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### BUILDING PERSONAL BRANDS TO STRENGTHEN LEADERSHIP EFFECTIVENESS

Maria Anggia Widyakusumastuti<sup>1</sup>, Ferane Aristrivani Sofian<sup>2</sup>,  
Siti Nahdiah<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1,2,3</sup>Marketing Communication Program, Communication Department,  
Faculty of Economics and Communication,  
Bina Nusantara University, Jakarta, Indonesia 11480  
[manggia@binus.edu](mailto:manggia@binus.edu); [ferane.sofian@binus.edu](mailto:ferane.sofian@binus.edu); [snahdiah@binus.edu](mailto:snahdiah@binus.edu)

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#### Abstract

Leadership holds a critical point in achieving a sustainable competitiveness for companies, unfortunately leadership still remains the primary issue companies around the world face. Effective leaders must have clear vision, willing followers, influence, emotional intelligence, seek information capability, understand circumstances, and communication skill; which can be represented through a strong personal brand. This study discussed how managerial-levels of multinational companies build their personal brands to strengthen their leadership effectiveness using eight steps. This research used descriptive qualitative research method. There are eight steps to build personal brands for leaders. The finding of this study showed that formal and informal discussions are two important factors to build good relationship and to understand target audiences. Digital profiles, professional appearances, and outreach are considered as communication tools. Mentors also strengthen leadership effectiveness as it is not only help leaders to know themselves better, but also create bigger career opportunities. Brand monitoring can be done through interactions with different target audiences, including mentoring. In the end, leaders must integrate all steps and consistently communicate their uniqueness to build strong personal brands.

#### INTRODUCTION

Today, in this highly competitive business world, leadership holds a critical point in achieving a sustainable competitiveness for companies. Referring to a survey conducted by Deloitte University Press, it was discovered that leadership still remains the primary issue companies around the world face. A survey displayed that 86% of respondents stated leadership as an 'urgent' or 'important' issue (Trapp, 2014).

Leadership, especially transformational leadership, has a positive influence on organizational performance (Hurduzeu, 2015). Today, in this

dynamic business environment, leadership is not limited to merely conveying orders and passing the instruction down through the rank; leadership is more focused on helping people attain their full capability, establishing a vision for the future, encouraging, coaching, mentoring, establishing and maintaining a successful relationship with all members of the organization (Carnegie, Levine, & Crom, 1993).

The concept of leadership has evolved throughout time. Leadership is a process where an individual, through his or her actions, influences a group of people in order to achieve a common goal (Northhouse, 2004). Silva (2016) in his literature review came up with a new concept of leadership as “the process of interactive influence that occurs when, in a given context, some people accept someone as their leader to achieve common goals.” This infers that leadership is a series of actions that involves both parties (the leader & follower) influencing each other in accordance with the context of the group, to accomplish their shared goals.

Referring to the definitions of leadership mentioned above, leadership is effective when the leader and follower manage to achieve the organizational goals set out. Simply put, the success of leaders are defined by the accomplishment of their followers. In the leadership process, delegating a task is just one of the multiple roles a leader plays. Moreover, a leader must be able to influence, motivate, inspire, communicate, etc. Leaders serve as a role model for their followers. Effective leaders must have clear visions, willing followers, influence, emotional intelligence, seek information ability, understand circumstances, and communication skill (Harris & Nelson, 2008). Those components of an effective leader can be represented through a strong personal brand. Personal brand portrays competencies and values that can be very critical in personal and professional lives.

According to the American Marketing Association (AMA), a brand is “a name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from competitors” (Keller, 2013). A brand consists of elements or a combination of them attached in goods and services that distinguishes the goods or services from its competitors. Brand applies not only to goods, services or business entities, but also to persons.

Personal branding is a process of organizing a unique personal identity, communicating that unique personal identity to target audiences and measuring the impact of the personal brand on one’s image and reputation, to accomplish personal and professional objectives (Mohammed & Steyn, 2016; Kheder, 2014). Personal brand is also defined as a set of professional and personal qualities owned by a person (Montoya & Vandehey, 2008) that differentiates that individual from his peers, colleagues, and competitors, and it promises something of value (Arruda, 2004). The purpose of personal branding is to attain a positive perceived recognition (Morton, 2012). Therefore, if a personal brand is well built and managed, it can be a powerful tool to improve career management.

