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DEVELOPING LEADERS

# The Art of Self Promotion Without Being Self-Promoting

BY ROB SALAFIA

As an executive coach, I work with my clients to help them clarify what they truly want and then assist them in getting from where they are to where they want to be. Part of this process involves identifying the 'blockers' or barriers that are in the way. From year-to-year I find certain themes surfacing among my clients. One that seems to be coming up recently is the notion of self-promotion.

It is important for us to promote ourselves in a positive light and highlight our best skills and experiences. But how do we do this without being **too** self-promoting? Consider if you identify with any of these statements:

- You are pigeonholed and are not being seen for your complete set of capabilities.
- You are not asked to join the top-level strategy meeting even though you know you belong there.
- You think that you should be evaluated based on merit alone, but you are continually the bridesmaid for the next level promotion.
- You just left an important job interview but did not know how to speak about your accomplishments and capabilities.





Photo by ecemwashere on Unsplash (Not Rob Salafia)

Knowing the value that you bring to your role and organization is the critical first step in enhancing your personal brand. However, it can be daunting for many of us to identify this value, and even more difficult to learn how to express it. Not to worry. In this article, you will discover a few clear and actionable steps to understand what sets you apart, to clarify your unique point of view and capabilities, and learn how to communicate these with a clear storytelling framework.

## Setting the frame

This concept of self-promotion was something that I dealt with directly in my previous work as a professional performing artist—a street performer, to be precise. Let me elaborate....



In the late 1970s, after college, I took a step back from academia and stepped fully into the world of theatre and the performing arts. My stage was a popular street venue, or 'pitch', situated at Faneuil Hall Marketplace in Boston. My audience were passers-by whom I could entice to stop and watch. I quickly learned that this task was easier said than done. My journey to becoming a seasoned performer was just beginning.

### **How to toot your own horn without blowing it!**

So, why are some of us afraid of, or loath to, toot our own horn? Is it that we

do not want to come across as aggressive, arrogant, or self-serving? Is it that we are introverted and feel less confident speaking directly to those in senior positions? Let us examine these for a moment.

### **Introverts vs. extraverts: making your voice count**

At times, being an introvert may seem like a limitation, but it isn't—it is a gift. And it is up to us to find a way to bring our astute observations and insights forward at the right time and to the right people. It begins with knowing the value that we bring to the table, developing our own unique point of view, and experimenting with bringing our voice into the room.

Along that same vein, being an extravert holds much value and power in many cultures. However, it does not mean it is okay for us to suck up all the air in the room by constantly pushing our ideas forward. Extraverts need to make their powerful voices count. They have an opportunity, maybe even a responsibility to advocate for and draw-out the other voices in the room. It begins with developing some intellectual humility and being open to hearing a fresh perspective.

**Engineers, scientists, and finance leaders develop a mindset of curiosity, intellectual engagement, and mastery rather than achievement and advancement. This mindset can create a major blind spot when it comes to managing their careers.**

### **Make yourself interesting**

My first year of street performing was difficult. As hard as I tried, I would get a group of about 15-20 people to stop and watch me, but with the slightest gust of wind—*poof*—they would be gone. I began to observe other more highly skilled performers effortlessly attract a crowd of over 300 people. How did they do it? It was all about making themselves interesting.

The best street performers did something that was unique to them, that grabbed attention and drew the audience in. So I set about learning how to make myself interesting. I learned it was not so much about me, but much more about my audience. I learned to take a keen interest in them and understand what gets them to stop and pay attention. I learned to get them involved right away. Something simple like taking the hands of two random people and standing them close together. Have them raise their arms and bow. I would then get any other people who might be watching to clap. This would then attract more people who wanted to see what was going on. And it built from there.

I became interesting by becoming interested in others. It also didn't hurt to have on a half-cut tuxedo, suspenders and a nifty top hat! I learned to bring a bright energy to every performance, to instill confidence in my audience, and send the signals that my act was going to be worth their time. I learned to notice the small things and stay connected to my audience, and to always draw them in closer and closer.

For all intents and purposes, the street was a platform for failure. It was not about being perfect—quite the opposite, in fact. It was more about how to make the most of my mistakes. It allowed me to grind my way into something that felt authentic. I was inspired to be my best by watching the best. I learned the principles of great performers and then created my own unique and successful act one performance at a time.

