Your leadership reputation is your most valuable asset. A strong reputation makes it easier to earn respect from your peers and to advance your career goals.

But what takes years to build can be lost in a moment’s notice. Social media is a perfect example of this; when leaders abuse the privileges and unique opportunities that social media channels offer to amplify their leadership value proposition, they often find themselves turning to reputation management firms to refresh their online image and keep their career progression from losing momentum.

Unlike with social media, however, you can’t hire an outside firm to fix and refresh your workplace reputation that easily. In fact, rebuilding your workplace reputation requires a renewed commitment to develop, live and manage your personal brand consistently and authentically.

A personal brand is the total experience of the relationship others have with who you are and what you stand for as a leader – and how you live your personal brand each and every day regardless of the circumstances. Unfortunately, most leaders (less than 15% according to leadership surveys conducted by my organization) still don’t know how to develop their personal brand – and when they have made attempts, they were more likely to launch self-promotion
campaigns that tarnished their workplace reputations and made their colleagues begin to question their true intentions.

Personal branding is the process of defining a leadership identity that describes what you can be depended on to deliver – consistently and confidently. Personal branding is about solidifying your leadership value proposition and corresponding narrative that tells the story about your unique features and benefits (just like any other brand does). The key difference with a personal brand is that you are the only one that can truly manage your brand’s evolution. The choices you make throughout your career – the people you associate with, your mentors and sponsors, the companies you work for, your network affiliations (just to name a few) – influence your ability to strengthen or contribute towards weakening your personal brand.

When you let your colleagues, the workplace culture, political dynamics in your organization, and/or vendor and client relationships define your personal brand development, you are putting your reputation management in the hands of others. Please don’t misunderstand the importance of external factors influencing your personal brand development. They are valuable. But the variables you choose to incorporate into your brand and how you manage it shape the leader that you become. Therefore, you must be extremely mindful of those you align yourself with and those you allow to enter into your domain.

Ultimately, to build a solid reputation, you must put yourself into a position of control (through greater self-awareness) to have more positive influence over how others perceive you and the decisions you make in the workplace on a daily basis.

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Control doesn’t mean you must act a part or believe you can manipulate how others experience you. It’s the opposite. Control means that you trust yourself enough to be your most authentic self – and as a consequence you have greater awareness of your surroundings, the people in the room, your body language, the
manner in which you communicate, etc. When you are in control of your personal brand, you are more transparent than ever before and thus are able to be more deliberate with your intentions; confident in your actions, you are responsible enough to admit when things don’t go your way and smart enough to reach out to others when you need a helping hand.

You also know your “best-fit” types of workplace cultures, the networks you should belong to, and how you can best support the advancement of others. You become a more responsible leader that sees opportunity in everything while anticipating the unexpected. A passionate explorer of endless possibilities with a strategy focused on making things better, you are a highly collaborative and engaging leader who has other’s best interests at heart.

You always know when leaders lack confidence because they begin to act the part and try to be too perfect. Trial and error is part of the leadership journey and if you are trying to be perfect, you are less likely to allow others to become part of your domain as you shape the way you think, act and innovate. A leader’s reputation is doomed by reaching toward perfection.

People want to be led by those who are relatable and likeable but also transparent and well-intentioned. Leaders who try to be perfect harm their reputation when it makes them seem unapproachable or not open to feedback. They spend all of their time developing themselves professionally without equally finding ways to advance, lift and accelerate the advancement of others. The best leaders always pay it forward; they share the momentum of their success with others.

Are you managing your brand or allowing someone else to dictate its path?

The following is an example of a client my organization worked-with a couple of years ago who gave us permission to share her story. As you read about this client – who we’ll call “Christine” – think of how you can relate to this situation and the way she course corrected.

