

# Get your brand and talent right

**Kevin Keohane** has some tips for building brand strength *and* employee engagement

**M**ost organisations and their leaders acknowledge that their reputation – establishing it, defending it, building it – is critical to their success in today's always-on, connected and often very transparent world.

Reputation is really created by two things: what you **say** and what you **do**. This is heavily influenced by your approaches to brand (what you stand for, what you promise, the products and services you provide) and talent (the people who design, manage and deliver the products and services you provide) management.

So **brand** management and **talent** management approaches are two of the most powerful levers at your disposal in driving tangible, measurable improvement to reputation, and to operational performance. Getting these two right, in the right combination, will drive significant cost savings, efficiency and, ultimately, the gross margin that allows business to invest and grow.

**Brand** management helps you be clear about who you are, what you stand for. It helps ensure that people are aware of you, of what you can do for them and why they should purchase your products and services. It gives you something clear to steer by. Name something more important to a CEO than the reputation of his firm.

**Talent** management helps you make sure you get the right people aboard to help in the first place, and then create an environment in which they can contribute more and you can deliver on your promises. Name something more important to a CEO than the talent needed to deliver growth. Every annual report seems to claim "people are our greatest asset". In most cases, they are certainly the greatest investment.

Chances are, reputation and talent issues are both in the top five lists for just about any leader. The two are, patently, inextricably linked.

Why, then, do so many organisations manage these distinct drivers of business effectiveness as if they are completely different things? In this article, I'll present the case for a different and more integrated approach to thinking about the way your organisation manages the way it attracts, recruits, develops and motivates the people you need in order to provide a product of service that is authentic, relevant to your



customers and differentiated from your competitors – for both business and talent.

Clearly, the provision of L&D lies at the heart of these efforts. I'd challenge you to read this article and then reflect on the degree to which your own organisation – and your own way of working and thinking – is truly integrated. My hope is that you will be able to take a fresh look at what you do and how you do it – and, ideally, play a role in influencing your peers and leadership to take steps toward a more integrated way of thinking, communicating and working.

### The big challenge: the silo

One of the biggest challenges organisations face in achieving the potential benefits of a more integrated approach is one that is likely to be familiar to most readers: the organisational silo is alive and well, and it generally stands as the biggest challenge to getting this balance right.

Why is that? It's because organisations, quite logically, shape themselves around specialist functional expertise. That's sensible, but it becomes less sensible when the agenda of the specialist function begins to overshadow that of the organisation. All too often the functional agenda elevates its own views, methods, systems and terminology, at the expense of a more outcome-focused, clear and simple approach.

Territorialism, politics, empire building, turf wars and budget battles are a reality of organisational life.

So, you can find yourself having the following conversation when you suggest a more integrated approach: **'Brand?**

*That's about external positioning.*

*Logos. PR and advertising campaigns.*

*Reputation management. Social media.*

**Talent?** *That's about recruiting.*

*Employee communications. Human*

*resources. Internal communications*

*handles all that stuff, doesn't it?*

*What's the connection?*

While there is evidence of

## Name something more important to a CEO than the reputation of his firm

some organisations connecting employer branding and living-the-brand/employee-brand-engagement type activities, they are far from being integrated and hardwired to the organisation – at either communication, operational process or people management levels.

It is hard to find examples where brand, employer brand, human resources, L&D and employee engagement have been genuinely connected and managed as a single integrated process.

But the tide is turning. The functional separation of many of the activities relating to brand management and talent management has reached the end of its usefulness for many. Smart (and higher-performing) organisations understand there is a better way, that one core idea is better than many when it comes to focus and clarity in a dynamic internal and external environment.

### A simple and more integrated starting point

If the connection and overlap between the worlds of brand management and talent management (including L&D) is so obvious, why does it appear to be so difficult to wring efficiencies and improved performance from it?

A great deal of the challenge comes from



the very way organisations are put together. The separation of responsibilities by audience and by task, appropriate for another era, is appearing to be less useful, agile and effective in the new age.

It would be foolish to assert that functional specialist expertise is not required. The challenge lies in **how** that functional specialism and expertise is integrated and applied in concert with other functions. Most organisations have not really changed their operational models to deal with the whirling dynamics of their external environment. Many have found themselves with 20 (or more) messages telling employees what they should be focusing on – some from HR, some from L&D, some from marketing, some from their managers, some from every other function.

