



Defining your brand as a leader

Insights from Leadership Fellows

October 2017

Society of Leadership Fellows
St George's House, Windsor Castle

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Introduction

This is the eleventh in our series of “Insights from Leadership Fellows”. It draws on a Leadership Conversation organised by St. George’s House, Windsor Castle through our Society of Leadership Fellows from 22nd – 24th October 2017.

When the Board of St George’s House decided to establish the Society of Leadership Fellows last year, they were clear that our mission should be to create “safe space” in which leaders can “nurture each other’s wisdom”. As we went through this Conversation we felt that we were “living” the brand, and found this experience very rich and creative because we all gave our energy to the process of drawing out each other’s wisdom.

Because this was a two-night event, we pushed ourselves hard to make it possible for individual members of the group to achieve significant breakthroughs in their thinking as a result of the Conversation. In the final hour, everyone present said that they had achieved their own breakthrough, which was a powerful tribute to the extent to which Leadership Fellows had supported each other in developing their own thinking from the very beginning of our Conversation.

As with all of our Leadership Conversations, the most valuable insights were personal to members of the group and so are not shared outside the confines of the group. Nevertheless, the general insights that follow each served as an eye-opener for us at the time, and we hope that you find them helpful.

Following the insights, we take you through a series of 10 questions to support you in defining more closely your own brand as a leader.

Six Insights

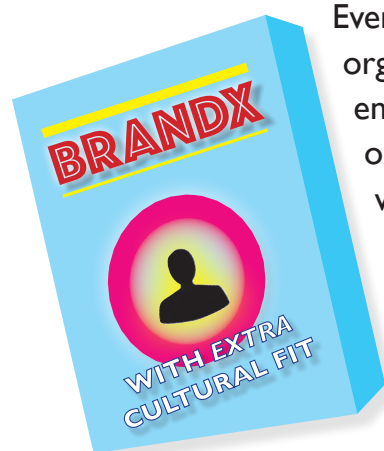
- 1 To a large extent, the nature of our brand as a leader will be influenced by the stage we are at on our leadership journey**

For younger leaders, their brand will largely be about their ambitions for the future. Through their current leadership role, they will seek to model what they would like to become.

As we all become more established as leaders, it becomes more difficult to disconnect our brand from our current role and the track record that we bring.

- 2 Our brand as a leader is dependent upon whether we work in an organisation with a strong internal culture of its own**

The stronger the culture of our organisation, the more our brand as a leader needs to achieve a high degree of cultural fit.



Even if we take over as Chief Executive of an organisation with a strong culture, we still need to ensure that our brand reflects that culture – unless our aim is to lead a process of culture change within which our brand symbolises the new culture that we wish to develop.

3 Our brand as a leader tends to be strongest when we see it as rooted in our greatest strengths

Those who are most confident in their brand as a leader tend to see it as rooted in their greatest strengths.

The brand is then about how they apply these strengths with such flair that colleagues naturally see their strengths as exceptional, enabling them to be seen as a leader in transition from good to great.

4 Where leaders fail to define a brand of their own, they still tend to have one – based on what those around them regard as their particular style as a leader

Whether or not we choose to develop our own distinctive brand as a leader, the simple truth is that we have one. If we don't seek to define it ourselves, others will define it for us.



This is why it is so important that we engage directly with the challenge of how we would like others to view our brand. If we duck the challenge, others will still have a view of us that might or might not serve our interests as a leader.

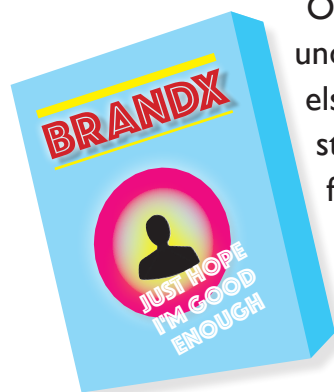
5 Our brand as a leader must be truly owned by ourselves. It is not a mask that we can choose to put on, and take off, at will

We know that a commercial organisation might change the words written on a tin, to redefine the brand of this product. However easy – or difficult – it might be to rebrand a product, it is nearly always more difficult for an individual to rebrand themselves.

Personal rebranding takes time, especial in an age when a leader's authenticity is seen as so important to their personal brand.

6 One thing undermines our brand as a leader more than anything else

Most of us face one 'common enemy' when it comes to our confidence in our brand. That is our fear of being shown to be inadequate and exposed as an "imposter".



