

Continous Development - Building a Personal Brand – Part 1

Over the years, I have been requested by many professionals and industry to help them with insights on their development, growth and areas of focus after they get into a job with industry. Many of them feel underutilized or in some cases feel that they do not have the skills and aptitude to move beyond their current jobs / roles. Some of them put across the responsibility of their development and growth on the organizations whom they serve. Not surprisingly talent attrition is a huge risk to knowledge organizations worldwide.

My first cut thoughts on your development and growth is that , each of us need to continuously educate ourselves both within the domain where we serve and the world outside. Remember, your growth and development is your own responsibility. You cannot outsource it to anyone else or the organization you serve. Good organizations try and provide you a few more opportunities than others to help employee development. They hope that such development would be a win win proposition for you and the organization. However, most organizations have realized that while providing such opportunities is actually showing you the source of the water, no one can be forced to drink it. That is a very personal quality which develops with self awareness. Always remember that you have the highest stake in your own professional success.

As a start, we need to cultivate good reading habits – daily newspapers alone are not good enough. Successful professionals continuously read and update themselves on various things around the globe, in the country, within the interest area and do specific job related reading. Remember, that however high your academic qualifications are, without this investment of time in developing your knowledge further, you can become obsolete and disconnected within a few months. Regular investment in quality reading of atleast 45 minutes to an hour daily at a convenient time is what helps you build your personal brand. But of course, reading alone is not adequate to build your brand. A whole host of areas need to be worked on. Let me try and list a few in this three part article as we try and understand the business of building our own personal brand

Trust and dependability – Clearly the mother of all qualities. Are you the kind of person who will always underpromise and over deliver ? Are you the kind of person who will give 100% to every single commitment you have made ? Are you the kind of person who understands that if something needs to happen which involves you, you need to be the pivot to make it happen and will work and galvanize all support irrespective of the constraints or difficulties ? Such people soon win the trust of all those who they come in contact with – family, peers, friends, associates, professional acquaintances and the society at large. The toughest and the biggest brand of all is that of trust and dependability. You will always find those who are trustworthy are always in the centre of the most important priorities in any set up. Clearly a priority personal brand trait.

Achievement Orientation - To start with a good academic record is a clear indicator of achievement orientation. Industry looks at this metric as a starting point for employment.

Orientation to depth - I regularly suggest to students and professionals to take up any one domain area and make oneself aware of the developments in that space. Lets say, you take up the “Steel sector”. A good orientation to depth will develop if you understand the global scenario, prices, demand and supply, policy, national details, global best in class practices and benchmarks, competition and research on alternatives. Market valuations and stakeholder inputs along with expert analyst inputs on the sector. For this to be true, you need to have your finger on the pulse of the sector and once you develop a knack of tracking the various facets of the sector, it becomes a simple well oiled process. This would give you the depth in the sector and is a clear indicator that your knowledge is deep. This clearly is a key differentiator with others in the same peer group and a foundation to building your own personal brand.

Knowledge of global trends – Keeping yourself updated on global trends in specific domain areas will help you to take knowledge based decisions and provide good advise when required. Reading of global journals , portals, web sites and magazines help you in this quest which helps you build the personal brand of a global employee.

Understanding of linkages and impact – A key quality of professionals is to understand the linkages between issues, policy, market activity on your domain space. When you keep yourself abreast of various things in the sector of interest, try and understand the play when variables change. This is what makes some professionals experts whom media continuously refer to while understanding linkages and impact. Such people are interviewed by the media and you see / hear their views in print, visual and audio modes. This quality is a pillar to building your own personal brand.

We will try and uncover more of these traits in our quest for excellence and towards our efforts at understanding the process of building our very own unique brand value proposition in sequels to this article.

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In the first part of this article, we explored the rationale for building a personal brand and understood a few key qualities which we need to focus on. These were Trust and Dependability, Achievement orientation, Cultivating depth in domain, knowledge of global trends and understanding the linkages between issue and events

Let us try and explore a few new qualities that professionals need to develop:

Ability to communicate effectively – In today's global economy, the importance of this quality needs to be fully understood. More than 70% of appraiser remarks in industry today, contain the remark of – Needs to improve on communication skills. HR professionals then try and organize to send the appraisee to a communication skills workshop and nothing much changes on the ground or with the individual. That's because, communication is such a misunderstood term and seems to fit the definition of many qualities. It is important to understand that communication has many dimensions – verbal communication, written communication, brief e-mail communication, cross cultural and accent issues in communication, leadership communication, structuring a communication, use of emotional intelligence in communication, communicating a view / report / making a presentation, public speaking, media related communication, relationship building communication, technical communication, telecommunication, and a whole lot more. Unless the dimension of communication is clearly identified and highlighted for improvement and success targets are set, generic communication becomes a motherhood training initiative with little or no impact.

In today's competitive and highly connected world good professionals need to rank high on each of the relevant dimensions of communication. Development gaps need to be highlighted with specific dimensional details and then addressed through a training / development initiative.

Questioning and Probing skills – One would have often heard the remark that the biggest challenge to solving problems and issues is to understand the key issue. Good professionals do not immediately get to problem solving mode the moment they come up with a problem. They question, probe, dig deeper by asking probing questions. Questioning is a key skill which is also a critical leadership trait. At decision making levels, the quality of professionalism is displayed by the quality of questioning skills before coming to a solution. Good questioning also requires structured thinking and analyzing skills, so important in the business world.

