



# Harvard Management UPDATE

A NEWSLETTER FROM HARVARD BUSINESS SCHOOL PUBLISHING

ARTICLE REPRINT NO. U0712A

## Five Steps to Building Your Personal Leadership Brand

by Dave Ulrich and Norm Smallwood

---

See a complete list of Harvard Business School  
Publishing newsletters:

<http://newsletters.harvardbusinessonline.org>

*Harvard Management Update* reprints and  
subscriptions:

<http://hmu.harvardbusinessonline.org>  
phone 1-800-988-0866 or 617-783-7500

Customized and quantity orders of reprints:

phone 617-783-7627 or fax 617-783-7658

Permission to copy or republish:

phone 617-783-7587



---

# Five Steps to Building Your Personal Leadership Brand

by Dave Ulrich and Norm Smallwood

**Y**ou 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.

We use the term brand very deliberately. Acme Manufacturing can make the greatest widget in the world, but if few people know about the company or the widget—if neither has a strong brand—then that widget will generate little value. It's the same thing with leaders. A strong personal leadership brand allows all that's powerful and effective about your leadership to become known to your colleagues up, down, and across the organization, enabling you to generate maximum value.

In this article, which is adapted from our book *Leadership Brand: Developing Customer-Focused Leaders to Drive Performance and Build Lasting Value* (Harvard Business School Press, 2007), we will show you how to shape a personal leadership brand that showcases who you are and what you can do. The benefit of consciously shaping a leadership brand is focus; when you know with utmost clarity 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 and to concentrate on activities that do.

## 1. DETERMINE THE RESULTS 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:** Identify customers who directly or indirectly receive value from the goods or services you produce. How can you add value for them?
- **Investors:** What do they want? What can you and your group do to meet their expectations?
- **Employees:** What employee outcomes do you seek: greater creativity, better collaboration, higher retention? What do your employees need from you?

- **The organization:** How can your team help the organization execute on its strategy?

We once worked with a very talented and hard-working executive we'll call Judy. 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, in which she would be 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 turned to us for help in forging it.

On our advice, she reviewed overall customer retention, satisfaction, and revenue figures and called on three of the business's largest customers to hear their thoughts on the division's strengths and opportunities for improvement. She analyzed her division's financial performance over the previous years and thoroughly reviewed the financial performance expected of it in the coming year. She met with small groups of employees and reviewed employee surveys and other data to assess how employees both inside and outside the division regarded it. Finally, she thought carefully about how her business could contribute more to the organization as a whole.

Notice that we advised Judy 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. DECIDE WHAT YOU WISH TO BE KNOWN FOR

Given the context of the business results you want to achieve, consider how you wish to be perceived. From the chart below, pick the six descriptors that best capture what you want to be known for.

### Possible attributes

Accepting	Accountable	Action-oriented
Adaptable	Agile	Agreeable

Analytical	Approachable	Assertive
Attentive	Benevolent	Bold
Bright	Calm	Caring
Charismatic	Clever	Collaborative
Committed	Compassionate	Competent
Concerned	Confident	Confrontative
Conscientious	Considerate	Consistent
Creative	Curious	Decisive
Dedicated	Deliberate	Dependable
Determined	Diplomatic	Disciplined
Driven	Easygoing	Efficient
Emotional	Energetic	Enthusiastic
Even-tempered	Fast	Flexible
Focused	Forgiving	Friendly
Fun-loving	Good listener	Happy
Helpful	Honest	Hopeful
Humble	Independent	Innovative
Insightful	Inspired	Integrative
Intelligent	Intimate	Inventive
Kind	Knowledgeable	Lively
Logical	Loving	Loyal
Nurturing	Optimistic	Organized
Outgoing	Passionate	Patient
Peaceful	Pensive	Persistent
Personal	Playful	Pleasant
Polite	Positive	Pragmatic
Prepared	Proactive	Productive
Quality-oriented	Reality-based	Religious
Respectful	Responsible	Responsive
Results-oriented	Satisfied	Savvy
Self-confident	Selfless	Sensitive
Service-oriented	Sincere	Sociable
Straightforward	Thorough	Thoughtful
Tireless	Tolerant	Trusting
Trustworthy	Unyielding	Values-driven

Judy 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.