The objectives of this study is to find out how personal brands built by managerial-levels of multinational companies strengthen their leaderships effectiveness.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Effective Leadership**

Harris & Nelson (2008) described seven characteristics of effective leadership. (i) **Vision** – to gain commitment from their followers, leaders provide clear direction, meaning, and motivation through their visions; (ii) **Willing Followers** – it represents the relationships and interpersonal communication built between leaders and followers; (iii) **Influence** – leaders must influence their followers in order to be able to accomplish shared goals. Leadership describes the ability to influence their followers to stay focused on the significant problems (Cybert, 1990); (iv) **Emotional Intelligence** – leaders are expected to be able to create human connection with their followers; (v) **Seek Information** – leaders must have thorough understanding of the alternatives, consequences, internal and external influences before making any decisions; (vi) **Situational** – leaders must understand circumstances, and be able to improvise, innovate, follow their instincts, and imagine the future (Jones, 2000); (vii) **Communication** – the key idea behind the success of a leader is built on the ability of leaders to express ideas, to draw attention, and to influence their followers through various means, such as language, strong images, metaphors, physical settings (Gabriel, Fineman, & Sims, 2000).

### **Building Personal Brand**

Similar to goods and services, it takes time and effort to build and develop personal brands. Someone who builds personal brands must be able to execute strong communication in a consistent and clear manner. McNally and Speak (2002) emphasize that there are three components that determine a strong personal brand, i.e. (i) Distinctive – personal brands based on the value of the person which affects his way of thinking, emotions and behavior; (ii) Relevance – to build strong personal brands, the person must be able to understand and care about things important to other people and his followers, and able to put words into actions; (iii) Consistency – is how a person manages to be consistently distinctive and relevant.

More detailed framework on building personal brand introduced by Patel and Agius (2014) follows these eight steps (Figurska, 2016):

1. Building personal brand vision – To be able to build a personal brand, a person must determine short and long-term goals in his career (Maulana, 2015).
2. Defining target audience – building relationships with anyone who influences how a person performs his duties.
3. Building online and offline assets – building social communities through one or more personal branding tools, both online, such as social media, social chat platforms; and offline tools, such as the business cards.
4. Building brand through outreach – building relations through networking with organizational stakeholders to create opportunities.
5. Getting free press coverage – using services to tell and share stories about the competencies and values, which will be useful for journalists to write news about the individuals.
6. Connecting with mentors – in this study, it is important to learn from people who have earned more experience in leadership.
7. Brand monitoring – monitoring gap between brand promise and how audiences perceived it; it simply refers to checking if the perception

audiences was properly received from the delivered messages in the previous stages.

8. Being unique – defining the uniqueness possessed by a person that will differentiate from others through various methods, such as developing personal stories, presentations, discussion, etc.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

This study used the descriptive qualitative approach. The descriptive research focuses on the question of "how" and "who." It focuses more on describing how an event occurs, rather than exploring new issues (Neuman, 2003).

In the descriptive research, the researcher begins with perfectly defined subjects and conducts his research to accurately describe the subject. The result of the descriptive research is a detailed description of the research subjects. This study described how personal brands built by managerial-levels of multinational companies strengthen their leaderships effectiveness.

Data collection methods used are: (1) Primary Data: Primary research that required data or information from the main source, usually referred to as the respondent. Data or information obtained through written questions using questionnaires or orally using the interview method (Sarwono, 2006).

In this study, data or information was obtained through (a) in-depth interview, a process of obtaining information for the purpose of the research by conducting question-answer method between the interviewer and the informant or interviewee, with or without using an interview guideline, whereas interviewers and informants are engaged in a relatively long social life (Bungin in Hamidi, 2007). According to Moleong (2007), informants are individuals who can provide valuable information regarding the situation or condition of the research background.

Key informants in this research were four managers (age between 32 – 45 years old) working at multinational companies in Jakarta, Indonesia. These key informants come from different industrial sectors, as follow:

- 1) Informant 1 (female, 32 years old) – Marketing Communication Manager at a Fast-Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) company, both supervisor and subordinates are dominated by females;
- 2) Informant 2 (female, 37 years old) – Communication Manager at a consulting company, has a male supervisor and female subordinates;
- 3) Informant 3 (male, 40 years old) – Head of Department at manufacturing company, both supervisor and subordinates are males; and
- 4) Informant 4 (male, 45 years old) – VP Marketing at a telecommunication company, has male supervisors and both male and female subordinates.

