A topographic map with contour lines, a river, and a road. A large, white, semi-transparent letter 'P' is overlaid on the left side of the map. The map features various lines representing terrain, water, and infrastructure.

8 Tips for Managing Your Personal Brand

Rodger Dean Duncan

Face it. For good or ill, you have a personal brand. In fact, in the eyes of others, you are your personal brand.

Just like some retailers are known for great customer service and some airlines are known for lost luggage and surly gate agents, you are known for the combination of your personality, behavior, and presence. It's your brand.

If you come across as empathic and approachable, that's part of your brand. If you sometimes miss deadlines and let other commitments slide, that's part of your brand.

Your reputation is your brand. Your brand is your reputation. And it makes a world of difference in every relationship you have.

Your personal brand can have an especially big impact in new relationships where people are just getting to know you.

Here's an example. Jim Rainey was the first outsider to be appointed president and CEO of Farmland Industries, a giant agribusiness company with operations in 19 states. Farmland

had been hemorrhaging from operating losses—\$374 million for the previous five years. Within 12 months of taking over at Farmland, Jim injected a proactive, collaborative spirit into the corporate culture, inspired the workforce and their constituencies to accomplish things never before dreamed, and returned the company to profitability. The impressive turnaround became a case study at the Harvard Business School.

The most pertinent point here, though, is not *what* Jim Rainey helped his people accomplish. The most pertinent point is *how* he did it. He did it with integrity, trust, and respect. He did it with tough-minded focus on business detail, coupled with genuine caring for the human element of organizational change. He did it with authentic leadership.

A couple of stories illustrate Jim Rainey's personal leadership brand. A few days after joining Farmland he walked into an early morning strategic planning meeting. You can imagine the attentiveness of all the eager beavers trying to impress the new boss. When he first entered the room, Jim overheard a young man mention that his wife was in the hospital. Jim inquired about the woman's health, and the man said his wife was expecting a baby who was likely to be delivered that day.

“Let me make a deal with you,” Jim told the young father-to-be. “I promise to give you a personal briefing on the outcome of this meeting if you’ll rush over to the hospital where you belong. You’ll get only one chance to witness the birth of your baby, and you don’t want to miss it.”

On the surface that may seem like no more than a nice gesture. But it’s that very kind of thoughtfulness that earns trust and loyalty.

“Walking the talk” is another way to earn trust and brand loyalty. During Jim’s first day on the job, the head of the company’s motor pool asked what car he wanted for his personal use. Jim requested a simple Chevrolet with standard options. Then the conversation went like this:

JIM: “When the car arrives, just give me the invoice and I’ll write out a personal check.”

MOTOR POOL GUY: “Oh, you don’t understand, Mr. Rainey. You get a free company car.”

JIM: “No, you don’t understand. This company lost tens of millions of dollars last year. I’ve been asked to turn things around and, beginning today, nobody gets a free car.”

Jim immediately told me about the conversation and asked that I check to see how long it took the word to reach employees a thousand miles from headquarters. What would you guess? Two days? One day? It took less than 10 minutes for people several states away to get word of the new CEO’s policy on executive privilege. (This was before the use of email.)

For the next several years I watched Jim Rainey demonstrate integrity, trust, and respect in hundreds of private acts that quickly (almost instantly, in some cases) became part of his personal leadership brand.

I see other leaders badly erode their credibility by ignoring or miscalculating the power of example. Somehow they assume that either nobody notices or nobody cares if they are petty or thoughtless in dealing with subordinates and colleagues. Oh, how dangerously wrong they are.

The issue here is not gossip. It's the natural tendency to pass along information (perceptions) about *the way people are treated*—which is one of the most important determinants of loyalty, commitment and return business.

Hmmm. That sounds a lot like what the experts say about customers, doesn't it?

Why the similarity? Because people's feelings cannot be neatly compartmentalized. People have many of the same needs in every one of life's roles. You return again and again to a first-rate retailer like Lands' End or L.L. Bean or Nordstrom because you're confident you'll have a positive experience. You know you'll be treated with dignity, you'll be listened to, your needs will be met. And you reward the retailer with your loyalty and lots of return business. By many metrics, return business is the best kind of business.

The great leaders I know honor the same principles with their own people. They treat them with dignity. They listen to them. They meet their needs. And they're rewarded with loyal workers who are passionate about strong performance and great results.

For smart leaders, this has very little "Ah-ha" factor. They understand and practice the principle almost instinctively. For others, the notion of employee-as-customer seems foreign and counter-intuitive. They are the ones whose competitive advantage is slipping or nonexistent. If you're one of the former, my hat's off to you. If you're one of the latter, I simply say, "get with the program." You should be treating your employees at least as well as you treat your very best customer. Either way, you're building your leadership legacy. You're establishing and reinforcing your personal brand.

