

Leadership: A Question of the Brand

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Abstract

Leadership is at the heart every living organisation, be it human or animal community. Leadership spans the existence of living creatures and or human beings. In trying to understand the phenomenon of leadership various concepts and philosophies have been put forward. Leadership has been described in terms of traits, transformational effects, group norms, etc. The main issue in leadership remains the ability to influence. The leadership of an organisation gives character to that organisation and subsequently projects the image of that organisation. Leadership branding has connotations that impinge on the internal and external dynamics. Internally leadership shapes the organisation values which determine the overall performance. Externally, leadership branding transforms into images that project the organisation to the broader community of stakeholders. Ultimately, the dynamics of leadership need a good understanding of the role played by leaders across a plethora of organisations as they shape the destiny of respective organisations and their outputs. This is a conceptual paper which weighs in on the philosophy behind leadership branding and its implications to organisational performance.

Keywords: Leadership, branding, perceptions, vision, followers, identity.

Introduction

There is still growing interest in leadership concepts (Western, 2011) and leadership as a brand (Ulrich and Smallwood, 2007). The identity and execution of the leadership process is referred to as leadership branding and attracts interest across the academic spectrum and the corridors of power in organisations and political circles (Mirza, 2012; Ulrich and Smallwood, 2007). Developing leadership branding requires leaders to increase their ability in attaining meaningful outcomes (Intagliata et al., 2007). Organisations have a role to play in creating distinctive leaders and the leaders themselves have a duty to establish themselves as a brand in whatever they do. Intagliata et al., (2007, p.13) state that “leaders who develop only common attributes of leadership do not establish leadership brand”. What seems to be at stake is the leaders’ ability to holistically brand themselves. Historically, the notion of “great man’s theory” (Northouse, 2007) which advocates the idea that leaders are born with special qualities seem to nullify the concept of leadership branding. In some cases this notion of trait theory becomes

apparent when references are made to the past great leaders. Personal qualities and attributes become fundamental in determining who the leader is or not. Bass (1990) argues that despite the measures taken to examine the leadership characteristics, there is still need to consider the leaders' qualities.

Understanding leadership branding forms the basis for this paper. There has been a shift in the examination of the leadership brand in the literature. Reference has been to characters in the Bible as a way of unlocking the notion and related dynamics of leadership branding (Woolfe, 2002). God's intervention in making individual leaders for his own people has been much emphasised and this has led to deeper insights into leadership branding; i.e. the unique way one could lead other people (Woolfe, 2002a). It is generally agreed that right from the creation of mankind, God has used ordinary people to lead his own people. This paper aims to examine the reality of leadership as a brand and how leadership branding lends itself both internally and externally.

The Essence Of Leadership

The concept of leadership is not a new phenomenon and the reality of leading in both familiar and unfamiliar environment is not new either. Woolfe (2002) writing on the Bible on leadership suggests that this book has everything about leadership which the corporate world needs and has multitudes of case studies the world could benefit from reflecting upon. Reference is made to the heroes of the bible such as Abraham, Moses, David and lessons from their exploits are provided. Friedman and Langbert (2000) present Abraham as a transformational leader who was redefined by his response to a call and this could be seen as tantamount to rebranding. The call had its challenges and standards to meet in fulfilling the divine promise just as a brand is expected to meet certain requirements. Similarly the book of Exodus in the Bible clearly shows the earliest intervention of leadership as noted by Harris, (n.d) president of the American Baptist College. It echoes the notion that the ultimate branding derives from God (ibid). This corresponds to the records when God commanded Moses to lead the people from the captivity of Egypt (Herskovitz, and Klein, 1999; Friedman and Friedman, 2007). Such action required determination as well as willingness from the followers. Risks were experienced as Moses set off to undertake a long journey to the land of Canaan. Harris (n.d) argues that God's strategy to brand leaders in the bible extends to David a heroic figure in Israel and David's attributes and story elevate the quality of leadership not only in Israel but also in the world at large (ibid), these writers argue.

A review of both earlier and contemporary literature shows that Leadership is one of the most explored concepts in the academic disciplines (Pfeffer, 1993). This is an indication of leadership's vitality and its place in the society. Leadership is not far from each individual – where two or three people are gathered for a purpose the different aspects of leadership are implicitly or explicitly displayed in the process. The leader and follower relationship becomes an important part in a given situation. Such interaction calls for organising and re-organising the situations and understanding the individuals' perceptual process and hopes (Andrews and Field, 1998). Leaders merge at all times, during the crisis, group settings, familiar and unfamiliar situations and in other situations often where one least expects. Individuals are exposed to different types of leaders at all times; however, what seems to be at stake is the comprehension and subtleties of the leadership brand.

