

Leadership Lessons:

5 STRATEGIES FOR A
LEADERSHIP IDENTITY WITH

IMPACT



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INTRO

Who Are You?

If you're reading this book, you've achieved a significant level of leadership. Your workday is likely consumed with leading your team and delivering results for your organization. But what about you? How much time do you think about your future goals and leadership identity?

Whether I'm working with emerging or senior leaders, when I discuss leadership identity, a lot of questions come to the surface. Emerging leaders often ask: "What is my leadership identity? How do I create it? What does it mean to my leadership path and career?" Meanwhile, senior leaders often ask: "How do I further leverage my leadership brand? How do I continue to make an impact in my organization? How do I fill in gaps to ready myself for even greater leadership?"

Let's take a look at the big picture.

**Leadership identity is your presence in your work—and in the world.**

This is about your physical and mental presence, your attitude, and your readiness to take on new challenges and make an impact. It's how you "show up" every day and for every interaction. Do you show up looking the part of a leader, acting the part of a leader, and with the attitude of a leader? Are you ready for the next opportunity when it arrives?

**Leadership identity drives your decisions toward big-picture leadership goals.**

Think for a moment about your big-picture leadership goal. What kind of person will you be when you reach that goal? What will be different, better? Now compare the mindset and decisions of the person you are today to that of the person you will become when you reach your big-picture goal. If you're like most, there's a gap; your mindset and decisions need to be consistent with where you want to be, versus where you are today. It's like the old saying goes, "What got you here won't get you there."

**Leadership identity reflects your values, mindset, actions, and responses.**

The best way I can describe this is with an example from my own life. One of my top values is health and wellness. When I reflect on my life I can see it almost everywhere, from playing sports as a child to my role models and personal habits. That value, along with the mindset, actions, and responses that go with it, shows up in my leadership identity—my energy in front of an audience, my attitude, my creativity levels, and my overall presence.

The Basic Building Blocks



Now that we've defined leadership identity, I'll share five key building blocks to creating and evolving it.

1

Leadership Brand: Each of us has a brand, whether we consciously shape it or allow others to do it for us. What are you known for that distinguishes you from the crowd, and are you visible to senior leadership?

2

Leadership Behavior: Do you act like a leader? Our self-initiated behaviors communicate a lot about us. Do your self-initiated behaviors reflect assertiveness, decisiveness, and confidence?

3

Visual & Verbal Presence: Your visual and verbal presence make a statement about you. Ensure that you look and sound like a leader.

4

Leadership Response: Our responses to situations and people also say a lot about us. What is your emotional intelligence in handling workplace situations and people around you?

5

Leadership Habits: Our small actions, done day in and day out are also known as habits. Who you are as a person is reflected in who you are as a leader, so it makes sense then that your habits have a big stake in your leadership path and ultimate success. With the right habits you stay on course. With the wrong ones, it's easy to end up off the path.

Read on to learn more about each block.

PART 1

Leadership Brand

“Branding and marketing yourself” is a fancy phrase for how you choose to project what is unique, genuine, and quality about you.

I intentionally use the word choose because it is your choice to actively design and build awareness for your leadership brand, or passively allow others to do it for you. Your brand and how you cultivate awareness of it can determine what leadership opportunities you have in the future.



The hallmarks of significant and successful brands are **consistent quality** and **consistent awareness**. In fact, if you examine the brands you are most loyal to, they likely have both in spades.

Consistent quality drives you to create the best product possible (you being the product). Its factors include:

- values
- mindset
- attitude
- talents and skills
- unique expertise
- strengths
- overall presence, including dress, presence, posture, voice, and articulation of thoughts.

Consistent awareness is where the big leap frequently comes into play, and I can relate. It's awkward for most of us to actively keep ourselves top of mind in our industries and organizations. For example, I've always known that I brought consistent quality to my work. In fact, I joke that I'm a recovering perfectionist! The work quality itself was only the starting point; I had to adopt the mindset and actions of consistent awareness. Was it uncomfortable at times? Yes! But if I didn't move past that barrier, it's likely I wouldn't be sharing this article with you right now.

