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How to Stand Out and Get Noticed



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Dorie Clark, former presidential campaign spokesperson, award-winning author, strategy consultant, professional speaker, and adjunct professor at Duke University's Fuqua School of Business, joins Joe Folkman in this installment of the Zenger Folkman Leadership podcast series to discuss her new book, *Stand Out: How to Find Your Breakthrough Idea and Build a Following Around It*.

Dorie's clients include Google, Microsoft, Morgan Stanley, DHL, Fidelity, Yale University, and the World Bank. She is a regular contributor to *Forbes* and the *Harvard Business Review*. She is also the author of *Reinventing You*, named the #1 Leadership Book of 2015 by *Inc.* magazine.

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Tell us about your background and what inspired you to write *Stand Out*.

I started out with a rather eclectic career that led me to my first book, *Reinventing You*. I was a newspaper reporter and was laid off early in my career. I had some adventures along the way: I was a presidential campaign spokesperson, I ran a non-profit, and I made a documentary film. Eventually I settled into the business of marketing strategy consulting.

These reinventions led me to understand that we live in a world where we are all reinventing ourselves. It also led me to the next phase. After I found the place I wanted to be, I realized that there were so many other people out there who described themselves the same way I described myself: a marketing consultant.

Differentiating yourself in a crowded, noisy marketplace—whatever your business—is very difficult. I wrote *Stand Out* because I wanted to understand for myself how to break out and get noticed and also to help other people who are talented and have good ideas.

In writing *Stand Out*, I interviewed 50 world experts in different fields and tried to reverse-engineer the process by which they came to prominence so that I could create a playbook for regular professionals to get their best ideas and talents noticed.

Our research suggests that it's not the absence of weaknesses that makes you great; it is the presence of strengths that makes you great. Have you found some definite things that make a difference?

When I was researching *Stand Out*, I discovered that there are different ways that helped people begin to get noticed. Not everybody reached the path of greatness by doing the same thing. It is important to pick a strategy that feels comfortable to you.

Some of the people I profiled came to the forefront of their fields by pursuing a niche strategy: they were experts in a tiny slice of something. If you are passionate about a subset of your field, this is a fantastic way to demonstrate your expertise. After you have that toehold and you are recognized for your expertise in that niche, you are then able to expand strategically.

Another strategy is mixing disciplines. A top scientist I profiled didn't start out in biology, the field in which he is now operating. He started as a mathematician and computer scientist. When he turned to biology he was able to bring extensive quantitative skills that most biologists didn't possess. By creating an amalgam of something new, bringing two things together in a unique way, he was able to rise to the top.

What advice would you give young leaders early in their careers?

A mistake people make is following advice that might have been good 20 or 30 years ago, which is “Don't worry about self-promotion. Just do a good job and that'll get noticed.” Some people don't want to promote themselves at all and then you have the “selfie-takers” who want to talk about themselves all the time.

It is important for every leader, especially young leaders in this crowded, noisy landscape to think about what your professional reputation is and how you want to be seen and then take steps to close the gap. If you are willing to thoughtfully grapple with this, it will put you far ahead of colleagues that are either slaving away at their desks hoping that things will happen or the people that are “all hat and no cattle.”

How can people self-promote in an authentic way?

There are misconceptions about what it means to “do personal branding.” Personal branding is not just chest thumping. “I’m the best at this. You should hire me or promote me because I’m so amazing.” The truth is that this is personal branding done badly. Nobody likes that and it doesn’t work.

What does work, and what for the vast majority of people feels comfortable, is not about saying how great you are, but showing it. This doesn’t mean sitting at your desk with your head down and hoping everything will take care of itself, but showing it in a strategic way so that other people hear it and recognize it.

We need to share our expertise so that more people can see for themselves that we have good ideas. This is a challenge of the modern, white-collar economy. It is hard for people to know if you’re any good. How can they evaluate that, unless they have been working shoulder to shoulder with you?

We need to find ways to share our ideas. This could be as simple as posting more frequently on your company’s social network, blogging, or answering questions on websites like Quora. If you demonstrate your expertise so that other people can see it, that’s when you begin to develop an expert reputation. It’s not bragging. It is the necessary byproduct of doing something that helps others.