Working from our list, she picked six descriptors that balanced the qualities that came naturally to her with those that would be critical in her new position, and then she 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:

- Collaborative
- Deliberate
- Independent

- Innovative
- Results-oriented
- Strategic

It is important to keep in mind that the list you put together may well require you to stretch yourself in new directions—that is fine. But be sure not to include in it traits that you do not believe you can ever truly exhibit. Judy, for instance, recognized that working collaboratively did not come naturally to her, but she felt it was in her power to do it effectively.

**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 also 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.

Judy combined the six descriptors into the following three phrases:

1. Independently innovative
2. Deliberately collaborative
3. Strategically results-oriented

This second list, which, like the first she tested with several colleagues, neatly pulled together what came easily to Judy (“independently innovative” and “strategically results-oriented”) with what she could accomplish through disciplined effort (“deliberately collaborative”). Judy 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 AND 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 \_\_\_\_\_.*

Judy’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 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?* If you lived this declaration of leadership, would you see yourself as successful? Are you willing to tell others that this is your personal leadership brand?
- *Is this brand identity something that creates value in the eyes of my organization and key stakeholders? Is this something that is needed?*
- *What risks am I taking by exhibiting this brand?* What will the brand keep you from understanding and doing? This is an important question—it can be tempting to choose a brand identity that supports organizational values but not your own personal values and strengths. For example, in many technology-oriented firms, technical know-how is valued over salesmanship or interpersonal strengths. It would be a mistake, however, even in such an organization, to disguise yourself as a technical leader if what really drives you is something else. Acknowledging the things your personal brand keeps you from understanding and doing helps you build a team that can compensate for areas that are not your strengths and actually increases your leadership efficacy.
- *Can I live this brand?* Do you have the ability to translate the qualities you articulate in your leadership brand statement into day-to-day behavior? Can you make specific time commitments to live the leadership brand you espouse? Can you translate it into the decisions and choices you make?

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

## 5. MAKE YOUR BRAND IDENTITY REAL

Espoused but un-lived 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, ask 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 Judy 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.

Six months into the job, Judy reported to us that she had achieved positive results overall. While she believed that the business could have reached some goals faster if she had relied solely on her own technical expertise in charting its course, she recognized that such success would have come at the cost of building a strong team. And a strong team it was: members identified challenges with clarity, respected one another's judgments, made hard decisions, and moved forward together.

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

## YOUR BRAND SHOULD EVOLVE

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 the drive to evolve their leadership brands regularly are more likely to be successful over the long term—and to enjoy the journey more. ♦

---

**Reprint # U0712A:** To order a reprint of this article, call 800-668-6705 or 617-783-7474.

---

*This article is adapted with the permission of Harvard Business School Press from Leadership Brand: Developing Customer-Focused Leaders to Drive Performance and Build Lasting Value, by Dave Ulrich and Norm Smallwood. Copyright © 2007 Dave Ulrich and Norm Smallwood. All rights reserved.*

---

*Dave Ulrich is a professor of business at the University of Michigan and cofounder of The RBL Group ([www.rbl.net](http://www.rbl.net)), a consultancy in Provo, Utah. Norm Smallwood is cofounder of The RBL Group and coauthor of five books and many articles on business strategy, organization, and leadership. They can be reached at [MUOpinion@hbsp.harvard.edu](mailto:MUOpinion@hbsp.harvard.edu).*

## RESOURCES

Leadership brand plays out very powerfully at the institutional level, too. Companies with strong leadership brands create deep pipelines of skilled managers and executives and often enjoy a distinct competitive edge. To learn more about organizational leadership brand, see our *Harvard Business Review* article, “Building a Leadership Brand” (July 2007, # R0707G), or our recently published book, *Leadership Brand: Developing Customer-Focused Leaders to Drive Performance and Build Lasting Value* (Harvard Business School Press, 2007).