As a leader, you must learn to create consistent awareness in the market and get comfortable with it. I've learned that the actions often come first in order to help cultivate the mindset. Here are some concrete ways you can take action. (I have used many of them myself). When creating your own list, it's important keep in mind the things you are naturally good at and enjoy. That will help you consistently deliver on creating awareness for your leadership brand.

I challenge you to put one of these actions into play in the next 30 days. See what happens as a result of getting yourself into the marketplace!

How to create consistent awareness:

- Join or lead a relevant group on LinkedIn
- Present research or a topic within your areas of expertise at an industry event, seminar, or conference
- Prepare a presentation for your organization's board of directors or executive leadership team. For instance, track your major accomplishments and impact on the business each quarter, and present them to your leadership
- Ask your clients to provide feedback and forward positive feedback to your leadership. For critical feedback, find ways to improve the client experience and share those improvements with leadership
- Elevate your networking by developing relationships with other senior leaders or industry thought leaders
- Write articles for key professional or industry association.

PART 2

Leadership Behavior

You've probably heard the saying, "Your actions speak so loudly that I can't hear a word you're saying." Indeed, your actions, or self-initiated behaviors, speak to your level of assertiveness, decisiveness, and confidence—all traits of a strong, effective leader.

Your job in enhancing your leadership identity is to elevate your awareness of your actions with colleagues, direct reports, and the CEO. What are your actions saying about you? Are they saying you have confidence and strong leadership abilities, or are they saying you aren't quite ready for the next level in your leadership journey?



Take a few minutes to assess yourself, and consider how these **five strategies** can help you elevate your leadership identity.

Make and Own Your Decisions

Pay attention to the next decision you have to make. If it's not a life or death situation, just make the decision without eliciting input from anyone else. See what happens. Chances are your decision is perfectly sound, and it will give you even more confidence the next time. If you are in a situation where it's absolutely vital to have input, select one or two other trusted people, weigh their input, and then make (and own!) your decision.

Ask Thoughtful Questions That Add Value

This takes practice, but it's well worth the effort. Many times it's all in how you phrase the question. In your next meeting, make note of any areas that need further clarification. Begin by saying something like this: "I'd like some clarification on something you said earlier. Can you please revisit section X of the project plan on the budget piece? Specifically the IT budget." Notice that you don't start the sentence with "I'm confused," "I don't understand," "You lost me at . . ." or "Maybe it's just me, but . . ."

Balance the Personal and the Professional in Your Conversations

With personal information, it's a careful balance between too little and too much. Too little, and you look like a robot. Too much, and you look like life is out of control, which it is for all of us at times—we're human. You just don't want to broadcast it to the world. Next time you are tempted to share extra details about a parent's health issue or trouble with your teenager, consider the person you are with—if they're anyone other than a close, trusted friend, check yourself and hold back. This is especially true if you're in the presence of those from the C-suite.

Know When to Be a Team Player and When to Delegate

For all of my helpers out there, you know who you are. In my view, helping falls into three categories:

- taking on tasks that help others and help you get to the next level (win-win)
- doing legwork where everyone pitches in (sometimes necessary and can show you're a team player)
- being a doormat (you're continually asked to do mundane tasks).

Ask yourself which of these categories you usually fall into, and if it's the third one, it's time to make some major adjustments. If you tend to fall more into the second category, you have to start working toward a better balance of the first and second categories. Remember there is absolutely nothing wrong with being seen as a team player, but you have to ask yourself if doing a certain task will make you look like you're a leader or simply a doer.

Elevate Your Financial Acumen

If financial expertise is something you've put on the back burner, remember this: Leadership involves being financially educated and confident, both personally and professionally. As an example from my own life, I opened a stock trading account. It has taught me not only valuable lessons in personal finance, but also how to follow and invest in financially sound companies. Other ideas include taking a negotiation workshop, or spending time with someone in finance to learn about your company's P&L.

