



Misguided Branding & Executive Presence B.S.

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By Dr. Chance T. Eaton

I was recently presenting to an Executive team an educational and succession plan for “Executive Development”. After the presentation, an Executive informed me of just how important it was to build your brand when it comes to Executive development, suggesting that it would be a beneficial addition to the curriculum. They then turned to me and asked if I understood what they meant when they said how important it was to brand oneself. I replied, “I think so, do you mean the impression one has earned through expressing talent, character, trust, and principles?” I said this because I could not imagine it meaning anything different. She did not mean this; she said it meant to convey and telegraph what you want others to see in you. I said I disagree...

This isn't the first time I have heard of the importance of telegraphing oneself in a brand from a marketing perspective. The fact that I continue to hear of its importance has led to me to believe that the corporate environment is once again failing to understand how to build true leaders for the

21st century. Corporate consumers of leadership development and education continue to invest in the leadership program of the month looking for quick fixes to problems misunderstood in the first place.

To give a little context to the short conversation I had with the Executive, I discovered that the same company's latest book of the month was titled “Executive Presence”. The idea of executive presence is to telegraph that you are in charge, measuring your image and signaling to others that you have what it takes. It is not so much about making difficult decisions, it is about needing to appear decisive in public (Hewlett, 2014). The idea is to telegraph gravitas and command through how you act, speak, and even look. As a result, adhering to technique based approaches like Executive Presence, you are left with Executives and Leaders working to express a marketable version of themselves, so that you come to follow in their self-perceived wisdom and specialness. Worse yet, they are teaching this to their mentees and employees, building yet another generation of ineffective leaders.

We know that leadership development in this country is not working. Gallup's employee engagement levels have remained unchanged with 70% of the workforce disengaged (2015). This relates to leadership because Gallup finds that over 60% of the variance in engagement levels are due to the immediate supervisor. Stanford Organizational Behavior Professor Jeffrey Pfeffer (2015) noted that not even half of the employees in the country report being satisfied at work and between 28 percent and 56 percent of employees want to leave their jobs. Further, 35% of U.S. employees would willingly forgo a substantial pay raise in exchange for seeing their direct supervisor fired.

Despite the billions of dollars that we pump into leadership and executive training, especially education that deals with shallow techniques of telegraphing your image, you can see just why nothing is changing for the better.

Branding one's self with Executive Presence is not and will not serve us in the development of tomorrow, or today's for that matter, leaders. If we really want to talk about branding, let's take a quick visit to what brand means to the American Rancher. The brand is something that is created and symbolically represents family culture and tradition, much like a family crest. But a brand in and of itself means nothing – it is the family's character, integrity, and honor that come to give the brand meaning. This comes from the earned respect; from helping serve their community, being there in times of need, disciplined in work, and deep in family values. The brand is an extension of the earned dignity and respect that has originated in past generations and continually earned into the next.

My family submitted their brand on March 1st of 1951. The brand in and of itself means nothing – but in our neck of the woods, my family's brand means everything. It represents a people that have strong work ethic, service to the community, strategic intelligence, and the courage to keep moving on no matter the situation. We didn't telegraph and convey what we wanted others to see in us...we earned it through being hard working and respected people of Eastern Montana. The brand is not about telegraphing a desired characteristic or attribute...the brand is the reputation earned from the demonstration of your principles;

the character and substance that has earned trust and respect.

The next time you hear the advice to go and brand yourself – understand that they know not. They have learned techniques from the latest book of the month club. Your challenge is to earn your brand through the actions and trust you build with your community, and adhering to basic human principles that have stood the test of time. Leadership really is a social science rooted in self-awareness, character development, building relational trust, and practicing an attitude of collaboration – not a marketing technique.

Hewlett, S.A. (2014). Executive Presence: The Missing Link Between Merit and Success. New York: Harper.

Pfeffer, J. (2015). Leadership B.S.: Fixing Workplaces and Careers One Truth at a Time. New York: Harper.



Dr. Chance Eaton has over a decade's worth of experience working in the field of Education & Organizational Development. Due to his unique educational and work experiences in finance, psychology, leadership & management, education, noetic sciences, and agriculture, Dr. Eaton provides his clients with relevant business solutions grounded in theory and research. To learn more about Dr. Eaton's services, please visit www.HRSolutionsInternational.com.