Project Management Skills – Today careers in knowledge areas are a series of projects. Every professional irrespective of industry or role is managing projects, resources, timelines with critical paths and critical chains involved in their execution. It is therefore important for all professionals across domains to develop this skill through both serving as understudies to good project managers and understanding project management through formal education and managing various tools which helps us manage projects better.

Developing Common Sense oriented thinking – I have heard many a professional throw up their hands in despair that they do not get the professional exposure in the specialized areas they desire. In fact, it starts at the student level where they feel that they have not had a good grounding on well thought thorough, relevant summer projects replete with good mentors. In most cases, projects are what you make of them. I have suggested to many a student that when they do not get exposure to projects of their

choice, try and look for opportunities on the street where you can pick up tips in the area of interest through observations and fieldwork. One can learn a lot of management skills by going to the wholesale vegetable market early in the morning where money is borrowed at exorbitant rates of interest to buy produce by the poorest in our society. Procurement, differential pricing, working capital management, debt servicing, negotiation skills, customer segmentation and servicing and whole lot more can be learnt just by spending a couple of days at the market or mandi. Watch a bhelpuriwala in action through the day and learn multitasking, customer relationship management and a whole lot more. This street learning learnt by artisans, many of whom have had very little formal education clearly demonstrates that this learning develops through observation and a hands on approach to understanding processes, problems and solving them. A very vital skill in life.

Understanding commercial and regulations in the area of domain - Reading widely in the area of governance, commercial and regulatory areas is another input which helps the mind understand these dimensions better. If this is not your domain area, each of us will be well served by developing atleast a working knowledge and identify situations when you need to call for professional help.

To summarize, the qualities of communication, questioning, probing and analyzing, project management, common sense based thinking and developing an understanding of the commercial and regulatory issues impacting our domains further the value of each of our personal brands.

In the third and final part of this article, we shall explore other areas of handling failures, handling change, handling the mundane, building a positive mindset, dedicating ourselves to a cause beyond ourselves and try and understand the timelessness of qualities of value based living and personal humility.

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In the first two parts of this article, we tried to understand a few critical inputs into developing our personal brands in industry. In this concluding part, let us try and align our minds and behaviour to the skills sets that we have developed.

Dedication to a cause which is beyond our own personal interests – Many young students and professionals regularly ask me on how they can focus themselves on their careers. My suggestion, rarely accepted on the face of it is quite simple. Do not work on your career or solely for monetary benefits. Work for a cause or a set of causes larger than your personal interests or business that you firmly believe in and keep at it even when things get rough. In the long term, dedication to laudable causes leads to self actualization and the summary of your journey is what society refers to as a career. Enough examples abound – Abdul Kalaam, Narayana Murthy, Baba Amte, Delhi Metro's Sreedharan, Dr. Varghese Kurien and many more. Each if them succeeded when they set about working on their cause. When the cause became a reality, they became the models of success. Important to remember that more one runs behind self career management and monetary success, one can at best obtain unsustainable short lived successes and in many cases a sense of failure but when you dedicate yourself to a cause, the cause takes care of your long term sustainable emotion of success, service and contribution.

Humility – Difficult to develop this quality. This is a quality that develops early in life and sustains throughout. It is a quality that cannot be faked but which is clearly visible to one and all . It is a quality that defies an easy definition and a quality that is an essential ingredient for legendary leadership. Many professionals mistake this as a sign of weakness. But when understood, this is clearly a quality which transcends many weaknesses and provides a lasting impression.

Values – Each of us need to understand that aspect of our beliefs that will never change in this changing world and commit ourselves to them. Such enduring values are enduring personal brand traits when relentlessly used to help us verify the rightness of the direction we take at different points in our lives

Handling Failures – When we have a humble disposition, dedication to a laudable cause beyond ourselves and live with a sense of values, handling our lows and failures becomes very simple. Remember, failure is a bigger and better teacher than success. Each of us need to develop a failure showcase and take insights from each of us. For that is what helps us grow wise. Never try to cover up failures or pretend they never happened. In fact, the world at large has a great deal of respect for those who have failed , learnt, pursued relentlessly and then succeeded .

Handling Change

Not without reason, have we often heard the lines – Change is the only constant. If you do not like change, you will like irrelevance even less which is the natural consequence for those of us who fail to understand change and change ourselves accordingly.

An open mind, a flexible approach and a realization that there are many right ways to each goal are critical pieces of equipment for each for each of us on our journey through life.

Sometimes, people come and tell me that they have done all this and yet it does not seem to have any impact on their lives. Each of us need to be resilient enough to withstand the negative influences that happen all around us and continue to have a positive outlook and mindset irrespective of the troubles of the present.

I am reminded of the words of wisdom someone once shared with me –

When nothing seems to help, I go and look at a stonecutter hammering away at his rock, perhaps a hundred times without as much as a crack showing in it. Yet, at the hundred and first blow it will split into two, and I know it was not that blow that did it but all that had gone before.

For in the final reckoning, what really counts is the timeless law of success

Life's battles are not often won
By the talented or the most qualified man
The battle of life is won
In all cases without exception
By the man who thinks he can

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