I encourage you to follow any of these ideas, and you'll see how your actions will speak volumes, in a positive and effective way, about your abilities as a leader.

PART 3

Visual and Verbal Presence

Do you dress the part of a leader and professional? What does your physical presence exude? In addition, do you treat every communication, spoken or written, as an opportunity to showcase how well you organize your thoughts and articulate yourself? Do you sound like a leader?

Let's delve into the impact you make through your visual and verbal presence.

Look the Part

You've heard it before. The first time people meet us, they form a judgment about us with lightning speed, much of that based on our appearance. Research shows that 55 percent of our initial credibility comes from how we look.

That's a little intimidating. It's humbling to think that before people even evaluate the substance of our message, they are making quick judgments about us based on our visual presence.

Even if you're a skeptic of statistics, it's smart to pay attention because this part of human nature—the continual evaluation of the environment and the people around us—can help us become

better leaders. We subconsciously filter information as we accept what we perceive as credible and release the rest. And yes, this "credibility filtering" mechanism initially includes paying close attention to how others present themselves, visually and verbally.

When it comes to visual presence, a little fine-tuning can enhance your leadership identity and pave the way for others to truly value the substance of your message. I've found that working on these outside attributes can give us momentum for the work that we're doing on the inside.

As a leader, your visual presence includes the obvious: dressing for the part. You've reached an executive level, so don't risk being mistaken for an intern. That means stepping it up a notch. Ensure that your clothes are tailored, and don't forget the finishing touches.

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Some more-subtle cues also contribute to your leadership identity. These are cues we may never pick up on, unless we're paying attention to them. Cues like:

- **the seat you take at a conference table.** Whenever I attend a meeting, I make sure to select a seat that allows me to see, be seen, and contribute. If I'm leading the meeting, I take the head seat.
- **your gestures and animations.** Are your gestures and animations appropriate for your message? For example, I know some people who deliver tough messages with a smile. It's usually a subconscious way to soften the message or an attempt to alleviate awkwardness; instead, it negatively affects your leadership credibility.
- **eye contact.** Making eye contact conveys your confidence, expertise, and sincerity. Always make and maintain confident eye contact, especially when introducing yourself.

Speaking of Leadership

Think about your last week at the office. You probably:

- sent and received a minimum of 100 emails a day
- sent and received dozens of voicemails
- took many calls in your car on your cell phone
- were on multiple conference calls and webinars, and attended daily meetings
- commented on various social and professional sites, such as LinkedIn, Facebook, or Twitter
- instant messaged, texted, Skyped, and Google Voiced.

In today's business world, the methods, speed, and sheer volume of communication can be overwhelming. The one thing all of the above communication methods have in common? They are completely second nature. And because they're second nature, we rarely see them for what they are—opportunities to be strategic and showcase our leadership identity through our verbal presence.

Your verbal presence combines many factors:

- how you organize and articulate your thoughts
- the tone, pitch, and speed of your voice
- the clarity of your message, both in content and punctuation
- your ability to be concise and on point
- your ability to use the language of your business and industry.

Verbal presence is about both the substance and the packaging of your message. Here are a few simple devices you can use to turn your spoken and written words into a leadership advantage.

When Speaking

TAPS is a formula you can use to quickly communicate your thoughts in almost any situation:

- **Take a breath and pause.** Taking a breath helps you physiologically and mentally. This public speaking trick works wonders, especially when you're put on the spot. And while it may seem like a lifetime to you, the other person won't even notice that quick second of silence.
- **Assess and select one point to make.** The key word here is one—a single point, not several points. This is a critical mistake I often see people make. This part of the formula requires you to be decisive, which is another essential leadership trait.
- **Provide support.** This is where you can elaborate a bit, sharing two to three supporting pieces of information for your point. Again, keep this brief. The human brain stores only a few pieces of information at a time in the short-term memory. Your ability to be concise also conveys your confidence.
- **Summarize.** If necessary, add a quick summary statement after you provide your supporting comments. If you are asked follow-up questions or for more information, it's an opportunity to share even more of your expertise.



