



When Brand Became Personal, It Changed Everything

Karl D. Speak

“Personal brand has been trending for a long time and it has changed everything about the way my colleagues and I view our relationship with our employer.”

- *Female Business Leader*

In less than 20 years, personal brand has become the Zeitgeist of the way individuals think about their professional life and, central to that ethos, young business professionals have drawn a line in the sand vowing never to surrender their personal brand equity to any company.

For today’s young business leaders, the growth of their personal brand is at least as important as building the brand of their employer. However, the growth of one’s personal brand does not have to be at the expense of her/his employer’s brand, but it will always take precedence. When the two brands are in alignment, the possibilities of brand synergy abound.

Conversely, without a strong alignment between employees' personal brands and their employer's corporate brand, an organization's competitive advantage and long-term success is threatened. The growth and acceptance of personal brand has had one very important unintended consequence – it has changed everything about the way companies build a corporate brand.

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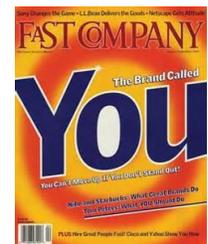
For the better part of 20 years I have been at the center of the personal brand-corporate brand dynamic that has reshaped brand power in the business world. Over 15 years ago, I wrote one of the first books on personal brand, *Be Your Own Brand*, to help individuals and companies take advantage of the new dynamic. Since publishing the book I have been working with organizations all over the world turning personal brand into a powerful corporate brand-building tool.

At the core of this new paradigm of corporate brand building is a fundamental shift in the way individuals build their personal brand and how innovative organizations are embracing a whole new way of aligning employees' personal brands to create value for customers.

20-Years Ago the Revolution Began

Tom Peters, provocateur of business trends, in an incredibly popular article [“Brand Called You”](#) published by *Fast Company* in 1997, introduced the concept of personal brand.

Arguably one of the more important articles ever published by *Fast Company*, it captured the fascination of many in the business world on two levels. The first was the bold suggestion of the impending sea change in the traditional employer-employee contract that was beginning to take place in the 1990's. Secondly, symbolized by the cover art of the magazine, was Peters' passionately advising individuals to think of themselves as a “product” and become brand managers of their careers.



The article was provocative and popular, for sure. The notion of personal brand captured the fascination of business professionals everywhere.

At that time, for individuals in the corporate world, the idea of personal brand was a fairly radical notion. Corporate employees thinking of themselves as a personal brand that was exclusive of their employer's corporate brand seemed like a paradox. After all, at that time it was routine for individuals, especially loyal employees, to perceive their “personal brand” solely in the context of their employer's brand, e.g., IBM'er, 3M'er. There were even more extreme descriptions of employees who completely subordinated their personal brand to their employer's brand, e.g., a very loyal IBM employee would be described as “bleeding blue,” blue being the dominant color in IBM's corporate identity signature.



The idea of perceiving oneself as a personal brand was the canary in the coal mine, signaling that a disruptive trend was in place that would completely redefine the employee-employer relationship. Employers were embracing a whole new perspective on their relationship with employees; loyalty was no longer to be a two-way street. Employees' faith in their long-term relationship with their employer was to be badly shaken and could no longer be taken for granted.

This disruption in the conventional lifetime employment contract was a wake-up call for employees. This awakening spawned a dramatic change in the way individuals perceived their personal brand, more appropriately that they actually could have their own personal brand. Individuals could no longer put the destiny of their personal brand in the hands of their employer. To punctuate the point, Peters was saying (yelling), "Damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead," think and act like a personal brand or suffer the consequences. For corporate employees this was a radical and scary idea.

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Companies would soon feel the impact of the growing importance of personal brand. The emergence of personal brand and flagging employee loyalty would become a threat to organizations' competitive advantage and was destined to have an adverse impact on their long-term financial success. The formula for a strong corporate brand, the badge of sustained financial success, was soon to be disrupted. The emergence of personal brand was portending a big change in the way companies would create competitive advantage in the future.

The Way to a Strong Corporate Brand

For decades, prior to the formal recognition of the concept of personal brand, the most successful companies placed a high value on the alignment of employees' "personal brands" and its cultural norms. The pay-off for employees' alignment and conformity to cultural norms was an implied contract of lifetime employment. In exchange for the implied economic security, employees were willing to commit to a long-term relationship with their

employer. Companies' intense focus on employee loyalty was not driven to satisfy corporate ego, it had its basis in a much more important business strategy.

The world's most successful companies had an inherent, unshakable belief that the distinctive qualities or competencies of its culture were their true competitive advantage. Each company would "brand" its culture defined by its distinctive qualities, e.g., "the IBM Way" or "the 3M Way." A company's long-term growth prospects and financial success depended upon keeping "the way" alive and growing year after year.