Employees might be forgiven for scratching their heads and wondering which thing they should be worried about – or, more likely, just ‘disengage’ and get on with day-to-day business as usual.

**How to get started**

The first step is perhaps the hardest for those who have done the drill before or, more painfully, those who advise them: Dispose of a lot of the terminology that has crept into the world of business strategy, brand and talent management.

With words, we make our world. The basis of human communication is whether the meaning behind the word that I say matches the picture in your mind when you hear it.

So some words should be banned from the process entirely. Start with a clean sheet of paper. This will prove uncomfortable for many who have very

specific and strong views about organisational strategy and development models. Nonetheless, by changing the words we use, we provide ourselves with a new and arguably level playing field on which to start the conversation.

What words should we ban – at least in this specific context?

- vision, vision statement
- mission, mission statement
- goals
- objectives
- brand values, attributes etc
- any combination of these words that are different in different parts of the organisation
- brand, employer brand.

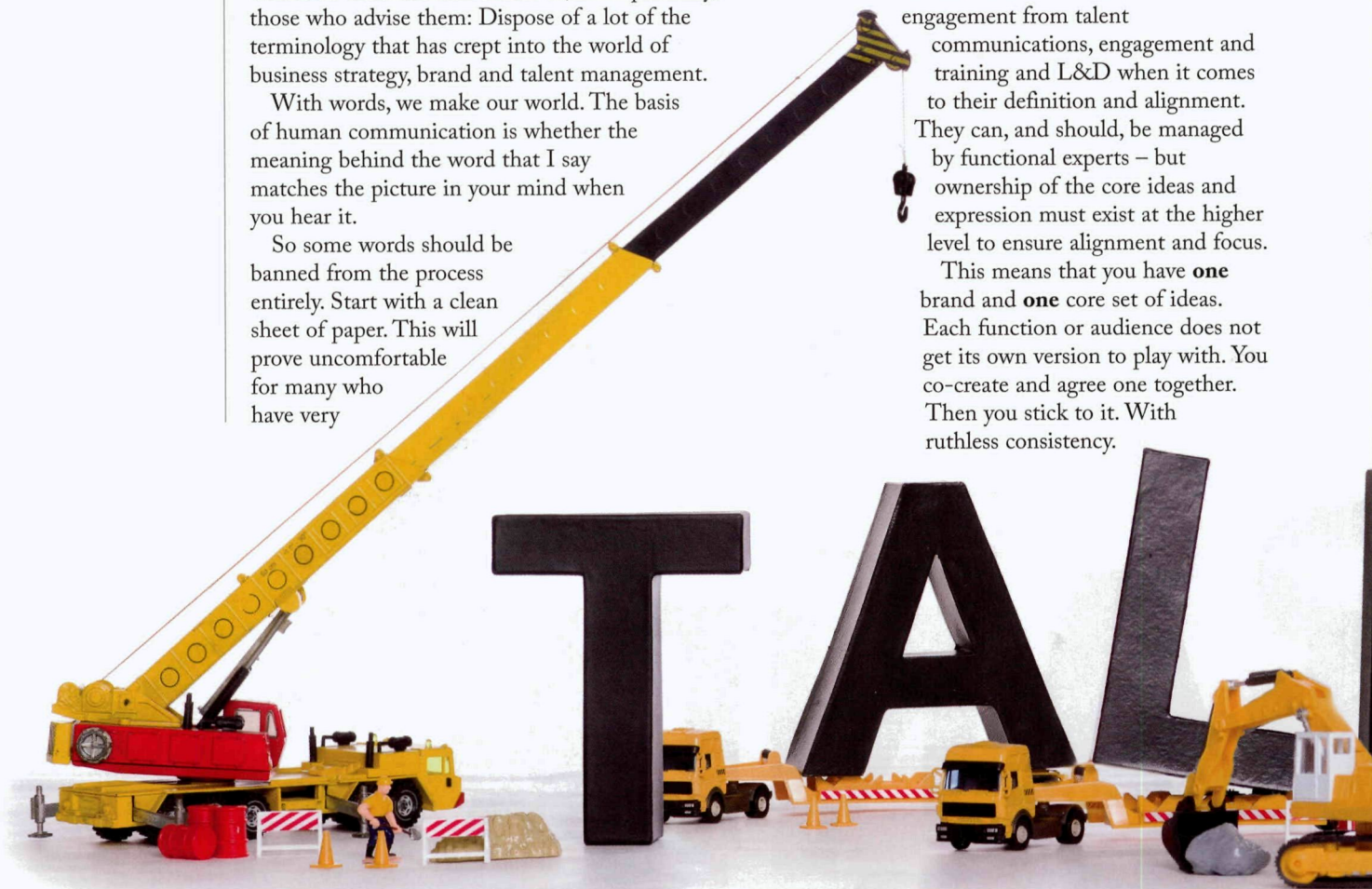
Uncomfortable yet?