## Merit alone

Many of us have been taught to be humble about our accomplishments. As a direct result, we develop an attitude that the quality of our work should stand for itself. This is a merit-based mindset that can be rooted in our upbringing and education.

Engineers, scientists, and finance leaders are taught the importance of accuracy and knowledge acquisition. They develop a mindset of curiosity, intellectual engagement, and mastery rather than achievement and advancement. They tend to be uncomfortable making premature claims and presenting incomplete data, as there is always something new to learn. However, this mindset can create a major blind spot when it comes to managing their careers.

For the street performer, this was a critical question to answer. As I developed the instincts of a seasoned performer, I also needed to make myself marketable beyond the street. This included press releases, marketing materials, and sales pitches. I expanded my reach to college audiences, festivals across North America, and theatres.

You might think that it all came naturally. Not so much. I was an interesting mix of introvert and extravert and had to learn how to talk about myself in a way that was both bold and humble.

Early in my performing career, I applied to be an artist in residence with the Rhode Island State Council for the Arts. On the day of my interview, I was asked to step into the board room. As I entered, I noticed several





folks already seated waiting to speak with me. I was invited to sit at the head of the table. Instinctively, I remained standing and greeted each person individually while giving each person my eyes and inviting them in. I opened my portfolio and gave the group a tour of my press clippings, photographs, and marketing materials.

As I spoke, I used a story selling technique I had learned that still serves me to this day. (Story selling is the art of building an authentic brand based on story that is engaging, relatable, easy to remember, and persuades prospects to buy). Rather than speaking about myself, I used the voice of my prior sponsors. I would say, “What the folks at the River Festival most appreciated about working with me was...”, “What I was best known for at the marketplace was...”, “What members of the audience would say about my performance was...”. Do you see how this changes the frame? I am using others’ words about how they experienced me, my work, and the impact that it had on them. These are just starter phrases. It is up to you to build out the story from there. How could you use this technique to promote your work and the work of your team?

## **What are you known for?**

Picture a room of senior leaders who are seeking to fill a new position. What are they looking for? How do they speak about each of the candidates? What is the story that you would like them to be telling about you?

## Think beyond your task – link your actions to the vision and strategy of the organization.

Ask yourself the following question: “What do you want to be known for”? This is your personal brand. Answer these quick questions to zero in this.

- What are the top three things you were known for in the past?
- What are the top three things you are known for now?
- What are the top three things that you want to be known for in the future?

Becoming clear about the value that you bring to your role, your team, and the organization is critical to finding one’s voice. Try to discover what people genuinely appreciate in you. For example, is it the type of questions that you ask? Is it how you hold others accountable? Is it how you can look past your own agenda and get the group to see the larger picture?

I recommend two additional strategies:

1. Think about a time when you were in your Best Self, or when you felt most alive and engaged. How were you standing? Describe the quality of your voice. What was your mindset? Hidden in each of these stories are clues to your unique voice and your value.
2. Conduct your own brand survey by asking several senior folks with whom you have worked how they experience you. What words come to mind when they think of you? In what ways have you influenced the people and environment around you? What aspects of how you show up are keeping you from being promoted to the next level?

Once you have these nailed down, you can send the right messages to the right people at the right time.



## Gaining visibility

We cannot assume that our efforts or potential are recognized by senior leaders or even our direct managers. Thus, it is important for us to learn to become more visible and make ourselves more memorable. Below are a few things to consider depending upon your situation.

