tone of voice and key messages.

Behaviour

People want to work for a leader they feel proud of and who inspires them. A leader who provides consistency and reliability through the way they behave and present themselves, especially in difficult times, acts as an anchor from which enhanced productivity is stimulated.

Your values should be recognisable in your behaviour. Volvo chose the right personality to reflect their values, and any large corporation looking for a new CEO should do the same. People at board level must stand for the values that a company wants to display.

Of course, that goes both ways. If you are looking at a new executive role, ask yourself if you are a good fit – do you match the values of the organisation? Can you authentically behave in a way that represents them?

If Volvo had chosen Lady Gaga, despite being a great performer and artist, she wouldn't have been the right fit. Don't underestimate how important this is - your personal brand casts a shadow and that shadow is incredibly influential.

Outside image

A leader's outside image is built up of many smaller bricks. On one hand you have you as an individual: how you dress, the car you drive, how you are represented online. On the other, you have the quality of the teams you build. Barack Obama is a superb example of this. He was a great president not only because of his personality and how he presented himself but also because he built a solid team of great people around him.



Leaders who consciously work to provide a consistent, authentic outside image attract the best people, the best teams, because those people want to work for them.

You might consciously construct your outside image by considering the car you drive – if you love Porsches or Ferraris, that's fine, but save them for the weekend and don't use them when visiting clients.

Again, this goes both ways. If you show up to board level interviews driving an old mini, perhaps CEOs won't take you seriously. They want to see that you understand the seniority and gravitas of board level roles. I drive a BMW 5 Series in dark blue or black – it's not over or under the top, but professional. For me, BMW is an established, trusted, sustainable choice.

It's important to consider what you wear to an interview. I remember one candidate I worked with who was fantastic at his job and wanted to make marketing director. After learning he was the company's second choice for the role, he came to me for coaching to help him make the step up.

I asked him to come wearing his interview outfit. He showed up in a green '70s suit, loud flowery tie and scruffy, tarnished shoes. The role he wanted was in Germany (not specifically German), where the cultural expectation is to wear smart suits and ties – designer at director level – and he needed to adapt to that environment.

So I advised him to go to a modern shop to buy a new suit including a new pair of well fitting shoes, which he did. Six months later he called me: He had been proposed to the board within his own company!

Tone of voice

As an experiment, listen to your own voicemail greeting. What is your reaction? How would your callers react? There are numerous tests that have concluded that if you have a poor voicemail greeting, callers don't leave a message. That means you could have missed your great order opportunity.



Over the years, I have done searches when I've found top level candidates to have generic voicemail greetings which have put clients off before they've even spoken to the individual. Phone etiquette is important - an effective voicemail greeting is personalised, short, open and invites a response.

When it comes to writing emails, I learned a rule that they should never be longer than 10 lines. When I worked at Reckitt Benckiser, I once sent our CEO a €100 million one-pager proposal. He replied with this: "Eelco, I've read it, it's according to plan, it's OK. KRBB." That's the power of the one-pager – being able to successfully compress information is an expression of leadership and creates a powerful impression.

At P&G I was drilled to write business proposals on one page, without missing any key information. The better we wrote our proposals, the more likely we were to get support from management.

Some leaders are naturally charismatic when they give a speech, a presentation or an interview. Others need to practise but strong leaders can adapt to it. It is publicly known that Steve Jobs adapted the last details of his slides himself in the final 24 hours before he spoke at an Apple event. What's important is that people enjoy listening to you.

Key messages

Messages are not always conveyed through words. How you are perceived comes down to your behaviour and your image, as well as verbal messages. There is a subconscious message that you are communicating all the time – the best leaders build on that self-signalling step by step to achieve trust, reliability, belief and inspiration.

While you can learn to be a certain way, a successful personal brand is all about authenticity - it must come from deep down inside you.



It is by combining the four building blocks that you construct your personal brand. But realise this: they are conveyed subconsciously to others, though done deliberately by you. If you don't get it right, people don't feel right about you. Why people like or dislike something or someone, is mostly a subconscious reaction.

In one-on-one situations with top executives I am often asked to give honest feedback. When I do, it is not always what people want to hear but most of the time, they are glad to receive the direct feedback and they often say to me: "Why did I never hear this before? Now I understand what I need to change".

This has made me realise that subconscious career limitations or irritations by others are seldom spoken about. But we need to hear about such things. If we are humble and ask for feedback from the right people, we can learn to change and move forward in our careers.

You need to be clear on what environment you're going into, what message you need to convey and who your audience are – cultural adaptability is key. Remember that green suit - even top board level candidates can fail if they don't adapt.

Building a personal brand is a lifelong journey. Coaching and training can help you learn and develop different elements of your behaviour across your career and can help you draw out different aspects of your personality from deep within you.

Get in touch<link to contact> with me to start refining your executive or personal branding - and bring your way forward into focus.

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