

5 Key Personal Branding Lessons From the Harris-Trump Debate

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As the founder of a leading global personal branding agency for CEOs, I am always on the lookout for lessons we can learn from people in the public eye. Even when they are not entrepreneurs or business owners themselves, their experiences frequently offer takeaways we can apply to our leadership journeys.

As a Ukrainian-Canadian, I have no political affiliation in the case of American politics. Yet, I watched the recent presidential debate through the lens of personal branding with fascination – and in this article, I'll share my observations.

U.S. debates take place on what can arguably be considered the world's biggest stage with the highest of stakes. Although we may all be far removed from the world of politics, as leaders who are working on building our own leadership brands, we can learn some incredible lessons as we observe the presidential candidates.

Clarity is one of the foundational elements of building a brand. Before we put ourselves in the public eye, we need to be clear on the WHY behind our brand building (i.e., our goals), clear on our unique strengths, clear on the audience we want to be addressing and clear on the messaging we want to be delivering to that audience. We also need to be prepared both with intentionality before any public appearance and for the criticism our visibility may attract.

Let's unpack this further.

As you begin to build your personal brand as a leader of your organization, you need to:

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1. Have clarity of your goals

Why are you on stage (virtual or physical)? Why are you writing an article? Why are you agreeing to a podcast interview?

Harris' goals were clear. She came to dispel the image of being ineloquent, uncomfortable on stage and laughing out of place. To dispel the image, she most evidently prepared extensively. She clearly rehearsed not only her talking points but also her body language (from her physical positioning during Trump's remarks to the smiling to the "not true at all" mouthing). How do we know that she was intentional and rehearsed? Due to the sheer volume of repetition that we all observed.

Lesson for you: Don't just "go with the flow." When you are building your personal brand as a leader, do it with intention and clear goals in mind.

2. Be clear on your strengths and play to them

This is when we feel that someone is "on brand" or isn't. What does being "on brand" look and feel like for you? This will apply to all scenarios: from the morning huddle to the leadership strategy retreat to the industry conference you may be speaking at.

Trump's undeniable strength is in his off-the-cuff quips. The very few viral highlights of the debate are a testament to

that. Harris, on the other hand, stumbles and stutters off-script, and we saw it a couple of times when she fell for Trump's bait.

Lesson for you: Don't observe someone else's style and attempt to emulate it. Instead, get very clear on your strengths and over-index them, even if your style garners criticism.

3. Paint a narrative

We live in an era where, for better or for worse, words now matter more than actions. Many people were asking on X yesterday why the candidates were not being fact-checked. Although to an extent they were and continue to be post-debate, the truth remains: If someone says something, then it is often believed to be so.

Harris seems to have come into the debate with a goal of painting the narrative of Trump as erratic, dangerous and out of control. She focused a lot of her storytelling on that specific narrative and baited Trump strategically to ensure that his rhetoric matched her narrative. In many ways, this turns what should be a fact-based debate into a he said/she said game of verbal ping pong, but there is a lesson for us here, nonetheless.

Lesson for you: If you are going to build a personal brand as a leader, you need to become a strong storyteller. Stories are memorable, they create emotion, and they build affinity.

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4. Define your audience

Your audience will be closely tied to your goals, so lesson number one remains a crucial one. If your goal as a leader is to attract higher caliber talent to the organization, then

this is a very different audience than that of a leader who wants to secure more board work, for example.

Once again, Harris came to the debate with more clarity and intent. She was evidently casting a wide net and made it clear by continuously referencing middle-class Americans as “all Americans.” Trump failed to address the audience, and it remained unclear whether his goal was to focus on his existing follower base or to address a wider audience hoping to sway swing voters.

Lesson for you: Clarity of audience leads to clarity of key talking points. Define yours before you begin creating any content, be it a LinkedIn post or a talk on a big stage.

5. Learn to handle criticism

The bigger your visibility gets, the more backlash you can expect to receive. It truly is not a question of “if,” but rather a question of “how much.” We are all subject to keyboard warriors’ boundless desire to criticize and virtue-signal, but how we react is what affects how others perceive us.

Trump made a crucial mistake last night. He fell for Harris’ baiting over and over again. Instead of having clarity of goals and building out his own narrative, he began to reply about crowd sizes at his rallies, world leaders mocking him and other disconnected jabs. Rather than remaining cool, calm and collected, he began to babble incessantly. You might relate: So many of us have fallen for baiters at least once or twice on social media. What begins as an unpleasant remark from a stranger can quickly lead to us losing face and not putting our best foot forward.

Lesson for you: Prepare for criticism. Have a go-to way of replying, and stick to it no matter how hard someone tries to knock you off course.

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Ultimately, the key lesson for all of us is that intention matters. I have seen many leaders go with the flow when building their leadership brand and then be disappointed with the lack of results or not getting the results they were hoping for. This is where strategy rooted in clarity makes a key difference. Clarity first, execution second, and consistency for the win!

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