Our shared capacity for self-doubt as leaders undermines our leadership brand more than anything else. So many of us are fearful of highlighting our strengths, lest we over-expose ourselves and are found not to be as good as we would like to be.

10 questions to support you in defining your brand as a leader

We have worked up the 10 questions that follow, to support you in thinking through how you would like to define your brand as a leader. If you wish to take part in the questionnaire, you might wish to print off a hard copy first.



How would you expect others to describe you as a leader?

Imagine that those who work most closely with you as a leader are discussing you, without you being around. Please jot down in the space below the 5 or 6 adjectives that you would expect them to use to describe how they see you as a leader.

Please don't spend long thinking about this. What matters are the first few words that come to mind, on the basis that they are trying hard to capture YOU as a leader, without in any way being ungenerous – or overly kind!

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How would you LIKE them to describe you?

Now please think of the adjectives that you would like these work colleagues of yours to use when describing you.

As before, please don't spend too long on this. You're simply trying to bring to mind the words that you WANT them to use when describing their experience of you as a leader.

3

How big is the gap between your answers to Q1 and 2?

Question 2 wasn't easy, was it. It shows how little time we each spend thinking about our brand as a leader.

Please compare your answers to 1 and 2, and ask yourself how big is the gap.

The bigger the gap, the more you probably need to do to reposition yourself as a leader; if others' views of you are to be closer to what you want them to be.



4

In what ways are you exceptional as a leader?

If you want the option to try and change your brand, the best place to start is to ask yourself in what ways you are exceptional – or not far off from being exceptional - as a leader.

Without letting yourself be held back by false modesty, what are the areas where you're already strong and where you would like to be stronger still? If the words don't readily come to mind, can you think of some 'leadership moments' these past few months that highlight strengths of yours of which you are proud?

If you can think of two or three different strengths that you showed in these moments, please jot them down below. They are key to defining a strong brand identity.

5

How do these strengths fit in with the culture of your organisation?

If you run your own small business, or work for yourself, you might feel that you can give this question a miss and go straight on to the next one.

If you work in an organisation that prides itself on having a strong culture, it's important to think through how your strengths fit in with that culture.

Please imagine that you show the strengths listed in answer to question 4 to a senior colleague of yours. Would they look at them and say what a great cultural fit you are with your organisation?

If they wouldn't, are there one or two aspects of your leadership where you would like your key strengths to become more closely aligned with the culture of your organisation?

6

Which leadership behaviours of yours prevent these strengths from defining your brand as strongly as they might?

Now that you have these strengths in your mind, please ask yourself whether there are one or two leadership behaviours of yours that prevent these strengths from having the impact that you would like.

We all get in our own way at times, and the strongest leaders have their own strategies for managing their shortcomings.

Please jot these behaviours down in the box below. In so many top teams, it isn't these behaviours that are the No 1 problem. It is people's reluctance to own them that causes the greatest problems.

7

So, what do you propose to DO to minimise these bad habits that get in the way of you defining your brand more clearly through your distinctive strengths?

This is the stage when it's really important to keep focused on the importance of "brand differentiation". The most successful brands always convey the message that there is something distinctive about the product that sits behind the brand.

So, one of the key reasons for you engaging with your bad habits as a leader is to ensure that nothing gets in the way of your brand projecting your distinctiveness as a leader in ways that you would want.

Can you focus on how a small number of close colleagues at work might support you in leaving behind these bad habits?

Do you want to ask them to "call the behaviour" when they feel you're slipping back into one of these habits?

How else could they help you to step out of a routine that plays to your weaknesses rather than your strengths?

It will be easier to talk this through with trusted colleagues, once you have one or two ideas to try out on them. Remember, the key is inviting their support.

With their support, it won't be long before you come up with some very practical ideas for moving forward.

8

Can we make sure that you have the RIGHT WORDS to describe the distinctive elements of your brand?

So, you're now fairly clear how large is the gap between how others see you as a leader, and how you would like them to see you; you have defined what you see as the distinctive elements of your brand, and also how close colleagues at work can support you in managing those leadership behaviours of yours that can sometimes compromise your brand.

Before you go any further, can you pause and check that you have chosen the best words that you can to define the distinctiveness of your brand.

Please tell yourself that you are not allowed to use the words that you've already used in answer to question 4.