When Writing

Below are some tips to stand out with written communication, especially email. A few assumptions you should make:

- Your message is sandwiched between dozens of other email messages.
- The recipient is likely reading your message on a mobile device.
- The recipient will open it, scan it quickly, and close it in less than 30 seconds. Then the recipient will decide if it merits a reply.

With those assumptions in mind:

- Create a short, substantive subject line.
- Use a brief opening sentence to set up the body of the message.
- Make your point right away.
- Use two to three short bulleted statements or phrases for any supporting information.
- Summarize with your request or call to action.
- Review the message before you hit send.
- If the message warrants, specify when you'll follow up.

PART 4

Leadership Response

We have hundreds of interactions in a day. They're virtual and live, written and spoken. They take place through email, social media, and phone calls, or in meetings and presentations. Your response in any given interaction broadcasts your leadership identity.



CAUSE

EFFECT

Think for a moment about how you respond to what's happening around you. Many times you probably don't give a conscious thought to your responses. There's a difference between reaction (unconscious) and response (thoughtful and conscious). When we move from reaction to response, it indicates a shift in our mindset around what it means to lead.

Below are some of the ways your responses can communicate the wrong leadership message. We've all had these happen at one time or another. One on its own isn't a deal-breaker. But if any of these are responses you regularly engage in, it's time to take a closer look at why it's happening and what you can do to change it.

Believing That What Got You Here Will Get You There

This is about internalizing messages. I'll give you an example from my life. I'm the oldest of five daughters, and there have always been lots of expectations for me, some imposed by family and some self-imposed. One of those expectations was being very responsible. That expectation has served me very well throughout my life and career, to a point.

My response to that expectation was to always strive for perfection in any project or assignment given to me. It was done well, it was done on time, and I managed nearly every detail. But I had to change when I became a leader. I had to learn new leadership responses—delegating, trusting, and letting go of influencing every single detail of a project or product. To be successful, I had to allow others to step up and take responsibility.

Allowing the Opinions of Others to Have Leverage Over Your Decisions

This has a lot of similarities to polling, or unnecessarily asking for the input of others. Where it's different is that you know your stuff and offer a solution or opinion based on your expertise and experience. Then it's counteracted by another's opinion, and you find yourself second-guessing your judgment or wanting to avoid conflict. The end result is that you accept that person's judgment as better than yours and it affects the path you take.

When you find yourself in this situation, never assume that someone knows more than you—especially when you have the expertise and experience. A better response is to ask the other person to share more information with you. This will help you get to the "why" of that person's opinion before allowing it to sway your decisions.

Routinely Putting the Needs of Others Before Your Own

From time to time, we have to put the needs of others before our own; it's part of the give and take of life and work. The mindset of giving first is also important to the success of relationships and our leadership path. The key is paying attention to whether you're routinely putting everyone ahead of you. If it's routine, it's a problem, and it manifests itself in things like:

- not advocating for yourself when it comes to assignments and raises
- frequently canceling personal plans for work obligations
- having no free time outside of work and family to pursue other interests
- allowing yourself to be a "yes" person to every request.

How do you break this practice? Begin with something small. The next time someone needs you to do something that you know can be handled in another way, graciously say, "I wish I could help you, but I can't at this time." And if it makes sense, offer another idea on how to delegate the task.

Also, be sure to schedule yourself a given amount of free time each day or several days a week. It can be any time of the day when you shut everything off and do something for yourself. Take a walk, indulge a hobby, or just enjoy the peace and quiet. As challenging as it can be to carve out this time and space, this new way of responding will give you what you need to make you a better leader.