Despite much rhetoric, individuals are still striving to understand the concept of leadership. Leadership is a broad term which is perceived differently. Northouse (2007) argues that perceptions of leadership differ considerably as some view it to be focusing entirely on people's personality, power, behaviour, skills and ability to do more than an ordinary person can do. Stogdill (1974) cited in Northouse (2009, p.2), indicates that "there are almost as many different definitions of leadership as there are people who have tried to define it". He adds that the notion of leadership has developed significantly over the past six decades and its complexity and sophistication can be noted in most of the leadership publications.

It has been argued that leadership is a process whereby an individual, influences a group of people consisting of individuals in order to achieve a common goal (Northouse, 2009). Given the complexity, there is raft of investigations surrounding the concept of leadership. Different types of leadership which exist in organisation have been identified such as Transactional Leadership, Transformational Leadership assigned leadership and Emergent Leadership (Northouse, 2007). Such types of leadership suggest that being leaders requires having to wear many "hats" to suit the common goals. Each situation will dictate the type of leadership which Hersey and Blanchard (1972) have termed as Situational Leadership approach. In this regard the leader has to change and react to the situation either in the supportive or directive manner in order to maintain the brand.

The pertinent issue in leadership is the way leaders portray themselves in the modern world as well as in business. Some commentators on leadership argue that the success of the organisation is based upon the leader relationship between the leaders and the followers Zaman and Ahmad (2008). The rudimentary idea behind leadership is this notion of Leader Member Exchange theory as noted by Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) which suggests that the leaders form two groups the in-group (close to the leader) and the out-group (distant from the leader). The in-group are considered to be trustworthy and have a lot to contend with such responsibilities, rewards and attention (Lunenburg, 2010) and in return the followers are expected to be reliable, loyal towards the organisation - hence go an extra mile to build rapport with the leader. On the other hand, the out-group comprises of followers that seem contented with contractual relationship and do little-based merely on the task. The out-group can be seen as more of strangers who are less trusted and who can be managed by the formal policies and guidelines (ibid). In any group formed the leaders have to maintain the status quo which are characterised by their brand image which has been developed overtime through the leader and follower relationships.

The Leadership Brand

The factors that embrace leadership centre on inspiration, vision and influence. Spinks and Wells (1995) assert that leadership is about inspiring others with a view to working together for a common purpose. Richards and Engle (1986) postulate leadership in terms of vision, personalised values as well as building an environment where shared goals can be achieved. Leadership is about influencing people to realise results or set objectives (Rauch and Behling, 1984; Northouse, 2007). It would follow that the way things are done by those guiding will determine success or failure. Bernstein (2003, p.1134) makes a strong case for corporate branding and argues that, "A brand equals product plus values." The notion of leadership renders itself to the development and realisation of brands, i.e. a product with value attributes. In the

same vein the approach to leadership is also branded as it has its own attributes which portrays an image that would render itself to a brand. This is echoed by Ahmad et al., (2012, p.153) who states that “what makes a brand strong are the image, associations and the personality translated as emotional benefits to customers”. Essentially the leadership brand transforms into organisational processes that produce goods and services with certain unique attributes, i.e. brands. In this article the main focus is on leadership branding, i.e. the idea of creating an identifiable way of leading an organisation that gives a character and ultimately an image reminiscent of a brand usually attributed to products. In this regard leadership is an internal service to the organisation.

The concept of leadership branding lends itself to both the internal and external dynamics of branding. In the internal branding it is about the people’s conduct, shared brand identity (Vallasterand Chernatony, 2004) and hard work put in order to aid the organisations’ systems and processes (Hendra, 2008) whilst the external branding focuses on perceptions in the eyes of external stakeholders. It is generally argued that leadership is not homogeneous – it is dynamic and keeps on evolving as individual leaders tell their stories about what is visible or invisible to them. The leadership branding is not only seen in leaders fulfilling their organisational obligations, the vision or influences but also in their interaction and the stories between the past and present situations.

Branding is about good ‘positioning’ of the product, the service, the individual. Herskovitz and Crystal (2010,p.21) point out that, “The brand persona drives the continuity of the overall brand message.” Herskovitz and Crystal (2010) further assert that the brand persona resonates with human characteristics; and this could be argued to project the nature of the decision makers, i.e., the leaders behind the brand. The authors would argue that a brand is reflection of array of decisions that shape brand identity. Mirza (2012) sees the notion of “leadership branding” as a growing area that fosters a collective approach in championing the development of the appropriate leadership skills in the organisation which impact the external environment and the customers. Hendra (2008, p.179) states that “leadership branding is a method used by a leader to promote himself in order to get influence or positioning in the organisation using his power, image, skills, ideas and others”. He adds that “the image a leader creates calls branding of leadership” (ibid, p.181).These views put responsibility for brand effectiveness on the leadership of the organisation.