You must now try to find a small number of different words to capture your distinctive strengths in a way that defines your brand as a leader.

What might they be?

Please try to limit yourself to the same number of words that you used to answer question 4.

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Now that you have used different words to describe your key strengths, which ones best capture the distinctive brand that you want to have as a leader?

Comparing the words that you have just used with those that you wrote under question 4, what does this make you think? Was it really hard this time, because you think you got it right before? If so, how great to know you got it right first time!

If the words that you used this time round feel as if they capture your brand rather better, that's also great, isn't it? So many leaders don't challenge themselves enough on how they would like to define their brand.

They also don't think hard enough about how they want to draw on these strengths to model certain key behaviours for those around them.

What this means is that we sometimes go "over the top" in living certain brands. For example, the leader who regards themselves as an empowerer of others can sometimes be so reluctant to use the term "I" that they actually make it difficult for those they are seeking to empower to talk about their own needs as well, because their empowering leader never seems to acknowledge his/ her own needs.

It's incredibly important that your brand as a leader enables to you to model your key strengths in a way that brings out the best in others.

Looking again at your answers to questions 4 and 8, can you now capture your best way of defining your brand as a leader? We won't ask you this question again!

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Are you tough enough on yourself in applying your own authenticity test to yourself as a leader?

There is nothing to write down here, since this is just a question to take with you. It comes from a challenge that came up powerfully during the Conversation.

Sometimes we all have to manage something of a mess in our life outside work, whilst trying to persuade ourselves that we can continue with “business as usual” in our work life - and no-one will know any better.

This might work for some people, for a while, but more often than not others quickly see through any disconnect between our professional persona and our personal identity.

It can so easily compromise our leadership if we try to pretend that life overall is hunky dory, whilst in reality the truth is very different.

If and when people see through this, they can be quite harsh in their judgement of us for “living a lie”.

This is why it is important for each of us to apply our own authenticity test to the way we present ourselves as a leader.

Whatever the brand might be that we want for ourselves as a leader, we have to make sure that we are real and don't spend so long trying to define the ideal image of ourselves that we misrepresent who we really are.

If we want to sustain high trust relationships with those around us, people at work need to feel that they know who we really are.

Making sure there is no disconnect

Of course, there are bound to be some parts of our lives that we wish to keep private. This point is not about what we disclose. It's about us being true to ourselves and not pretending – with close colleagues - that some things are fine if and when they're not.

Whatever sort of brand we wish to define for ourselves as a leader, it is important that we should try to live the “no pretence” maxim as fully as possible.

It is the idea that leadership success can require us to pretend to be what we are not that can make us so vulnerable to being undermined by the imposter syndrome.

This is why we need to be careful to ask ourselves whether there is any sort of significant disconnect between how we are at work and how we are in the rest of our lives.

If we leave ourselves in any way vulnerable to the charge that we are “living a lie”, that can be used to undermine our brand as a leader.

However we might define our brand, we need to be comfortable with it as our brand.

Capturing something powerful about us

We need to be seen to be living it and working hard to make it stronger and more effective, because that brand captures something powerful about us, not just as leaders but as human beings in the broadest sense.

Increasing connection

During this Conversation, one of our Leadership Fellows quoted the words that Brené Brown uses in her latest book “Braving the Wilderness”, when she writes that

‘True belonging doesn’t require us to change who we are. It requires us to be who we are.’

Being who we are doesn’t mean that we can’t change a whole host of our behaviours to become more effective as leaders. What it does mean is that we should (as BB says):

“show up as our true selves and brave the wilderness of uncertainty and criticism” rather than just trying to “fit in”.

It means that our brand is all about connection, and increasing connection.

It is not a front or an opportunistic device to get on. It’s a way of being ourselves that enables us to give that much more to others, through the role that we are developing for ourselves as leaders.

Achieving true belonging

As Brené Brown writes, *“True belonging requires us to believe in and belong to ourselves so fully that we can find sacredness both in being a part of something, and in standing alone when necessary.”*

In this context, our brand is a means of increasing belonging and defining to ourselves more clearly who we are in those moments when, as leaders, we find ourselves standing alone.

Does your brand enable you to achieve greater connection with others, as well as enabling you to feel more secure about who you are, as a leader, in those moments when you find yourself standing alone?

That's a powerful question, isn't it?

Every time we feel satisfied with the answer that we give, it's still a good idea to tell ourselves not to leave it too long before we return to the question again.

