

Maintaining Your Personal and Professional Brand Integrity

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“Brand Integrity is the point at which your organization achieves its desired brand image while reaching business objectives. It occurs when employees, customers, partners, and the market understand, believe, and experience that you are who and what you say you are. It’s about walking the talk” (Lederman, 2007).

Brand integrity is not your typical higher education buzz phrase. You’ll rarely hear this thrown into the same sentence as “student-centered,” “intentional,” or “paradigm shift.” When broken down, however, each word is commonly spoken both on college campuses and in the business industry. So often we talk about “living with values” and having integrity, but are we actually assessing our own personal and professional brand to see if it is truly one of integrity?

Recently a few well-known brands have been called into question. Jessica Alba’s The Honest Company was sued by the Organic Consumers Association (OCA) for claiming to produce baby food that is 100% organic. The OCA found that Alba’s products contained 11 synthetic and inorganic ingredients. Another example is Dannon’s Activia yogurt, which landed them in a \$45-million-dollar lawsuit after the product’s nutritional and digestive benefits failed to live up to their claims. And for all my fellow travelers out there, Airborne was also found to have falsely advertised their protection from germs and harmful bacteria leading to a \$30-million-dollar class-action lawsuit. While these are world-wide examples of companies facing brand-integrity issues, we can also point to smaller scale, close-to-home scandals on our campuses – in our fraternity and sorority chapters, our academic and administrative departments, or even our own personal brand.

Let’s think about brand integrity in the workplace. This is beyond simply doing what you say you will do as a leader, but rather it’s about creating an environment where staff and students are committed to the office mission and are empowered to make positive change, where staff members understand the purpose and value in their work and are compelled to work harder to achieve the mission of the institution.

Surely you’ve heard the saying, “People leave managers, not companies.” So why is this? Is it because of the actions (or inactions) of the leadership? In Gallup’s 2015 study on the “State of the American Manager,” they found that “50% of Americans have left a job to ‘get away from their manager at some point in their career.’” Employees want to feel empowered, they want to grow with their office or company, and they want to know they are a part of something that is living up to what they say they are providing. We are quick to call our students out on their

behaviors and choices that are not congruent with their values, but maybe it is time to take a deeper look into our own office and managerial practices to see if we are actually hitting the target.

In our industry, unfortunately, the high turnover rate leads to the loss of some really great professionals. I have seen many colleagues, once full of passion, exit our field quietly to pursue other areas of interest. Could it be the pay? The long hours? Sure. But could it also be they weren't feeling engaged, appreciated, or heard? Could it be what once was meaningful work is now meaningless?

If we take a look at personal branding, a whole other conversation evolves. We preach day in and day out about living our values, taking the high road, doing what we say we will do, values congruence... the list goes on and on. Yet there are times when there is a discrepancy between what we preach and our actions. Yes, we are all human, but can we do a better job at aligning our words to our ways?

I believe everyone wants to be led by those who are authentic whether that person is the president of our country or the dean of students on a college campus. We learn to trust those we see as authentic because of their sincerity, honesty, and integrity. It is important to note, however, that authenticity is not the same as credibility. Rather, credibility is an outcome of being authentic. When our students or staff view us as our authentic selves as well as doing what we say we will do, we gain credibility in their eyes. The trick, however, is to maintain that credibility. Credibility takes time to build, and a split-second decision to ruin.

So, I challenge you: how are you being your authentic self while maintaining your personal brand integrity and credibility?

References

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