

Building an authentic personal brand of leadership for the 21st Century

For business the pace of change and the growth of connectivity is remorseless.

We want our organizations to be adaptable and flexible, but we also want them to be stable and controlled. We want an emphasis on the value of people, their engagement, empowerment and commitment, but we also want an emphasis on compliance, planning and delivery.

Leadership and behavioural complexity

In such a complex, dynamic environment, the implications for leadership are far reaching. Effective leadership requires a simultaneous mastery of seemingly contradictory or paradoxical capabilities - decisiveness and reflectiveness, broad vision and attention to detail, bold moves and incremental adjustment, task performance and people orientation.

Research on leadership and management during the past several decades provide strong evidence about the importance of behavioural complexity for effective leadership. This concerns distinctions in leadership roles, the associated behaviours required and the leadership skills therefore that need to be acquired and applied.

The notion of the 'brand' of a leader has similarities with the notion of the brand of a product, and it can be best viewed and developed through the eyes of the customer and consumer. Such leadership can be viewed as a transactional event or a series of transactional events, in which the impact the leader has on subordinates, peers and bosses is crucial. It is crucial in delivering a task to a high standard, and over time it is a crucial in shaping a culture, environment and norms which will either support or undermine long term success.

Developing an authentic personal leadership brand:

Four traits to build on

- 1. Cognitive complexity and systems thinking:** these include the ability to understand how the various parts of the organization relate to each other and how changes in one part of the system will eventually affect the other parts. A high cognitive complexity and systems thinking allows leaders to develop a better mental model to help understand patterns of causal relationships and how these may play out over time.
- 2. Situational awareness and social intelligence** both involve a person's ability to identify and understand the leadership situation, including social and political processes and relationships. Social intelligence involves social and cultural cognition, that is understanding the environment and its constructs in order to react appropriately for socially successful conduct.
- 3. Self awareness and emotional intelligence** includes the ability to recognize and regulate one's emotions, and to develop empathy, which is essential for determining how to influence and motivate people. Self awareness includes the ability to understand one's values, motives, and effectiveness in influencing others and seeing your impact on others 'in the moment'.
- 4. Openness to learning and new ideas** is essential for leaders who must adapt to changing conditions. It includes the ability to accept feedback about the impact of one's actions and knowing how to improve them. It also includes the ability to learn new ways to dealing with problems. A person who relies on habitual forms of behaviour and denies negative feedback or new ideas is unlikely to be flexible and adaptive.

The practical implications of the research on behaviours and skills is that developing an authentic personal leadership brand is crucial to managing in a complex, dynamic environment.

These four traits can all be developed with training, practice and feedback.