

# **The Only Trait of a Leader**

*A field guide to success  
for new engineers, scientists,  
and technologists*

**by  
John E. West**

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It is not the purpose of this text to reprint all available information on leadership skills and techniques for technology professionals, but instead to complement, amplify, and supplement other texts. You are urged to read all of the available material to learn as much as possible and tailor the information presented here and elsewhere to your individual needs.

**This is a sample from the new book “The Only Trait of a Leader,” by John E. West.**

If you're interested in learning more, check out full details on the web site, [www.onlytraitofaleader.com](http://www.onlytraitofaleader.com). There you can download samples of other chapters, or buy the entire book in PDF or print form.

Thanks for reading!

## Chapter 5

# Managing Your Brand

You should read a book on marketing and selling services.

Most of us who consider ourselves scientists or technologists shudder at the thought of sales and marketing. The very idea brings up images of car salesmen, snake oil salesmen, and telemarketing, and the small person in our heads says, “I’m not in sales!”

Oh, but you are. It turns out that as a technologist you and, say, a contractor who wants to remodel your house, are selling the same thing: a service. And if you are going to lead others, or even just have a successful career as a technical team member, you’ve got to learn to sell your service.

Services are different from products in several ways that make service customers very uncomfortable. If you can understand these differences and manage them with respect to Your Brand and your services, then you will be miles ahead of your peers and well on your way to becoming recognized as a leader.

Services are different from products in that they are intangible and unwarrantable. If you are buying a product (some thing, like a car), you can experience it. You can smell it and touch it. You can

check out the product before you buy it, and know ahead of time that it is right for you and your needs. Products are tangible, and being able to have a personal connection with a product reduces the consumer's fears before the sale.

A service, on the other hand, is intangible. You cannot touch, taste, smell, or feel the competence or trustworthiness of any of the contracting services you are evaluating to remodel your home. You also, for the most part, cannot meaningfully provide or receive a warranty on services, and this is the source of the fear.

When you buy a product—say, a car—you have some built-in expectations about quality and the time before a major mechanical failure. But we also have lots of everyday experience with products that tell us that, as physical artifacts, failures will sometimes occur sooner than expected. We can intellectualize the reality that of one million widgets even if only 1% of them have problems there will be 10,000 failures. We expect over a lifetime of consuming stuff to buy one of the 10,000 things with problems from time to time. We accept this risk because experience tells us that the risk is small, and because the manufacturer's warranty will protect us if we are unlucky.

Not so with a service. We have a lot of experience with services, and most of that experience is bad. Flown on a commercial airline lately? Been to a fast-food burger joint? Rented a movie from a large commercial chain? These places employ low-cost labor to keep consumer costs low, and it shows. The service that they provide, sometimes in support of delivering their product, which may be on the whole good, is terrible. The stakes on these daily services are pretty low. Even if getting your burger is painful, the pain only lasts a few minutes and the burger is still good. We can overlook the irritation that the brief transaction causes and we will return. Obviously burger businesses know this about us as well, because after half a century they haven't elevated their employee profile.

But when it comes to the larger services, when high dollars are invested, most of us have very little experience and a whole lot of

fear that we'll end up getting bad service and not being able to do anything about it. The contractor may provide a warranty on his workmanship when he remodels your house, but do you really want to have to rely on the warranty? Can you do without your kitchen for another six months while he fixes his mistakes from the first six months? Do you really want him trying to fix them: what if he fails again? The warranty on a service is really not very effective, so consumers have fear. And in the face of fear consumers do something really interesting: they don't seek to buy the best service. They seek to buy the service with the smallest chance of failure. And here is where you can make magic for yourself.

Big companies recognize that in order to entice customers to their service they have to manage the consumer's fear of failure. One of the most powerful ways to do this is to have a brand. Consumers will buy the brand-name service, even if it is more expensive and lower quality than unknown competitors, to minimize the risk of failure.

