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What's On Your Label?

Skills and Professional Development



When I was a kid, designer label clothing was all the rage: Calvin Klein, Gloria Vanderbilt, Guess and others. As an adult, I am keenly aware there are designer brands not only for clothes, but housewares, furniture and cars. There are brands that I purchase because I like them, believing they are better whether that is true or not. But what I don't do anymore is buy things just because they have a label.

Whether we've thought about it this way or not, we are our own brand. How many of us stop and think about the labels we wear or represent everyday? Do we consider whether or not our labels are accurate or if we want to be associated with them? After all, who wants to be caught wearing or using a passé brand?

It boils down to how we want to be known and viewed. All too often we think more highly of ourselves and our skills than is appropriate or we deserve. When was the last time a poor manager of people thought, "I'm a poor manager and I'm going to keep doing things the way I do them." More likely than not that person thinks they are a good manager and their problem, to the degree they even think they have one, is the people they manage, which gives them an excuse for not improving as a manager.

An honest assessment of who we are and a willingness to hear the truth from others willing to tell us the truth is all we need to understand the labels we wear and to change how we are branded if we are not viewed as we want to be seen.

But how do we go about making those changes? Obviously, it starts with understanding where we are. We are bosses, managers, employees, committee chairs, membership chairs, etc. We are good, bad, mediocre, scary and the like. After ascertaining where we are, we need to get honest assessments of how we are performing those duties. There is a caution here: if we are not ready to hear the truth, we should not ask others for their feedback. Soliciting input and then making excuses and being defensive about what we hear will result in others being less willing to be honest with us in the future.

Once we have this input we can make an assessment about the labels we wear or whether the person others perceive us to be is the image we want to project. If it is, no further work is required. But... if it isn't — we have work to do.

I'll use myself as an example of how to address some of the labels we may find we are unintentionally wearing. I have a no nonsense personality. However, everyone doesn't see it that way and throughout my life I've been labeled as mean or intimidating. Now the people who know me know that not to be the case. But branding is not always about what is, but about what is perceived. That is why marketing campaigns are so important and advertising is a multi-hundred billion dollar industry.

It only took an evaluation or two for me to realize that my no nonsense approach to life and work tagged me with a label that didn't work for everyone and in every situation. In fact, it was something that was holding me back. In order to address the perception of being mean, I had to take a step back and retool my approach to interacting with other people.

What were the behaviors that suggested I was mean? How might I stick to my nonsense free approach and still convey the fact that I was open and friendly to my coworkers and colleagues? Once I'd worked through a host of similar questions one of the simple changes I made was to stop what I was doing when others came to me for input or assistance and give them my undivided attention.

I was initially fearful that if I appeared too friendly, I would get caught up in conversations that were not beneficial to the projects I was working on. But in reality, what I discovered was that I was more productive in my own work as well as when I was called upon to be a team player because people didn't avoid me as much. Had I not been willing to explore how I was being perceived by others, I would have continued to wear labels that were not only inaccurate, but detrimental to the goals we were collectively trying to achieve.

The point here isn't that if people see us in less than a positive light we have to change, but rather understand how we are being perceived. And if it is not the way we want to be seen, then we can rebrand ourselves with behaviors and the labels that are.

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