Setting aside these baggage-laden terms can prove to be very liberating. Particularly when working with senior management, shifting the lexicon allows for a mind shift and avoids debating different and deep-set views about specific terms and their application.

The next step is to stop separating branding, external communications and engagement from talent

communications, engagement and training and L&D when it comes to their definition and alignment. They can, and should, be managed by functional experts – but ownership of the core ideas and expression must exist at the higher level to ensure alignment and focus.

This means that you have **one** brand and **one** core set of ideas. Each function or audience does not get its own version to play with. You co-create and agree one together. Then you stick to it. With ruthless consistency.



To do this, you must think about your reputation as an **organisation** and your reputation as an **employer** as two sides of the same coin. Both sides must draw their inspiration and expression from the same set of core elements or they will not be aligned.

On the one hand, at first glance this might not appear to be a radical concept or approach. Common sense, it is often said, can be uncommon. When most people see it, it seems quite obvious.

On the other hand, the reality is that few organisations actually approach their brand management and talent management and communications in this manner. Brand, strategy, marketing, employer brands, talent acquisition, go-to-market programmes are, all too often, misaligned and marching to their own drum beat (often to the click of a functionally-set metronome).

While few would argue against the idea that engaging and aligning people to deliver the right customer experience is critical to organisational success, the reality of the cut-and-thrust of day-to-day business and functional agendas can drive a wedge between these efforts.

### Is anyone doing this right?

Some organisations have grasped this nettle and are demonstrating its power in terms of their operational structure and how they communicate where they are going, both internally and externally. This core idea creates an explicit guide around which

