

Achieving the LOOK & SOUND of LEADERSHIP

By Tom Henschel



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EXECUTIVE COACHING TIPS



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Personal Branding ▶ 07/10/14

Self-branding

Donna and I were old friends by now. Originally, I'd been her coach. Later, during her exhilarating rise through the company, she'd often engaged me as a thought partner. These days we tended to talk when planning an off-site for her group. But today, aside from catching up, she'd invited me to lunch specifically to think about one of her direct reports.

"I'm dying to get Jason promoted," she told me. "But the other members of the senior team don't see his value yet. I can only push so hard. So now I'm wondering what *he* can do to change their minds."

"What's his brand at this point?" I asked her. "Not just with the senior team, but in general. What's his brand?"

"Dependable," she answered, not having to give it much thought. "He's a stable guy. No drama. What you see is what you get. Does what he says. That's his brand. And that's all good, right? But being dependable doesn't light any fires."

"How has he shaped his brand himself?" I asked.

She asked what I meant.

By way of example, I told her about Siobhan, a fiery Irish woman I'd coached. She'd been distressed as, over the years, she'd found herself nudged out of important meetings and kept out of the loop with certain information.

One day during our coaching, as we discussed a business situation, she said with a laugh, "Oh, I haven't a clue. I'm rubbish with numbers."

"Wow," I said, "how often do you say that out loud?"



“What? That I’m rubbish with numbers?”

I nodded yes.

“Oh, I say it all the time. Been saying it for years. And it’s the truth! I am!”

“Perhaps it is the truth,” I said, “but I think maybe you’ve said it often enough that people believe it. Maybe even *you* believe it. But if people think you really *are* rubbish with numbers, I can see why they might not want you at the table. Maybe you’ve branded yourself.”

Which is what had happened. Siobhan’s words about herself had branded her. And not for the better!

Branding with adjectives

“So what words does Jason use about himself?” I asked.

She ran through her mental files, then said, “You know what he says a lot? ‘We can do that.’ He’s always saying yes. And delivering. It’s great. But if I’m going to get him promoted, he needs to be more than just dependable. He’s going to have to be dynamic, too.”

“Do you know what words he’s carrying around in his head about himself?”

“How do you mean?”

I looked at her a second, then said, “Instead of telling you, can I do it with you?”

“You bet!” she said, putting down her fork. She’d always enjoyed thought exercises.

“OK. You’re at a meeting with other department heads. Big meeting. Lots of voices. Complex conversation. And you do great. You make at least two, if not three, suggestions that are so smart the group adopts them on the spot. Your suggestions significantly alter—and improve!—the next steps. You are a rock star that day. And everyone there knows it.

“Then you have to go to another meeting. You excuse yourself and, as the door closes behind you, people nod their heads in admiration. And they say, ‘Wow. That was great. Donna is so . . .’



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"How do you fill in the blank? What words do you want them to use to describe you at your absolute best?"

With only the slightest pause, she said, "Smart, strategic and collegial."

"Those are great adjectives, Donna. And I think they're pretty accurate. I think that's how people experience you because those words are pretty active inside you."

I continued. "So that's the exercise. Imagine yourself at your best, then ask yourself what adjectives you'd want people to use to describe you. The question I'm asking is what words do you think Jason would use to describe himself?"

Turning adjectives into action

She looked doubtful. "Are you saying whatever words he uses about himself would automatically get recognized?"

"Automatically? No, I think it takes time. But I'll tell you what I see a lot. I'll do that exercise with someone. She'll rattle off a list of words. I'll write them down. Then as we examine them, she'll see a gap between the words she's chosen and how she wants to be perceived.

"So she'll choose a new word to focus on. A word that will stretch her and develop the new quality she wants. She'll think about the new word all the time. In meetings. In her emails. On the phone. And, then, yes, that word starts to crop up around her. That stretch word starts to become real. It's uncanny, but I've seen it more than once."

Without skepticism she said, "That's an interesting idea: you can create your brand just by thinking about it."

"And by speaking it, too," I added. "If you were going to turn up the volume on 'collegial,' then you might say during a meeting, 'In the interest of collegiality, how about if we did such and so?' You'd begin to use the word in conversation, not just keep it inside your head."

