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JULIE MERNAGH
CHIEF PEOPLE & CULTURE OFFICER
BIDVEST NOONAN



LAST CORPORATE MYTH

*Few concepts have achieved such sacred status as “employer brand”.
”It has been treated as both a science and an art - define it, express it,
market it and your talent challenges will diminish. Simple and seductive -
a strong employer brand attracts the best people, keeps them engaged and
makes them ambassadors for life. But it is behaviour, not branding, that is
the true currency of trust. Employer branding has become corporate
orthodoxy, but much of it rests on untested assumptions.*

"PURPOSE STATEMENTS IN RECEPTION, THE 'VALUES' ARE
IMMORTALISED ON MUGS AND TOTE BAGS AND MEANWHILE,
EMPLOYEES ARE TELLING ANYONE WHO WILL LISTEN,
A COMPLETELY DIFFERENT STORY"



ARTICLE BY DR LEANDRO HERRERO, CEO - THE CHALFONT PROJECT



Much of the “new age” employer brand narrative runs on assumptions, self-reinforcing surveys and wishful thinking. We have confused marketing aspiration with organisational anthropology. One of the most persistent risks is the conflation of brand and culture. Brand is what you tell the world you are. Culture is what you actually do when nobody is looking. The two may overlap, but they are not the same - and the overlap is never automatic. When brand is allowed to stand in for culture, organisations drift toward perception-management instead of behaviour-management. We have the inevitable trappings - the recruitment videos with slow-motion smiles, purpose statements in reception, the “values” are immortalised on mugs and tote bags and meanwhile, employees are telling anyone who will listen, a completely different story. This is where the conversation often avoids its most uncomfortable point, the missing link is behaviour. A brand may open the door to a candidate, but behaviour keeps them inside or propels them out. It’s behaviour that shapes trust, credibility and reputation far more than any campaign. If your stated value is “we listen”, but the only listening happens in an annual engagement survey, your brand is theatre. If you claim, “we care about wellbeing”, but quietly reward presenteeism and after-hours emailing, the brand collapses. If you talk about inclusion but meetings are dominated by the same voices, the dissonance is obvious to everyone - including those you hope to attract. This is why I believe the future is not in EVP - Employee Value Proposition as much as in EBP - Employer Behaviour Proposition. That is, the observable, repeatable, everyday actions that tell people how things really work here.

The current orthodoxy says that an employer brand should be “employee-led”. It’s a comforting phrase, who could disagree? Employees are indeed the most trusted voice in the talent marketplace. The trouble is, “employee-led” often means “employee-fronted”. It’s about putting a few smiling faces in the brochure, while the core narrative is still tightly scripted by leadership and comms teams. It’s about controlling the story, not

yielding it. True authenticity is harder. It means creating the conditions where employees can share unfiltered stories and then having the courage to hear them, respond to them and sometimes change because of them. That’s a very different kind of leadership from commissioning a glossy EVP campaign. When organisations over-manage the employer brand, they can fall into a trap, spending more time maintaining the image than dealing with the reality. The result is internal cognitive dissonance, people experience one thing inside but see the company broadcasting another. Cynicism follows and cynicism is corrosive. It spreads informally, fast and far, faster than any official narrative can keep up with. In the social era, you can’t out-message reality. This is why branding should never

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be treated as a separate, controllable “asset” detached from culture. A brand is a reflection of culture and culture is a reflection of what people consistently do. What shapes someone’s perception of an organisation is not a values poster, a welcome video or a LinkedIn campaign. It’s repeated exposure to consistent, credible acts: When leaders acknowledge mistakes without spin. When flexibility is genuinely supported, not quietly penalised. When promotions are transparent and merit-based. When inclusion is evident in how meetings run, not just in policy statements. These are the proof points people remember and share. They are the true raw material of an employer brand. Marketing logic is broadcast - you define the message, choose the channels and push it out. Culture logic is social proof - you demonstrate through behaviour and people tell each

other. Employer branding rooted in broadcast logic will always be fragile - one bad experience can puncture it.

Employer branding rooted in social proof is resilient, because it’s continually reinforced by lived reality. A useful test is, if you switched off all formal employer brand activity tomorrow - no glossy videos, no EVP decks - would your people still recommend working here? If the answer is yes, you have a strong culture and therefore a strong brand. If the answer is no, you don’t have a branding problem, you have a behavioural one. If we took the idea of an Employer Behaviour Proposition seriously, the approach would look different. 1. *Diagnose reality first*: Not just via surveys but by observing behaviour - decision-making, conflict resolution, recognition and day-to-day collaboration. 2. *Close the say-do gap*: Identify and fix the visible contradictions between values and lived reality before making any brand claims. 3. *Encourage unscripted stories*: Enable employees to share real experiences, without fear of repercussions or pressure to conform to a narrative. 4. *Measure behaviour as well as sentiment*: Sentiment can be swayed by momentary factors; behaviour is more reliable evidence. 5. *Treat brand as a consequence, not a cause*: The brand should be the natural outcome of a functioning, credible culture. There’s an uncomfortable truth here, moving from “brand” to “behaviour” requires humility. Branding implies control, you decide what the world sees. Behaviour means vulnerability - you accept that the world will judge you on lived reality, not just the image you curate. For leaders trained to manage every variable, this feels risky. But in a hyper-connected world, you can’t win by managing the myth; you can only win by managing the substance. A strong employer brand is indeed a strategic asset, because it reflects an organisation’s capacity for behavioural consistency and adaptability. In the end, your employer brand is simply the name people give to the pattern of your behaviour over time. It will exist whether you manage it or not.

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