How do involving yourself, volunteering, and finding opportunities to work with others help?

During my research for *Reinventing You*, I discovered that as people begin their careers or are shifting into new roles, they sometimes think more is better. They get caught up in quantity and think they should volunteer for everything, join every committee, and do a little of this and a little of that.



That might sound like a good idea on the surface, but the truth is that it is far more effective to go deep in a few things rather than spreading yourself thin. If you have a choice between getting involved in two committees, volunteer groups, or professional associations and taking a leading role or being a member of ten different things, I would always advise people to go deep into fewer things.

There is a power and a perceived authority that comes with being chosen by your peers for a leadership role, even if it is something you are doing for fun on the side. It could be the running club at your office, but it lets people see you in a different way as a leader and that shapes how they think of you.

What is your advice to women? Is it the same or slightly different than your advice to men?

Whenever I'm giving a talk specifically to a women's group, there is always one concept that I make a point of highlighting because I think it is so relevant, salient, and important for women to be aware of. This is a technical term used in psychology known as the "likeability conundrum." This is something that unfortunately comes down harder on women. Research shows a tendency to view people that are very likeable as less competent. This leads to some damaging outcomes.

In our society women are trained and brought up from birth that being likeable, agreeable, friendly, and positive are highly valued traits. Our society creates a Catch-22 because when women are not those things, they are punished—called shrill, aggressive, and the "B word."

The reason it's called a conundrum is that there's actually not a great solution. The answer is not to forget likeability and try to be mean and competent. That's not a good world to live in. Each woman should think through how she can demonstrate her likeability and be the kind of person she wants to be, but also make 100% sure that she has covered her flank with regards to questions of competency. How can she make sure



that other people couldn't, even if they wanted to, get the perception that because she is likeable that she is not competent? If we are aware of the problem, we can begin to address it.

What standout qualities do you possess and when and how did you discover them?

I'm incredibly persistent. If we're looking for traits that form a helpful substratum—traits that can magnify other traits that might be positive—persistence and grit are good starting places.

We are not going to have smooth sailing all the time. There are going to be setbacks. If we let being turned away the first or second time stop us, pretty much everyone will be stopped eventually.

When I decided that I wanted to publish a book, I wrote three different proposals and not one of them got picked up by a publisher. I was essentially told that I was not famous enough. I had to start from square one. I spent a couple of years building my platform and building a following. I have now published a couple of books and I am working on another. Some people let the rejections stop them, but I knew that if I kept pushing forward, eventually I would be able to do it.

Does persistence track back to when you lost your first job?

I think so. Having lost my job, I had a very immediate concern, which was how to make money. The newspaper industry has never been renowned for its generosity. These folks were particularly cheap and gave me one week of severance.

Certainly there was economic reality breathing down my neck, but overall I had a reasonable base of confidence. It was incredibly frustrating because I felt like I had a contribution to make that people weren't seeing. I vowed that I would keep pushing forward and I would find people and places that appreciated me and, hopefully, I would make the



people who turned me down regret it. I wanted them to feel like the 17 people who said no to J.K. Rowling.

Do you have any final thoughts or closing comments?

One thing that stands out for me is the importance of being proactive with the decisions of how we spend our time and with whom we spend our time. When I was researching *Stand Out*, I discovered that there is a three-step process to spreading your ideas and getting them known. Sometimes people like to jump ahead or skip steps, but you do need to do all three.

The first one is what I call building a network, the second is building an audience, and the third is building a community.

I think a place where we can all start is building a network: assembling a small group of trusted people around you and being deliberate about recognizing the people you respect most, personally and professionally, and arranging your time and schedule to spend more time with them.

Some of us are very reactive and spend a lot of time with people who ask for meetings, but if time is the resource by which we demonstrate our value, we need to be choosy about that. Building that network is important and essential because it is the people who can support you and help you refine your ideas. That's what enables you to be successful later on after your ideas begin to grow and gain traction. You can then move into speaking with a wider world and building that audience and community.



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