Two criteria were used to select these informants: (i) the first criteria was; key informants must have more than three years experiences in leading their departments; (ii) the second was; informants must have achieved recognitions through awards or achievements from key performance indicators that highlighted the effectiveness of their leaderships.

Beside in-depth interview, the data were obtained through (b) observation, a method of collecting data by researchers to observe or record an event with direct testimony and usually, the researcher can be

a participant or observer in the event of an object being examined (Ruslan, 2008).

(2) Secondary Data: Secondary research used materials outside the first source to answer the problems (Sarwono, 2006). Secondary data is assisted with documentation. Documentation is a method of collecting data by taking data derived from the original document. The original document may be a graphic, table, checklist or documentary (Hamidi, 2007).

Bogdan and Taylor (in Moleong, 2007), defined data analysis as a detailed process of formal efforts to find themes and formulate work hypotheses (ideas) as suggested by data in an attempt to provide assistance to the theme and work hypothesis. The data analysis process begun by examining all available data from various sources (Moleong, 2007).

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

### **Building Own Personal Brand Vision**

The first stage in building personal brand is to know oneself. According to Maulana (2015), brand vision includes determining short and long-term goals in career. McNally and Speak (2002) added that determining competencies and values are also part of developing personal brands. Competencies cover knowledge, attitudes, and skills in leadership. Competencies and values also serve as direction to create visions, which create distinctiveness as one of the components of strong personal brands.

Prior to building personal brands for leaders, it is essential to understand the meaning of leadership and the qualities of an effective leader based on the informants' perspectives. Knowing the characteristics of good leaders and identifying these attributes will help them to create their brand vision.

All informants understood leadership as an act of being a role model. Being a leader means to lead by example, which in their perspectives, a leader must communicate the vision through example. They believed that leading by example lessen the power distance. Power distance is defined as how people accept the unequal distribution of the power, which can be related to prestige, wealth and power in general (Biatas, 2009; Hofstede, 2001). Lessening the power distance encourages better interpersonal communication between leaders and followers.

Besides having a good comprehension of leadership, informants were also asked to describe qualities of an effective leader that they had. Informant 1 stated that having a 'can do attitude,' being people-driven, and acting fairly makes an effective leader. This means a leader must have persistency in facing whatever challenges the individual or the company may encounter in the present or future. Effective leaders must be able to empower their team members so none of the members feel left out, and convince them that everyone in the team are valuable assets. Therefore, a leader can direct and persuade his/her followers to bring out the best in them, and finally accomplish shared goals.

In addition to being perseverance, Informant 2 also added that an effective leader must have integrity, a good problem-solving skill, and be inspiring. Leaders should be also consistent with their words and act honestly. A leader must have strong moral principles. Besides that, a leader must be able to define problems, and work together with the employees to think of alternative

solutions, as the business environment is very dynamic. As stated by Jones (2000), effective leaders must understand circumstances to solve the problems with innovative solutions and minimum risks in the future. Meanwhile, Informant 3 further stated that an effective leader must possess a good communication skill, be able to plan and drive action, and focus. Focus means being able to put shared goals and employees' interests into priority. According to Informant 4, an effective leader must have a good communication skill and people-driven orientation. In order to motivate subordinates, Informant 4 believed that both a professional and personal approach is important.

After understanding the leadership process and qualities, all informants described their short-term goals (goals they wanted to achieve under five years' time) as developing their career path and to get promoted to a higher position in the companies they presently work. Meanwhile, as for long-term goals, each informants showed different objectives. Informant 1 wished that she could start her own consulting firm; Informant 2 wanted to inspire others by writing a book to share her leadership and career experiences; while Informant 3 and 4 wished that he could lead a bigger division or business unit at the company. All informants pursued what they had dreamt in their lives, when it came to the long-term goals. It can be concluded that most of the informants wanted to practice leadership in a bigger field, and also wanted to be able to empower others to be effective leaders.

Both short and long-term goals represent a person's brand vision. Those are not everything they want to achieve in their lives, but rather, it describes their passion. Setting goals also provide guidance for the individual to perform as a leader, and to motivate followers to have goals and accomplish them.

### **Defining Target Audience**

In building personal brands, it is impossible to aim at everyone. Target audiences are those who are involved and provide an input on a person's work performance, including internal stakeholders, such as employees, supervisors (both direct and indirect), other divisions in the organization; and external stakeholders, such as clients, agencies, industrial associations. Therefore, knowing who the target audiences are in building personal brands is important.