There were two fundamental strategies to perpetuating the uniqueness and strength of "the way" of the company. The first strategy was to recruit young college graduates and mold their personal brands through strong culture-oriented, on-boarding programs and to promote them through a series of job assignments, learning about "the way" from different mentors. Hiring employees with experience from other companies, aka, "outside hires," took a backseat to the "grow and mold" human capital strategy. The prevailing notion at that time was molding an employee's personal brand starting with a fresh slate was much more effective than trying to reshape the personal brand of an "outside hire" that was shaped in a different organizational culture.

Secondly, employees' personal brands who indeed reflected the values of "the way," demonstrated through their behaviors and achievements, were placed in a rigorous leadership development program and destined to be the future leaders of the company. Through this process the core of the personal brands of future leaders were indistinguishable from the values of "the way," ensuring that a "company's way" would remain strong and thus ensure the future growth and success of the company.

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The way to maintain competitive advantage and sustain financial success had become intrinsic to how the world's most successful organizations operated. The model of sustainable financial success has been proven, but making the model work was to change in a radical way.

The Way is the Same, But It's Different

Amidst all the change in the employee-employer relationship, the importance of "the way" in sustaining superior financial performance for companies is still very important in today's global business world. Chris Zook and James Allen, leaders of Bain & Company's strategic

practice, studied the qualities of thousands of the world’s most successful companies and reported the results in their best-selling book, *Repeatability*. Their research put a fine, indelible point on the preeminent importance of the alignment of employees’ beliefs with an organization’s “*authentic company philosophy*” as the key driver of sustained superior financial performance. In other words, the stronger alignment between employees’ personal brands and an “organization’s way,” the more likely the company will enjoy industry-leading financial success.

The importance of sustainable internal alignment is as important as ever; however, fostering that alignment has been flipped on its head from 20 years ago. The difference is the shoe is on the other foot; employees can exert much more influence over the level of internal alignment. Employees look at the relationship with their employer through the lens of their personal brand. Many high performing employees are asking what can the employer’s brand do for my personal brand. The key to answering that question lies in how much perceived alignment exists between an employee’s personal brand and the employer’s corporate brand.



Individuals with strong personal brands may be in the driver’s seat, but only if their brand is in alignment with their employer’s brand. Companies are willing to provide handsome compensation to strong personal brands that are in authentic alignment with its internal brand, “its way.” Employees now “own” their personal brands and there is a big opportunity for individuals to take advantage of the new balance of brand power.

The formula to create and sustain internal alignment has been changed fundamentally and likely forever.

A New Perspective on Brand Building

What’s different today, 20 years later, is that brand synergy has been replaced with brand mutuality. Brand alignment that serves the purpose of building an employee’s personal brand **and** the organization’s corporate brand is the new paradigm. The success of this new framework will require that individuals and organizations change their understanding of brand building.

Individuals will benefit by expanding their perspective of personal brand, giving more credence to the core and less to the veneer. I say this after discussing personal brand with

thousands of business professionals. When I tell audiences that “personal brand is who you are, not just what you say,” the responses are typical – “I guess I hadn’t thought about it that way.” The fact that so many individuals equate personal brand building with their social media activities is just a reminder of the narrow understanding of personal brand. A LinkedIn Profile evokes Tom Peters’ sense of personal brand, a way for individuals to use modern marketing techniques to “package, position and polish” their professional image. In that context, personal brand management has become synonymous with career promotion. This shallow perspective of personal brand management limits the growth of an individual’s personal brand - it’s only part of the equation.

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A strong personal brand begins and is sustained with a strong core. Personal brand strength starts with a strong core comprised of one’s *competence, character* and *commitment to growing*. Building a strong personal brand is 80% professional development and 20% professional promotion. A strong “product” will always yield the most from “packaging, positioning and polishing” one’s personal brand.

Osmosis is no longer an effective internal alignment strategy.

A new perspective on organizational brand building is also in order. For decades, successful organizations took the power of internal brand alignment for granted. Traditionally, employees were willing partners in building and sustaining internal alignment, the core of sustainable corporate brand strength. In exchange for the promise of a long-term, implied employment contract, employees happily subordinated their personal brand to their employer’s brand. By showing up, understanding the rules and playing by the rules, employees’ behaviors were “naturally” aligned with an organization’s cultural values. It’s very different now. Osmosis and counting on employee acquiescence is no longer an effective internal alignment strategy. Today effective corporate brand building will require a more transparent, proactive organizational development process that aligns the mutual interests of employees, the organization and its customers.

The Possibilities for Internal Alignment Are Brighter Than Ever

Today tapping into the power of internal alignment is more possible and potentially more powerful than ever. Leveraging brand mutuality creates powerful brand-building synergy, unleashing a new source of brand power. Over the last 20 years, I have worked with many, many organizations helping them to build a conscious competence in creating and sustaining internal brand alignment. At the core of this work is implementing an innovative organizational development process known as internal brand building, a process designed specifically to tap into the power of brand mutuality.

The gist of the internal brand building process is helping employees discover the alignment between their personal brand and the organization’s brand (“its way”) and then focusing those shared beliefs on making a difference for customers. Using an internal brand building

process that promotes transparency and mutuality delivers on the promise of internal alignment that has been proven to be the engine of sustainable financial success.