## Name something more important to a CEO than the talent needed to deliver growth

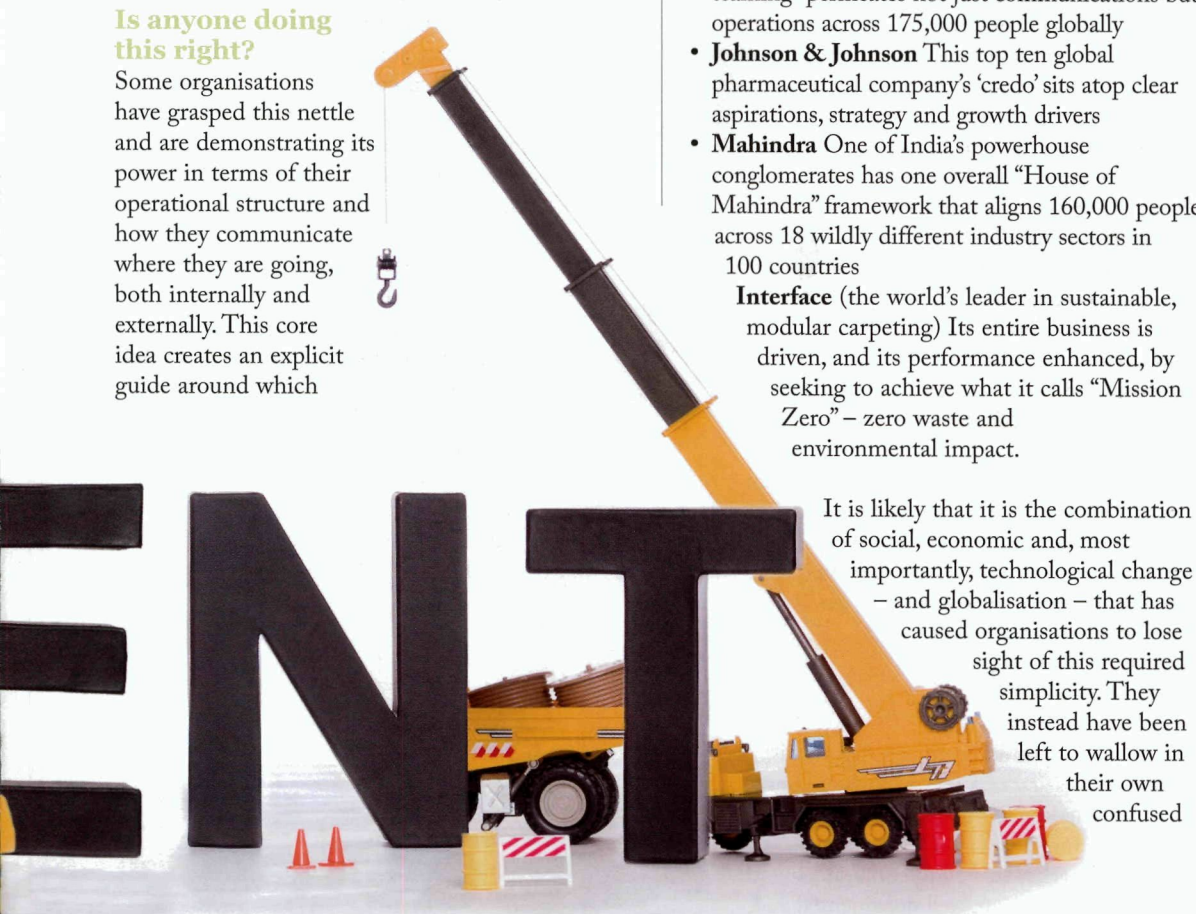
operational processes are established – including what training to provide, what development opportunities to explore, what competencies to redefine and develop, what reward, recognition and engagement processes to undertake. Importantly, this can also help decide what to end – what to cancel, stop funding, stop doing.

Some examples from high performance organisations include:

- **IBM** Its “Smarter Planet” core infuses everything it does across ten distinct data-driven disciplines
- **Accenture** “High performance. Delivered.” is its unavoidable mantra
- **EY** “Building a better working world” through “exceptional client service and high performance teaming” permeates not just communications but operations across 175,000 people globally
- **Johnson & Johnson** This top ten global pharmaceutical company’s ‘credo’ sits atop clear aspirations, strategy and growth drivers
- **Mahindra** One of India’s powerhouse conglomerates has one overall “House of Mahindra” framework that aligns 160,000 people across 18 wildly different industry sectors in 100 countries

**Interface** (the world’s leader in sustainable, modular carpeting) Its entire business is driven, and its performance enhanced, by seeking to achieve what it calls “Mission Zero” – zero waste and environmental impact.

It is likely that it is the combination of social, economic and, most importantly, technological change – and globalisation – that has caused organisations to lose sight of this required simplicity. They instead have been left to wallow in their own confused



complexity as they are forced to react, on a quarter-by-quarter basis, to burning platforms and what they perceive to be more imminent and emergent challenges – each generating new messages and adding to the noise and confusion.

**So what lies at the core?**

An integrated model aligns **brand** (efforts to influence your reputation with external stakeholders so that you drive awareness, consideration, preference and advocacy) with **talent** (how you attract, recruit, engage, train, develop and eventually export your talent).

- **purpose** This is a crisp, clear, compelling, confident statement that answers the question *why do you exist?* Why do you and your people get out of bed in the morning? Why would your market and the world be a poorer place if you simply ceased to exist? What do you generate beyond profit and what impact do your activities have on your people, your communities and the larger world?
- **ambition** What have you set out to achieve? What is that mountain you have set out to climb? How will you measure or monitor your progress or success along the way? When will you know you have done it (will you ever)?
- **strategy** What is your plan to get there? What activities is the business doing (and what activities is it not going to do), with whom, where and in what order to achieve your ambition and fulfil your purpose? How does each person make their contribution?
- **positioning** Given all of this, within your competitive landscape, how will you express what makes you special and unique to your marketplace? What is your value proposition when it really comes down to service delivery or product performance? Is it relevant? Is it authentic? Is it different, and does that difference matter? How does it connect to your own HR, engagement and L&D activities?