### **I am not Scotch Tape®**

True! But you are providing a service in your company, organization, or troop.

As a technologist, when you are hired into a group it is to fill a gap in skills or to meet a specific need of the group. These skills are your service. Your competence, professionalism, timeliness, attitude, and record of success are the intangible assets of your service, and for the most part whoever hires you has only your word (and maybe the word of a few references) that you have represented them faithfully. Your boss has a warranty—he can dismiss you if you cannot deliver—but does not really want to take this route. It damages him in that his bosses see him as having failed, and in most modern organizations, especially governments, it is very difficult to fire anyone for pretty much anything less than arson or murder.

To your boss, then, you are a service.

To lead and to be seen as a leader you must reduce your consumer's (your company's, your boss's, your coworkers') fear of failure, of buying the wrong service. Do this the same way big companies do: build and manage a brand. Brand You.

This chapter has a variety of techniques and skills that successful leaders employ in creating and managing their brand. Many of these ideas flow naturally from the tenets of the Enlightened Leadership Philosophy, and so 75% of managing your brand will come for free after you internalize this philosophy. You'll have to work for the rest of them, but it's well worth the effort. A few minutes spent each day thinking about your decisions and behavior in the context of their impact on Brand You will go a long way toward growing and improving that brand.

Some of the tips in this chapter are pithy and worn almost to the point of meaninglessness. I encourage you to look underneath the catch phrase and think about what it means. If you find one of the tips isn't clicking with you today, review it tomorrow when your perspective may be a little different. I also encourage you to review these periodically, to keep them at the top of your unconscious, where they can do a lot of good for you.

## **Be apart**

Building a brand—a name for quality work that your organization can count on when a job needs to be done—also means positioning that brand relative to the other brands in your organization.

Oh yes, there are other brands. The best people in your organization are building and managing their own brands (even if they don't think about it in those terms), and they are your competition. What you need to do is position yourself relative to the other brands (people) competing for your customers' (bosses') attention. You have to be Super Cola to someone else's SoSo Cola.

There are a couple of points to make here. First, it doesn't make sense to be Super Cola to someone else's Super Cola. If there is already a Super Cola, then introducing another Super Cola isn't

likely to create much interest. You might create a cheaper Super Cola knock off and compete on price, but do you really want to be the person who does the same work as someone else for less money?

You need to look around at your peers and at the people in the closest management layers to you, and understand what their brand is. Those who perform at the bottom or middle of pack aren't really managing a brand that you want to compete against. They are positioned like generic toilet paper: they'll get the job done, and they're cheap enough to buy without waiting for a sale. But you don't shop for generic toilet paper for the confidence you have in the brand (not least because if it were a brand, it wouldn't be generic). You shop for it on price, and you are willing to accept a less than optimal comfort to save \$0.40 on a pack of four rolls. You also plan to drop it for the best brand as soon as your finances improve.

In terms of brands, you have to study the top performers. Who are the "go to" folks? The ones always pitching the toughest clients, or always being asked to give tours to large corporate donors and 3-star generals. The odds are fairly good as you study each of these performers you'll see that they are different from one another and different from the lower performers around them. One is funny and dresses casually but smartly. One is serious, highly organized, and very conservative. One is interested in sports and uses that as a way to bond with upper management and customers. One plays golf. One dresses appallingly but always, always, manages to pull failing projects out of the fire. One is crusty, and one is super nice.

Know what the other leaders in your organization are doing, and decide where you fit in. Make this your brand.

In my case, my peers are all fairly serious people but not actively managing their brands. They keep their heads down, dress conservatively, speak when spoken to, and are very serious and focused most of the time. I need to manage my brand in such a way that it stands apart from this competition.

**Thanks for reading this excerpt from the new book “The Only Trait of a Leader.”**

If you're interested in learning more about this topic or the others covered in the book, please visit [www.onlytraitofaleader.com](http://www.onlytraitofaleader.com). There you can download samples of other chapters, or buy the entire book in PDF or print form.

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