According to Hendra (2008) leadership branding in organisations involves two standpoints namely the personal and organisational standpoints. In the former, he notes the leader and employee/employers relationship as being important and in the latter the relationship is solely between leader and customer within the organisation. Such perspectives would follow that organisational systems should be market driven and that the leadership of the organisation is focused on customer satisfaction (Kotler and Keller, 2009). In that respect Mirza (2012) would allude to the notion that customers should be central to leadership programmes which enables managers to identify themselves within the brand provision of the organisation.Mirza (2012, p.23) states that, “When organisations get their leadership brand right, they are in a stronger position to meet and exceed customer expectations.” Therefore, it can argued that successful brands have an appropriate approach that yields effective results in the communication of organisations, products and their values to differentiate them.

Edgeman and Dahlgaard (1998) highlight important contributions of leadership in organisations in arguing that trust demands that people are empowered, driven by strong core values and that the leadership credibility derives from integrity and that communication accounts for recognition. They further point to the promises leaders make in organisations which should be credible and that leadership is one of the few factors that influence business excellence. It could be argued that leaders should be dynamic in approach and seek to embrace the main challenges through times in order to remain contemporary in the constantly changing world (Drucker, 1995). The authors would argue that from the foregoing it is clear that those led and those leading should be prepared for change in order to remain contemporary in a dynamic environment. The annals of history have recorded the changes that mankind has evolved through time from the beginning of time and at all times adaptation has been essential and remains so to this day and will for the future (Scott and Herron, 2007).

Expressing The Brand

Ahmad et al., (2012, p.153) argue that “branding is often wrongly referred to as an exercise involving the launching or changing of company logo, design style colour scheme and corporate slogans” what seems ignored amidst this perception of branding are the strategic developments that involve leadership, process and people (ibid). Bernstein (2003, p.1135) maintains that a logo for a brand is “... the outward manifestation of a corporate identity.” This would therefore imply that what we see tells a story (Boje, 2008); of the leadership’s efforts. Traditionally a brand has a physical expression in the form of an inscription burnt into the offering, originating from an old practice of marking cattle at a ranch with an identity burnt onto their skin for differentiating one ranch from another (Davis, 2005; Bernstein, 2003). Mirza (2012, p. 23) identifies qualities of organisation with successful leadership branding as, “...credibility ...trust, communication,...consistency, and ...resilience.” While the different characteristics of successful leadership branding could be summarised as put forward by Mirza (2013) it is important to note that they would differ in significance from one industry to another. A brand is aligned to the vision of the organisation and for success it needs to be anchored in a solid set of values underpinned in a core ideology (Collins and Porras, 1994). The respective core values manifest in the brand expression can be lived day to day and establish an outstanding reputation of the organisation which reflects good leadership. Edgeman and Dahlgaard (1998) concur that core values play an important role in the realisation of a brand.

According to Collins and Porras (1994, p.73) core ideology equates to the sum of core values and purpose which are defined as, “Core values...The organisation’s essential and enduring tenets- a small set of general guiding principles; not to be confused with specific cultural or operating practices; not to be compromised for financial gain or short-term expediency; Purpose....The organisation’s fundamental reasons for existence beyond just making money- a perpetual guiding star on the horizon; not to be confused with specific goals or business strategies”. If the vision is about excellence that rubs onto the brand and the same applies to the brand if the vision is blurred. Walesh and Asce(2009)point out that the inspiration to excel comes from various sources. This would mean that across the whole gamut of organisational processes for a given phenomenon leaders can find a basis for excellence for their brand. Having considered the diverse range of views from within the spiritual and corporate approach to provide a working approach to running of an organisation it is clear that the process shapes what is now referred to

as the leadership brand. The authors are aware of the cost of the process in terms of the financial outlay and the time required to develop the brand.

Conclusion

The authors in this study argue that the core of organisational success is underpinned in a leadership founded on solid principles that give an organisation a character. Subsequently, the organisation's way of doing things gives it a character and an image which becomes its branding. The literature considered in this article points to the importance of leadership branding (Mirza, 2013). This would embrace elements of culture and the philosophy of the main movers and shakers in the organisation who could be the chief executive or an agent of change in the organisational setup.

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