Over the past forty years I've worked closely with people in a wide range positions—presidential cabinet officers in two White House administrations, members of the U.S. Senate, CEOs of some of the world's best companies, and leaders of religious and community organizations. The best of the lot are very mindful of the persona they project. Even if they may not use the term, they are careful in tending to their personal brands.

Here are eight personal brand tips we can glean from the best leaders:

1. Relinquish Power

Of course asking people to check their titles at the door does not erase the reality that they have different titles, different levels of authority, and different power bases. But during conversation itself, equality must reign supreme. Participants should remove their badges of status and resist any temptation to pull rank.

*“Face it. For good or ill, you have a personal brand.
In fact, in the eyes of others, you are your personal brand.”*

During a routine maintenance outage at a nuclear power station one crew spent its entire 12-hour shift dismantling some equipment for inspection. A second crew continued the work for another 12 hours. Then when the third crew shows up one of its members said, “Hey, this is the wrong equipment. We’re not scheduled to work on this stuff until next year.” Oops! It turned out that the leader of the first crew was a command-and-control type who told his people not to ask any questions, just do their jobs. The second crew chief had the same approach. The third crew chief had a very different mentality. He told his people, “We’re all in this together. I’ll challenge your

thinking and I expect you to challenge mine. That's the only way smart people can help each other work even smarter." We learned that several members of the first two crews knew full well the equipment being dismantled was not scheduled until the following year. But they didn't dare speak up. On the other hand, it was easy for a guy on the third crew to say, "Hey, this is the wrong equipment." The primary difference? His leader's viewpoint on the use of power. By the way, this incident delayed completion of the outage and cost the power company more than \$2 million in lost revenue.

2. Defer Judgment

Deferring judgment doesn't mean you'll never reach a conclusion. Of course you will. But you'll serve yourself and others best if you delay, postpone, or hold off on your judgments until you have sufficient data to proceed with justifiable confidence. Open dialogue with your colleagues cannot pay rich dividends if its currency is shrouded in preconceived notions and untested conclusions.

Avoid *Allness*, a dogmatic, unqualified, categorical attitude that you know all there is to know about something. Self-confidence is wonderful, but make sure you don't lead with it or you'll smother dialogue and be offensive to boot. Practice saying four simple words: "I didn't know that."

Avoid *Hardening of the Categories*, a failure to differentiate. Come to the realization that an individual member of any group (or category) is just that—an individual. No two people are

quite alike. There's really no such thing as a "typical" Italian, or a "typical" New Yorker, or a "typical" engineer, or a "typical" CEO.

Avoid *Frozen Evaluation*, another kind of problem with differentiation. It occurs most frequently when we assume that people don't develop and change. Simply accept the premise of change. Have you ever made a mistake? Of course you have, thousands of them. But this doesn't mean you'll continue to make the same mistakes the rest of your life. (Okay, now, resist the temptation to list the people you think are exceptions to the rule.) If people thought of us only in the context of our past errors, none of us could be trusted in any circumstance.

“ Self-confidence is wonderful, but make sure you don't lead with it or you'll smother dialogue and be offensive to boot. Practice saying four simple words: “I didn't know that.”

Avoid *Inference-Observation Confusion*. This is a pattern of communication mix-up that's had us all in hot water at one time or another. It occurs when we infer more than we've actually seen or heard about a situation. Be mindfully aware of when you're inferring as opposed to observing, then calculate the degree of probability that your inferences are correct.

3. Challenge Your Own Stories

On a drive along California's central coast I noticed an interesting bumper sticker on the vehicle in front of me: "Don't believe everything you think." Unlike most bumper stickers, this one caused me to ponder the layers of meaning and even to challenge—well, to challenge my own thinking.

Everything we do is a product of our thinking. Every single act is rooted in a thought. Our thoughts may be subtle or even unconscious, but they nevertheless are at the root of our behavior.

Your brain has a mind of its own. No kidding. On its own accord, the brain tends to act more out of self-preservation than out of rationality. We have a natural tendency to tell ourselves stories that justify what we're doing or failing to do. We have a natural tendency to allow our stories to masquerade as facts. We have a natural tendency to seek information that reinforces our view and to filter out or ignore information that contradicts our view. When we're not careful, some of us can jump to conclusions faster than an Olympian can do a back flip. This isn't a character flaw, it's just part of being human. But these natural tendencies can be crippling. The good news is that we can teach ourselves a new set of behaviors that serve us better. The ideas under the Defer Judgment section (above) are an excellent start.