**How is this different to other approaches?**

In some ways, it could be argued that this is simply a rephrasing of a lot of standard approaches to establishing vision, mission, values and positioning, and that would be a fair challenge. Various approaches to setting corporate, brand and talent strategies are well documented and,

for the most part, would not vary too much from this model.

On the other hand, cross-functional and cross-cultural and regional dynamics have created for many organisations a very convoluted and overly complex set of messages and ideas, inconsistently applied and with ample room for ‘optionality’ – often under the banner of ‘localisation’. It is my belief that the way to ‘rest’ this imbalance is to use the approach advocated here.

So while there are different models for addressing this, this approach:

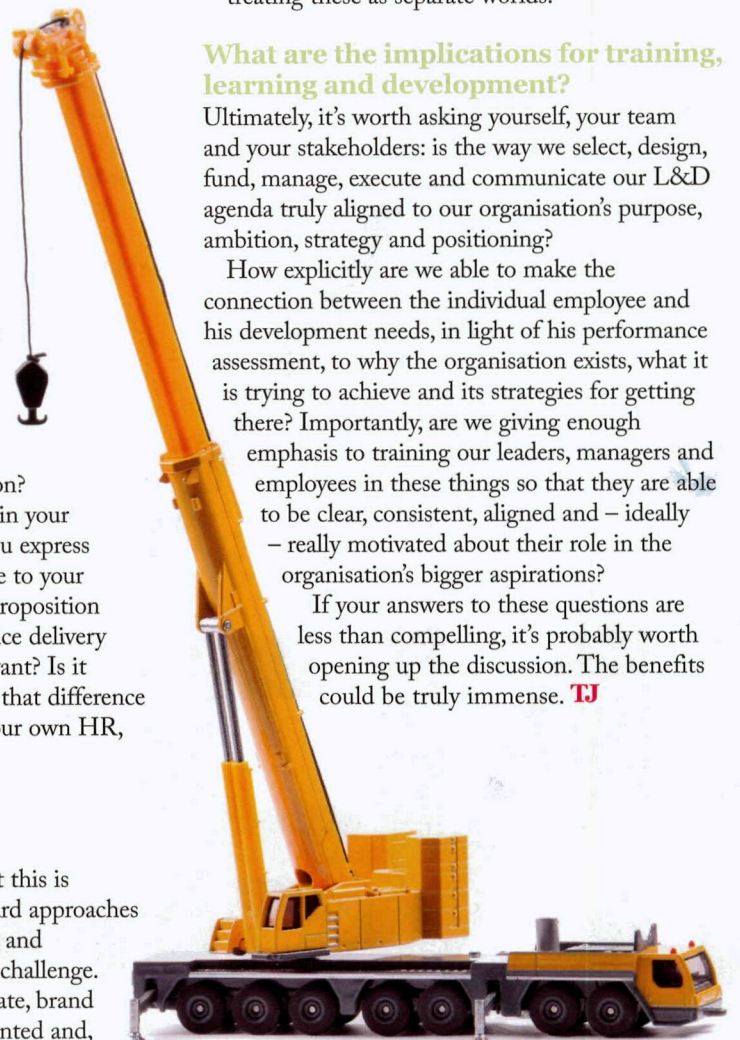
- redefines some of the core terms with new ones that clearly are less battle-weary
- keeps it simple – four core elements in plain language
- allows for both inspirational higher-order content as well as commercially-focused targets and business/operational content
- aligns it to customer and talent marketplace messages in an integrated manner, rather than treating these as separate worlds.

**What are the implications for training, learning and development?**

Ultimately, it’s worth asking yourself, your team and your stakeholders: is the way we select, design, fund, manage, execute and communicate our L&D agenda truly aligned to our organisation’s purpose, ambition, strategy and positioning?

How explicitly are we able to make the connection between the individual employee and his development needs, in light of his performance assessment, to why the organisation exists, what it is trying to achieve and its strategies for getting there? Importantly, are we giving enough emphasis to training our leaders, managers and employees in these things so that they are able to be clear, consistent, aligned and – ideally – really motivated about their role in the organisation’s bigger aspirations?

If your answers to these questions are less than compelling, it’s probably worth opening up the discussion. The benefits could be truly immense. **TJ**



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