PART 5

Leadership Habits

It was Aristotle who said that we are what we repeatedly do. Our seemingly small actions, performed day in and day out, eventually create who we are.

They are also known as habits.

Who you are as a person is reflected in who you are as a leader. So it makes sense that your habits have a big stake in your leadership path and continued achievement. With the right habits, you stay on course. With the wrong ones, it's easy to end up off the path and in the weeds! As a leader, you can't afford to go astray.

A focus on habits seemed to me a perfect way to close this series of lessons and set you up for greater success moving forward. To help you take the next steps in creating lasting leadership habits, I'll share this simple, three-step plan you can practice.

1

Access Yourself

First, take some time to review each article in the series.

Next, assess yourself in each of the leadership identity categories. This is where you are today, keeping within the context of your career. Create a ranked list, with 1 being where you're the strongest. This will help you prioritize your direction. For example, your ranked list might look like this:

- 1. Leadership Brand**
- 2. Leadership Behavior**
- 3. Visual Presence**
- 4. Verbal Presence**
- 5. Leadership Response**

2

Set Your Direction

With your ranked list in hand, look at your strongest and weakest categories. In our list above, for example, our strongest is Act Like a Leader and our weakest is Verbal Presence of a Leader. These two areas are where you'll begin your action plan. I'll let you in on the method to my madness in working this way. I'm a big fan of working from strengths first, but I like to make sure I'm not ignoring weaker areas. So beginning your action plan from a place of strength will help you build on the successful leadership habits you already have, and give you some quick successes. Those quick successes will create the boost you need to establish new habits in the weaker areas.

For your two selected categories, go back to the corresponding article and then choose one tip from each that you'd like to work on. Try to pick one that you think will give you the biggest return, based on your projects, your development plan, and your goals. Remember that you can modify it to fit your situation, so you get the most out of it.

In our example, it might look like this:

- Act Like a Leader: Ask great questions.
- Verbal Presence of a Leader: Practice the TAPS formula in my next meeting.

3

Practice, Track, Repeat

Once you've decided on the tips to implement, it's time to put them into practice. Commit to working on this daily for the next 30 days. It takes that long to cement a new habit, to make it subconscious and part of your everyday behavior. Odds are you'll find that the new habit creates other positive changes!



Some tips to help you along the way:

- Share what you're working on with the executive you report to. Better yet, put it into your leadership development plan.
- If working on two actions is overwhelming, begin with one and build from there. Do what you need to do to set yourself up for the best possible success.
- Pay attention to your environment. Our environments play a big role in how successful we are in adopting and integrating new habits. For example, think about your surroundings, the people you spend time with, your routines, and your physical, mental, and emotional well-being. Are those environmental elements setting you up for success?
- Track your progress in a way that works for you. It could be as simple as marking it in a calendar, or keeping a more detailed journal. The idea is to be consistent and make it something you'll do each day.

At the end of the 30 days, check in with yourself. How often did you practice? How well is the new habit established? Based on that check in, decide if you need another 30 days with these same actions, or if you're ready to take on some new ones.

If you're ready to move on, here are some suggestions:

- Continue with the same categories, and add new actions.
- Move on to the next categories in your list, working your way inward (to number 2 and number 5).

If you're not ready to move on, that's completely OK. Stay with it and give yourself another chance to make the change stick.

One of the best pieces of advice I received from a mentor was to be more compassionate with myself—to give myself a break. (Especially for all you perfectionists out there, I understand!) True change takes time, practice, and some self-compassion. Remember that these are lasting habits that will make you the leader you want to be.

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At Impact Instruction Group, we're big-picture thinkers helping organizations develop their top talent and future leaders. The Fortune 1000 and middle market call on us to deliver real business results. We are experts in emerging and frontline leadership development.

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About the Author





Amy Franko is the Founder & President of Impact Instruction Group. IIG works with Fortune 1000 companies, and we are sought out for our expertise in leadership development, custom learning, and developing sales teams.

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