4. Prime Your Idea Pump

If you've ever studied semantics, organizational behavior, or even history and politics, you've likely heard some variation of this:

There are *known knowns*. These are things we know we know. There are *known unknowns*. These are things we know we don't know. There are *unknown unknowns*. These are things we don't know we don't know. And there are *unknown knowns*. These are things we know, but don't realize we know them.

There's a lot of wisdom in that tongue-twister. In any change effort (in fact, in life itself) we must constantly juggle what we know with confidence, what we'd like to know but don't yet know, what we don't even know we don't know, and what we unknowingly already know.

The best thinking often has a strong element of serendipity. You're energized by the prospect of a difficult challenge. You suspend judgment. You ask a lot of questions, many of them seemingly naïve and unrelated. You double-check your data and challenge your assumptions. You discover things you weren't even looking for. Then you have a solution—not necessarily the *only* solution, but one that works—that you never imagined.

In your leadership role you'll likely be called on for big-picture thinking. Look beyond your parochial agenda and consider how your decisions and actions may affect others.

When the situation calls for *creative* thinking, regard failure as a natural part of exploring what works and what doesn't. The ubiquitous Post-It® Note, one of 3M's most popular products, was invented when an "accidental" batch of sticky-but-not-too-sticky adhesive was discovered to have a use that nobody had thought of before.) Be prepared to connect seemingly unrelated ideas and thoughts.

When *strategic* thinking is needed, be clear about the direction you want to take and the reasons for doing so, then evaluate the pros and cons of ideas. With strategic thinking, planning is a priority. Ask questions to break issues down into manageable parts.

With *possibility* thinking, dream new dreams with no barriers or limitations. (Just a few short years ago only a handful of people dared to dream of a powerful communication device like an iPhone that could be carried in your shirt pocket.)

When *reflective* thinking is the order of the moment, look back and learn from what you and others have done. Past experience can be very instructive, as long as we avoid getting stuck in the "we've always done it that way" trap. Reflective thinking can help you put issues into perspective, reveal the big picture, evaluate issues logically without emotions of the moment, and provide insight for future situations.

5. Listen With Empathy

Some people seem to operate under the misconception that to “listen” is merely to allow the other person to talk while you prepare your response. Real dialogue requires much more.

First, some important points on “empathy.” Empathy is not the same as sympathy. Sympathy involves commiseration, agreement, or a shared feeling. *Empathy* is more about appreciation and understanding. Understanding between and among the participants is a critical goal of dialogue. People engaged in true dialogue may or may not come to agreement. Their primary goal is mutual understanding. It’s a difference worth noting. (After all, if agreement is going to be reached, it must be preceded by understanding.)

Listening with empathy requires patience. It requires a willingness to allow the other person to take the conversation in fresh directions (serendipity can pay dividends). It requires letting go of your own needs and focusing on the other person’s needs. It requires mindful attention to the subtleties of tone, mood, temperament, and the spirit of the moment. It’s all about listening to understand rather than to control or to coerce.

But what if you’re talking with someone who simply “doesn’t get it”? What if the other person holds a view that seems contrary to everything you stand for? Surely, you may say, this notion of empathy doesn’t apply in such situations. Yes it does.

6. Tame the Elephants

Because people like to avoid discomfort, it's tempting to allow some topics to remain undressed—sort of like leaving a splinter in your finger even though logic tells you the temporary pain of digging it out is not nearly as bad as the likely infection from leaving it in. Most of us have been in situations where there's a relevant issue that nobody seems willing to talk about. We might even say to ourselves, "There's an elephant in this room, and I sure wish someone else would tame that animal." Well, to tame an elephant—an "undiscussable"—you must first acknowledge its existence.

“Until the elephant's presence is made explicit—plain, clear, straightforward, obvious—the quality of true dialogue is limited.”

Effective people understand the difference between *implicit* and *explicit* communication. The elephant—an undiscussable subject—is implicit. It's latent, tacit, undeclared, unexpressed. People talk *around* the elephant without acknowledging that it's in the room and affecting everything that's going on. But until the elephant's presence is made explicit—plain, clear,

straightforward, obvious—the quality of true dialogue is limited. Naming and taming the elephant is a metaphor for making implicit issues explicit.

Taming elephants is a three-part process.

First, identify the elephant. Although you always want to be respectful, identifying the elephant is not the time to mince words. Call it what it is. One CEO I worked with had a very loud, very aggressive “my way or the highway” communication style. Referring to his style as merely “tough minded” would have missed the mark and might even have been accepted as a compliment. I told him he was widely regarded as a bully and that his style was having the unintended consequence of shutting down the very kind of straight talk he said he expected of his people.

Second, uncover the underlying assumptions that people have about the elephant. In the spirit of genuine curiosity and discovery, talk openly about your view of the “elephant” and invite the other dialogue participants to share their versions of “reality.”

