

Hospital Floors, Flagpoles and Your Personal Brand

The hospital CEO loved taking me from his office to other departments. He was particularly proud of the shiny-clean tile floors, his dictum. They seemed old-fashioned at a time when his competitors were laying down carpet, lush but prompting the wonder: How do they get out the — um — stuff that gets slopped around in a hospital?

“Patients and their families *know* when they come here, just by looking at the floors, that we emphasize cleanliness,” he bragged. “You want that feeling about your hospital.” It was his way of emphasizing the institution's brand, but also a constant visible reminder of his leadership.

Look at other leaders around you. What's their “hospital floor”? In the early days of Microsoft, Bill Gates would show up at important banker meetings dressed in rumpled chinos and a sweater, rather than the obligatory blue suit and red tie, the dress-for-success costume of the '80s. It was his message: We work at a frenetic pace here, and business is being done in a very different way. His dress, in other words, telegraphed a personal brand.

On an army base, a new leader reputedly moves the flagpole by the front gate from one side of the entry road to another, so that everyone coming onto the base knows a new commander has arrived, and things will be done differently. How do you “move the flagpole”?

Businesspeople like to castigate union leaders as stupid thugs. They are, instead, some of the smartest, most compassionate people I've ever met. Their job is both business and cause to them, and that puts them ahead of the thuggery I've found in corporate hallways. They often dress particularly fine and wear a pinkie ring, which contrasts with their humble character. I've come to believe that the ring and dress aren't for themselves, but for their membership, who can see that prosperity is possible, whose leaders can hold their own against “the suits” who want to keep their wages and benefits down rather than sharing their success.

What's your sign, your personal brand? When you walk into a room, how do people know you are the CEO and what you stand for? Employees want to look up to their leader. It can be in anything you do: Do you not take calls for the first hour? Are you notorious for ending meetings in 30 minutes (wish there were more of you)? Is it your unexpected wandering around to see what's going on, to inquire after employees' work and families? Are you Fred the Good or Hatchet Hallie?

Your personal style is probably more accidental than deliberate, but it won't hurt to reflect on how you are in your organization. Do you want to project tough or approachable?

Try, like the hospital floors, to create a personal brand that shines.

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