Alumni Unscripted: Personal Branding

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As many of us know, brands are both important and valuable. In fact, Fortune estimates that Apple’s brand alone is worth over 100 billion dollars. This begs the questions—what is the value of your personal brand? Do you know what your personal brand is and how you are viewed?

I have been fortunate in my career to work with leaders and mentors who openly talked about personal branding and have taught me to proactively think about this topic. Specifically, the first senior leader I worked for out of graduate school taught me about Harvey Coleman’s PIE model—Performance, Image and Exposure. All three of these are elements in your personal brand.

We all know deserving people who have been passed over for promotions. They may have been the most qualified candidates based on their experience and performance, yet they have missed out on opportunities. Performance is clearly critical, but it is really only one piece of the puzzle. Frankly, it’s a basic requirement. The real differentiators are the other two components of the model—image and exposure.

Image seems like a dirty word to some. It can sound like it implies something contrived or inauthentic. However, image is about much more than the way we look or dress. We all have a reputation and project an image all of the time. The trick is being thoughtful about the reputation we want to develop and intentionally taking actions to create and enhance that brand.

Keep in mind while image is personal and should be authentic, culture of your organization also plays a key role. The image of successful people in companies like Apple may be very different from those in local manufacturing organizations. Having awareness of what is valued is helpful in managing your image.

Exposure can be the trickiest out of the three pieces of the PIE model because it requires managing others as well as yourself. Think about who knows you and what you do. Do your boss and one-over-one leader know your skills and the quality of your work product? Who would vouch for your performance and advocate for your advancement?

In order to gain exposure with people who would sponsor you for jobs with a greater scope of responsibilities, you should focus on proactively forming these relationships. Ways to gain this visibility are to lead cross-functional projects, facilitate meetings or get involved in activities outside the scope of
your assigned responsibilities. A good manager can help make connections and help you get in front of leaders with the potential to influence your career and future success.

Ask yourself what others say about you when you’re not in the room. The answer to this question will probably help determine your current personal brand. This is a great starting point to determine whether you like what people would say and proactively think about strategically managing your brand.

Christine Walsh graduated from WMU in 2005 with a degree in human resource management and received her master’s degree in human resources and industrial relations from the University of Illinois. She then joined GE where she completed their rotational program and held various positions in talent and executive development, acquisition integration, HR business partner roles, and labor relations and negotiations. Next, she joined American Express in New York City as a director of human resources for the credit operations business. She is currently director of talent, engagement and development at Nielsen, a global information, data and measurement company operating in more than 100 countries with approximately 44,000 employees worldwide.