Instilling transparency in the internal brand-building process begins with the organization and each employee defining the distinctive qualities of their respective brands. Based upon my personal experience, it is not an overstatement to say that I am consistently struck by how often a leader is convinced their organization has a distinctive “way,” yet struggles articulating the exact dimensions of it. *Naming it is knowing it.* A lack of articulation of a “company’s way” and how it shows up in everyday behaviors is problematic in creating and sustaining internal alignment. If leaders can’t practically articulate “the organization’s way,” it becomes very difficult for employees to dedicate their personal brands to it. In a similar way, many individuals speak of their personal brand, but struggle to clearly articulate their strengths that differentiate them as business professionals. Taking the time and effort to define a Strategic Brand Platform is an effective way to define an “organization’s way” in a form that all employees can understand and find relevant. For more than 20 years I have observed how defining an authentic Strategic Brand Platform has laid the foundation for leveraging the power of brand mutuality.

If leaders can’t practically articulate “the organization’s way,” it becomes very difficult for employees to dedicate their personal brands to it.

The lack of clarity of one’s authentic personal brand creates a similar drag on creating internal alignment limiting the power of brand mutuality. Much like defining a Strategic Brand Platform, employees must also make the effort to define their Personal Brand Platform.



The foundation of creating internal alignment is built on executing a transparent organizational development process where employees can discover their authentic alignment with the organization. The process today begins with an organization clearly defining its authentic “way” and placing it on display in words and actions. Likewise, the organization must provide employees with the tools assisting each individual to define their authentic personal brand. Following the definitions of the respective brands, a transparent,

encouraging process to help employees discover their level of alignment sets the stage for leveraging the power of brand alignment.

I have observed three other common commitments organizations are making to build and sustain strong internal alignment. Organizations making a “no strings attached” commitment to helping employees develop their personal brand. Focusing recruitment efforts to “replenish” the culture with candidates whose personal brands are most likely aligned with the organization’s brand. On-going celebration of the organization’s “way” and mutual benefits of its aligned culture.

The possibilities of internal alignment offer individuals the confidence and security that a long-term relationship with their employer can be a smart personal brand strategy.

So, what started out about 20-years ago as a consultant’s buzz word, personal brand has changed the way individuals think about their careers and organizations build brands. After I joined the conversation about personal brand I, like most everyone at the time, had no idea about the disruption in corporate brand building that was about to take place.

Today, business professionals maintain a strong commitment to their personal brands. The possibilities of internal alignment offer individuals the confidence and security that a long-term relationship with their employer can be a smart personal brand strategy. Likewise, organizations, by valuing and respecting employees’ personal brands, can leverage the power of internal alignment to use “its way” to strengthen its competitive advantage and sustain superior financial success.

Fostering internal alignment by leveraging the power of brand mutuality will benefit customers, employees and organizations – the trifecta of sustainable business success.



Karl D. Speak

Karl D. Speak is a thought leader known for his development of key innovations in brand building. Karl's innovative work on corporate brand strategy, personal brand and internal brand building has been implemented in companies around the world. His best-selling book, *Be Your Own Brand*, has been translated into 12 languages and through its multiple versions has sold over 100,000 copies. Karl's pioneering work in internal brand building has added to the principle understanding of brand management competency.

Karl has implemented his contemporary approach to brand management and internal brand building, through his work at Brand Tool Box, with a wide range of corporate clients. Clients such as 3M, LeadingAge, American Express, AT&T, BASF, BMW, Cabela's, Cargill, Consumers Energy, FedEx, Honeywell, IBM, ING, Mosaic, Motorola, Securian, Skandia, Sony Corporation, St. Jude Medical, Syngenta, Target Corporation, The Scotts Company, *The Wall Street Journal*, Toro, and Walgreens have benefited from Karl's consulting and internal brand building programs.

Karl's work on personal brand has impacted tens of thousands of business professionals through the Broadview training programs based upon the personal brand content he developed and was subsequently published in *Be Your Own Brand*. In addition, the digital app *Broadview Personal Brand Discovery Tool* has been used by business professionals around the world.

As a respected thought leader, Karl's perspective has been reported in many different media outlets such as The Wall Street Journal, Bloomberg BusinessWeek, BrandChannel, NPR, NBC, CBS, ABC, Leadership Excellence, La Gaceta, Irish Times, Lavanguardia among many other publications. Karl also serves as an "expert witness" in legal cases involving matters relating to brand.

Karl holds a Masters Degree in Economics from the University of Minnesota. He has taught in the MBA programs at University of Minnesota, Saint Thomas University, and has been guest lecturer at University of Westminster in London, Capella University, ESADE University in Madrid, among others.

Karl's boardroom experience includes being a board member of Mesa Holdings, VocalEssence, MAP Consulting and serving as the chair of the board of The Design Management Institute.