Christine was not being taken seriously enough as a leader by her colleagues and peers at work. She felt stuck about how to navigate her career into a more elevated leadership role within the organization where she could have more
impact and influence. She needed to turnaround a reputation of not being assertive enough in meetings, too soft-spoken with senior leadership, and not being sufficiently active in company functions and industry networking. Though she was well-liked and a strong performer, she played it too safe rather than finding ways to leverage her likeability – whether to enable positive outcomes, become more politically savvy, or open new doors of opportunity for herself, her direct reports and the teams that she led. She allowed the workplace environment to control her leadership reputation because she focused too much on being well-liked and fell into the trap of complacency. She was so focused on driving results she lost sight of her other responsibilities as a leader – to be a great decision-maker; to be strategic, visionary, collaborative, and entrepreneurial; and to employ greater focus on making those around her better. Instead of leading, she was managing. Though she had been in a leadership role for three years, she never made the transition from manager to leader.

Though Christine was an extremely qualified leader with more than sufficient experience, she had never defined her personal brand well enough to manage her reputation. Like most leaders that don’t develop and live their personal brand, she was unknowingly being irresponsible to the organization and people she served.

As she battled the gulf between assimilation and authenticity, her employees were looking for increased consistency in her approach, more authoritative presence in her style, and heightened performance standards for her teams. They wanted a leader that was confident in whom she was and deliberate in leveraging her strengths. Christine needed to dive into her full potential as a leader in order to help others grow and prosper in their roles. Until she did, her employees felt that she was putting their careers and their own reputations at risk.

This was a wake-up call that forced her to step back, reevaluate her leadership skills and those characteristics that came most naturally to her. She was determined to live her most authentic self. She identified her strengths, asked her colleagues to provide transparent feedback and began to align herself with the right people and organizational resources to elevate her leadership presence. She
stopped micro-managing people and started to define roadmaps for their success. She ultimately took control of her reputation by viewing herself as the enabler of her full potential – rather than the organization. She trusted herself enough to actively put her ideas and ideals to the test and soon began to find her leadership rhythm.

This is how Christine turned her reputation around. She began to develop and manage her personal brand by employing several tools and resources that earned her respect and recognition from employees and peers and eventually led to her promotion. And the most powerful tool of them all:

- **Define Your Personal Brand Story**

When you have a seat at the table, your narrative (what you say and how you say it) will have a profound effect on how others perceive you and what they can expect from your leadership.

How others witness, react to, respond to and embrace your role as a leader requires you to control the narrative by defining your personal brand story – which you must then enable to its fullest in your leadership role. Your personal brand story should be centered-around serving others – advancing yourself without any need for self-promotion.

When you can articulate who you are and what you stand for as a leader, you can then set forth the expectations you have from others and what others can expect from you. The mystery, inconsistency, and uncertainty of your leadership identity is replaced with a clear understanding derived from four key elements that define your brand:

1. Your enduring idea
2. Your primary differentiator as a leader
3. The primary experience you deliver to others as a leader
4. Who your leadership serves.
After critically examining the answers to these four key elements that define your personal brand story, you have your leadership value proposition.

Here is Christine’s personal brand story:

“Seeing things that others don’t by connecting the dots of previously unseen opportunities is what defines my leadership and makes it distinct. My methodical approach allows me to dig deep into the issues and responsibly identify the interconnection points to most efficiently and effectively influence sustainable outcomes. This strategic process gives me the required insights to execute my decisions quickly, communicate them confidently and enable high-quality performance standards for my team. My leadership will foster an environment that serves and rewards continuous improvements to create the required momentum for the business to strengthen its competitive advantage.”

Christine’s personal brand is: Expansive Innovator.

Tagline: Stretching the Ways We Think to Strengthen Our Competitive Edge

From this personal brand story, Christine can deploy her leadership confidently and share it with her employees, her boss and senior leadership so that she can be most optimally utilized in her leadership capacity. She can now course correct before circumstances force her hand. In other words, her personal brand story becomes her reputation management tool, assuring that she stays focused on who she is and what she stands for with elegant transparency to others.

This is how the best leaders control their leadership reputation. They break themselves apart and put themselves back together again with greater clarity of purpose and responsibility to those they serve.

You control your leadership reputation. Be well-intentioned about genuinely serving the needs of others and you will not only have a leg-up on managing your reputation, you will begin to advance your own career.

- Follow-me on Twitter @GlennLlopis or join our LinkedIn Group to continue your leadership journey!