She considered that. "I can see how this works. I think this would be a good exercise for a lot of my people. But do you know what I thought of when you said that just now? Bragging. Do you remember how much we used to talk about whether self-promotion was bragging?"



"I sure do! Does self-promotion still feel like bragging to you?" I asked.

"No, I'm past that. Now I'm trying to get some of my people past it. And teach them how to self-promote appropriately. Jason's the perfect example. I need him to stop putting limits on how he talks about himself."

"You could remind him," I said, "that he's creating his own music every day."

She liked the image and asked me to explain it.

I told her I'd first heard it from a music executive named Harlan.

Creating the soundtrack of your career

Harlan loved developing people. He told them they each created their own soundtrack that played all around them every day.

Their soundtrack was crafted in a million little ways, he'd say. Some ways were auditory, like actual music: the rhythm of their speech; the range of their inflections; whether their tones were predominantly friendly or challenging.

But they also crafted their soundtrack by their repeated patterns. He called these *motifs*.

"For example," he'd say, "how does some guy answer the majority of questions he gets asked? Does he condescend? Does he welcome? Does he attack? Does he complain? Over time, everyone gets to know the guy's *motifs*."

"The bad news," he went on, "is that it's pretty universal which music is harmonic to our ears and which is dissonant. So if your music is dissonant, you either have to change the music you create everyday or accept that you have a big hand in creating whatever part of your life is making you unhappy."

He told his people: start writing your music with consciousness; don't merely play by rote, unconsciously. "Because," he explained, "when other people think of you, that soundtrack plays in their heads. It affects how people say good morning to you and which work you get assigned to and how much you get paid."



By the time he retired, Harlan had groomed an entire generation of devoted young executives.

Donna loved the idea of a soundtrack. "And the *motifs* idea is perfect. To me, the list of adjectives people make up about themselves contributes to their *motifs*."

"I agree," I said. "The words people say about themselves in that thought exercise shape the music the rest of us hear from them."

"I am definitely going to use that," she said.

Shaping your list = shaping your brand

"So," I said, "if Jason can begin to imagine more dynamic words, over time, his soundtrack will become more dynamic."

"Are you thinking I could actually sit down and do that exercise with Jason?" she asked. Then laughed. "Wouldn't that be like coaching without a license?"

"Feel free to use it, Donna. Anyone can use it!"

"Well, I'll bet whatever words Jason says about himself will be a lot more cautious than the ones I said about myself!" Then she flinched a little. "Oh! Wait! I don't want to say anything that would sound like I'm criticizing his list, do I?"

"Good point! No, you don't," I agreed. "But you can ask him which words are getting him the results he wants."

"Oh, I like that. 'What is getting him the results he wants'." I could tell she was making a mental note.

I told her, "I recently did that thought exercise with a client. She brainstormed a long list of words. But listen to her top four: 'Creative' and 'original.' Then 'disorganized' and 'confused.' The first two were really working for her. The last two clearly weren't. But *all* of them had become her brand."

Donna nodded. "My old boss used to call those kinds of people 'the buts' because when you described them you'd always say, 'They're really good at *this* part of the work, *buut...*'"



She was eager to talk with Jason and begin improving his brand. By the time we left, she'd jotted on a napkin:

BRAND

What "brand lines" do you repeat about yourself? I.e., "I'm rubbish with numbers!"

What adjectives do you imagine people say about you at your best?

Add "stretch" adjectives to help you develop.

You're always creating your soundtrack.

Your natural repeated responses become the motifs we hear.

After seeing her notes, I told her about two personal branding books I've used with clients over the years. One, by Peggy Klaus, is, "[Brag! The Art of Tooting Your Own Horn without Blowing It.](#)" The second, by Kathleen Reardon, is, "[The Secret Handshake: Mastering the Politics of the Business Inner Circle.](#)" Donna wrote those down on her napkin, too.

Donna had known me and my brand a long time, so I wasn't too surprised when, as we stood up, she smiled and said, "I'm determined to give Jason *The Look & Sound of Leadership!*"

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