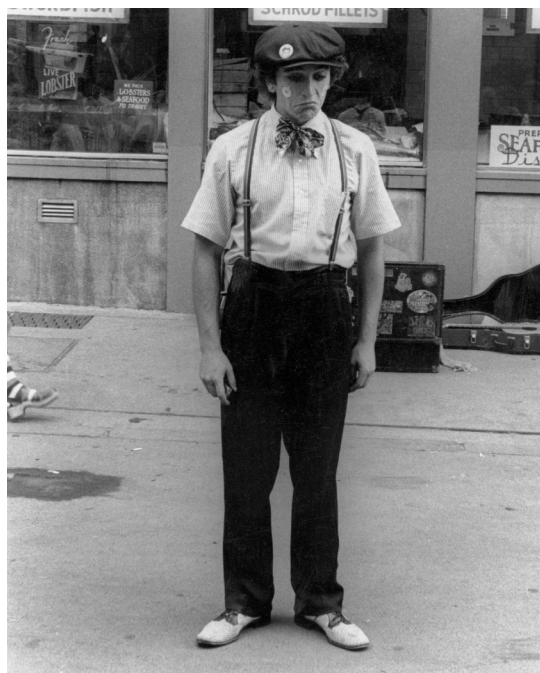
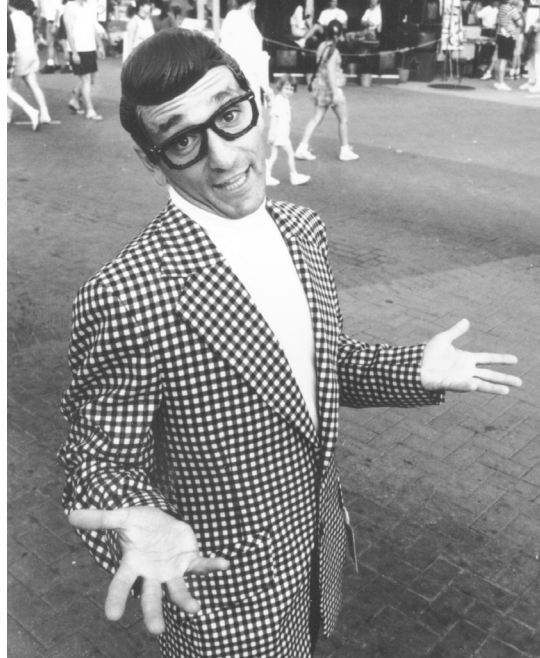
- Ask for a stretch assignment or to be a part of a strategic initiative.
- Think beyond your task – link your actions to the vision and strategy of the organization.
- Start acting like you are already at the next level. What is important to you now?
- Present your ideas with a clear point of view focused on helping the senior leaders make a confident decision.
- Do not hide your gifts and talents. Where do you find joy? Find ways to express it. People find this sense of self-assurance attractive.
- Ask to moderate a conference or meeting.

### ***Photos top to bottom:***

Rob Salafia, aka Bobby the Suit, Riverbend Festival, Chattanooga, TN, 1991

Rob Salafia, Courtesy of the Edmonton Street Performers Festival, Edmonton, Alberta, 1990

Rob Salafia, Street Performer, Faneuil Hall Marketplace, Boston, MA, 1979



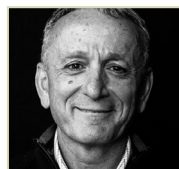
When you are ready to introduce the keynote speaker, avoid mechanically reading their bio, and instead give a Remarkable Introduction©. (This is an exercise that I teach in my learning programs to help participants get beyond the rote, boring, and robotic introductions that plague business meetings and conferences). Ask him or her what they are most passionate about or something unique about them. Ask him or her about the experience they are about to create and get the audience excited about it.

### Success is in the experience we create for others

During my time as a street performer, I learned that if I just stood in front of a crowd and began to juggle, some people would stop for a moment and then continue walking past. Being a successful performer was not just about showing off my skills. I needed to give my audience something to relate to or connect with. Yes, I learned that I needed to make myself more interesting, but it was more about the **experience** that I wanted to create for them. Once I focused on what I wanted my audience to think, feel or do, everything changed.

The same is true for how we 'perform' in our professional roles and careers. Once we learn to focus our attention on the impact that we want to have on our team, organization, and customers, we will begin to get noticed, appreciated, and promoted.

*If you would like to learn more about how to develop your executive presence and the subtle art of self-promotion, feel free to reach out to me directly at: [robsalafia@protagonistconsulting.com](mailto:robsalafia@protagonistconsulting.com).*



*Rob Salafia is the author of 'Leading from Your Best Self: Develop Executive Poise, Presence, and Influence to Maximize Your Potential' (McGraw-Hill). He is an MIT Leadership Center Master Executive Coach and CEO of Protagonist Consulting Group.*

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