A vital point in the second step is to know the needs, expectancies and difficulties of each stakeholder so that leaders can influence and help them to achieve shared goals. Leaders also required to communicate the goals they want their target audiences to achieve. As McNally and Speak (2002) mentioned, relevancy is one of the components in determining strong personal brands. It takes emotional intelligence and communication to understand each stakeholder's needs, expectancies and difficulties.

After determining their target audiences, informants conducted formal and informal discussions with their audiences. The purposes of formal discussions are to convey the goals that need to be accomplished, to build good coordination among team and across the division, to monitor the team's monthly work progress, including technical obstacles that impede their

works (if any), and to discuss any opportunities that can elevate the team's achievements.

In fact, the information obtained from formal discussion setting is limited. According to all informants, informal discussions during break time or lunch, and also team gathering outside the office were considered more effective in persuading their followers to express expectancies, and ideas for innovation, and to listen to subordinates' difficulties. Informal discussion settings were perceived as more relaxing and could stimulate the team to reveal more about themselves. It can also strengthen the interpersonal communication amongst the team. Informants also used the opportunity to motivate, influence and improve leaders' emotional intelligence. Both formal and informal discussions were applied to internal audiences. This interpersonal communication skill is also beneficial to persuade their subordinates to have more sense of belonging to the company (Barata, 2016).

To maintain relationships with external audiences, informants actively attended gatherings with clients, business partners, and industrial associations. From those occasions, informants not only obtained information on their external audiences' perspectives and challenges, but also shared updates of current business-related issues. Exchanging information with audiences was useful to help leaders make decisions, create innovative solutions, and in the end to achieve sustainability.

### **Building Online and Offline Assets**

After determining the target audiences, effective leaders must build their online and offline assets. Leaders must be aware of and pay attention to these as they serve as their communication tools to their audience.

Not all informants consider the online platform as a communication tool. Informant 4 preferred the face-to-face approach to personally approach his audiences. Meanwhile other informants built their online assets through a professional network platform and social media platforms to share their leadership message. They believe that the numerous digital platforms help them to reach out to more audiences. At the same time, it also helped them to find more information about their audiences, such as educational background, work experiences, and even personal interests. Having such information about their target audiences gave them bigger opportunities to build relationships with new acquaintances. Another benefit that they gained from social media was the strengthening of their personal brands by sharing their thoughts on leadership. The key to effectively use the professional network platform and the social media to build online assets in personal brands quite responsive.

In personal brands, building offline asset is as important as online assets. All informants agreed that the business card is an effective communication tool to communicate their identity to audiences. Unfortunately, business card is not sufficient to make them stand out from the crowd. Informants considered appearance as part of communication tool, because it can emphasize their leadership values. Informant 1 preferred wearing loose shirt, pants, flat shoes and red lipstick. She believed that looking casual reflected her as a warm person in front of her team members and as part of the team. Therefore, Informant 1 believed she could persuade them to perform at their best. Meanwhile, the red lipstick represented her authority as a decision

maker and role as a leader. Pearson, Nelson, Titsworth, & Hosek (2017) stated that clothing and accessories, known as artefacts, convey messages about people's roles and authority.

Similar to the first informant, Informant 2 invested in high quality clothes and accessories. The high quality materials delivered a message that as a consultant, she gives reliable advice and disburses excellent services. Informant 2 specified heels as her working shoes, because she believed that heels can reflect her strong personality. In order to look important, Informant 4 added that he avoided wearing jeans to work.

Unlike the other informants, Informant 3 wore a uniform to work. Therefore, Informant 3 focused on looking neat, presentable and maintained a good hygiene. Good grooming shows that the person is not only professional, but also focused.

### **Building Brand through Outreach**

Outreach can be very beneficial for those building personal brands. Leaders share their knowledge to industrial associations, communities, or other professional networks that have the same audience profile as the people they want to reach; in return, leaders will have a chance to sell themselves to the audience (Patel & Agius, 2014; Figurska, 2016).

Informant 1 shared knowledge of marketing communication to her business-to-business partners during the global marketing conference, and at her alma mater. According to Informant 1, going back to alma mater could be very beneficial as many education institutions now focus on collaborating with industrial partners. Those institutions tend to have joint collaborations with several partners in a single event.

Informant 2 started the outreach by sharing knowledge on communication and public relations to people through professional networks, such as LinkedIn. Informant 2 interacted with people who shared the same interest by participating in the 'Career Advice Hub' provided by LinkedIn.