Third, make it safe to talk openly about the elephant. People are afraid of elephants because they don’t want to get stomped on.

7. Inquire to Discover

In a typical “discussion,” inquiry might come across (and in fact be intended) as interrogation. We’ve all seen people who ask questions primarily for the purpose of challenging the other person or bolstering their own position. A common tactic by command-and-control folks is to play the “Gotcha” game in which they ask questions designed to convince or win, to even to entrap, attack, or overpower people. Inquiries rooted in these motives, no matter how congenial in tone, quickly begin to feel like a prosecutor’s cross-examination.

Consciously resist the temptation to play the “Gotcha” game. Remember, your purpose with inquiry is to discover and learn, not to entrap or rebut. If you’re genuinely committed to open and honest communication with your colleagues, follow this simple rule: Talk so people will listen, and listen so people will talk. And not necessarily in that order. Be willing to be influenced by others, regardless of their titles or rank. You might be surprised what you can learn from even the greenest recruit.

Egyptian novelist Naguib Mahfouz said it best: “You can tell whether a man is clever by his answers. You can tell whether a man is wise by his questions.”

8. Advocate With Respect

A lamentable consequence of our debate culture is that we're usually more adept at advocating than inquiring. And the "advocating" we see is often done more as leadership-by-announcement than as part of a true dialogue environment. We have plenty of public models of this. The programming at Fox News, CNN, and the other cable networks is heavily weighted with loud and overbearing people whose purpose in life is to ram their views down someone else's throat.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not suggesting that good leadership requires gathering endless reams of "input" before a decision is reached. Neither am I suggesting that decisions must always be preceded by a dialogue session. If the building you're in catches fire, you wouldn't expect the fire marshal to tiptoe into your meeting and launch into timid inquiry: "Excuse me, folks. May I ask, how do you feel about smoke inhalation?" You would want him to say something like, "Please stay calm. There's a fire in the building. Leave this room immediately and proceed to the nearest exit."

Advocacy is making a statement or expressing a view about your own position. *Inquiry* is using thoughtful questions to explore and discover the views of others. To a great extent, the quality of the dialogue is determined by the spirit with which you state your views and inquire into the others' perspectives. That's where respect plays an indispensable role. Even experienced hostage negotiators will tell you that respect for the other party is a critical determinant of their success.

High quality advocacy is a clear and understandable presentation of your viewpoint. A high quality advocacy delivers with such precision and focus that the chance of misinterpretation is greatly diminished. We should advocate so clearly that not only is it easy to understand us, but it's difficult to *misunderstand* us. And it should be done with a good balance of humility, confidence, and respect. *Humility* because we don't know everything, *confidence* because our position should be based on a reasonable interpretation of available data, and respect because the other parties also have valuable contributions and may in fact be able to disabuse us of our position.

A Common Thread

You'll notice that humility is the common thread running through all these eight tips. In this age of loud, high testosterone behaviors, humility is often not held in particularly high regard. But it's a primary ingredient in the "brand formula" of every excellent leader I've observed (that includes parents as well as CEOs). Even those who exude confidence have an inner humility that enables them—motivates them, in fact—to learn from anyone within their circles of influence.

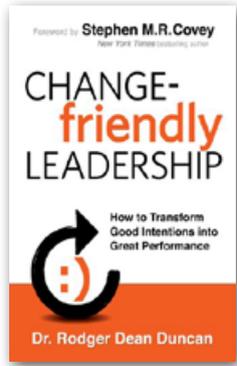
We have a family friend named Chuck. Chuck is relatively small in stature, not at all an imposing figure, and he talks in the soft tones you'd expect of the Sunday School teacher he is.

Chuck is also known as retired General Charles C. Krulak, former Commandant of the United States Marine Corps. In both his distinguished military career as well as in his high level work in business, Chuck proved that size and noise do not necessarily carry the day.

As I've worked with countless leaders over the past four decades, I've noticed that the best ones are coachable. They not only tolerate candid feedback, they thrive on it. A key reason they're so good is that they constantly look for ways to get better. This doesn't require a frontal lobotomy or a personality transplant. All it requires is a willingness to adopt a set of behaviors that consistently produce the best results.

Remember that you make a lousy somebody else. Be yourself. But be your *best* self. Use these eight behavior tips to build a personal leadership brand that will produce the results you want. Consistently. 📌

Info



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR | Since 1972, Rodger Dean Duncan has been a consultant and coach to hundreds of people in leadership positions, ranging from presidential cabinet officers in two White House administrations to C-level executives in some of the world's top companies. He earned his PhD in organizational dynamics at Purdue University. He is author of Change-Friendly Leadership: How to Transform Good Intentions into Great Performance.

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