Informant 3 became a guest lecturer at a leading university and shared knowledge about leadership and organizational communication. Informant 3 was also actively involved as an assessor of the national competition on quality and productivity, where he shared knowledge about work improvement and innovation. Informant 4 actively shared current issues on marketing in various events held by business partners.

### **Getting Free Press Coverage**

Getting coverage by press will increase reputation and credibility, and show the person's expertise. Nevertheless, none of the informants had a chance to get free press coverage.

### **Connecting with Mentors**

Leaders need to constantly improve themselves due to the ever changing business environment. As role models, leaders also need to learn and upgrade their competencies from other leaders who have more experiences in leadership and business. Having interactions and feedbacks from leadership experts will strengthen their personal brands. Mentoring plays a multi-functional role, such as coaching (providing work-related knowledge and guidance), counselling (providing emotional support and paying attention in

mentee's situation, problems and challenges), guardian (being concern with mentee's well-being and interests), and networker/facilitator (providing access to networks and resources) (Stead, 2005; Clutterbuck, 1998).

Informant 3 perceived his mentor as a person who gave him a major influence in his career development. According to Informant 3, his mentor helped him discover himself more. Mentoring encouraged Informant 3 to explore himself, to know his competencies and values. Through the mentoring program, Informant 3 acquired wider perspectives on business and leadership itself, and he was inspired by the mentor's stories and case studies. Informant 3 also added that in order to be effective, it was very important to build trust between mentor and mentee. Trust led to comfort and openness. Mentoring is essential in both personal brands and leaderships. Mentoring will provide feedbacks from mentors so that leaders can define their uniqueness to maximize their personal brands. It is relevant with personal brands where the essence of the brand discovering a set of unique values that will distinguish him from others (Montoya & Vandehey, 2008). In addition to building personal brands as an effective leader, mentoring programs could be a good opportunity to seek information that could be used to make decisions, and in facing challenging situations (Harris & Nelson, 2008).

Unlike Informant 3, other informants stated that there was no official mentoring program in their companies. Both Informant 1 and 2 improved their leadership skills from leadership books and learned from successful and famous figures. They gained understandings of good leadership characters by interpreting the figures' actions and experiences. They were also inspired by how those figures led their team. Informant 4 learned about leadership values from his supervisors.

### **Brand Monitoring**

Another step that is also important in building personal brands for leaders is to monitor the gap between the brand promise and how the audience perceived the promise communicated by leaders.

In this study, informants monitored their brand promise through interactions with their target audiences, mostly from their supervisors, mentors, and subordinates. All informants stated that measuring the gap of brand promise and how the audience perceived it can be done through individual assessment with direct supervisors, informal discussions with subordinates, and the mentoring program.

### **Being Unique**

At this final stage of building personal brands for leaders, leaders are expected to communicate their uniqueness in a consistent manner (McNally & Speak, 2002; Patel & Agius, 2014; Figurska, 2016). Being unique means to stand out from the crowd. Informants communicated their uniqueness through various media, such as formal and informal discussions, social media, seminars, gatherings, and even professional appearances.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Today, leaders need to focus on building their personal brands, because it reflects their competencies as effective leaders. Building personal brands

requires effort, consistency and focus. Building personal brands also means standing out from the crowd.

The most fundamental characteristic of an effective leader is having a clear vision. Prior to it, it is important for leaders to have strong leadership values and be understanding. Their leadership values will serve as their brand promises. Effective leaders are those with willing followers. Willing followers are the main target audiences who will support leaders to achieve their goals (including internal and external audiences). Maintaining good relationships with target audience can be done through formal and informal discussion settings. These interactions not only help leaders to understand their followers and act relevantly, but also provide opportunities for leaders to share their visions and build followers trust.

In personal brands, determining target audiences and maintaining good relationships with them, building brands through online and offline assets, as well as through outreach plays an important part in emphasizing the leaders' abilities to influence followers and to reflect their emotional intelligence. Those three steps of personal brands require good interpersonal communication.

Other characteristics an effective leader must have include the ability to seek information and understand various circumstances. An effective leader must thoroughly understand all alternatives and consequences before making decisions. Interacting with followers through discussions, sharing knowledge through outreach, and learning from mentors help leaders to make the best decision for both the company and their subordinates.

Leaders can also exercise their communication skill through personal brands. Interactions with followers will highlight a leaders' ability to express their ideas effectively to their main target. In the end, personal brands are about communicating leadership values in a consistent manner.

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