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Case Study:

Build Your Leadership Brand – A Case Study on India’s Megastar Chiranjeevi

by M.S. Rao

Abstract

The purpose of this case study is to unveil tools and techniques to build a leadership brand by focusing on a living example. This study focuses on India’s film industry superstar, Konidela Siva Sankara Vara Prasad, better known by stage name, Chiranjeevi. His example shows how building a successful leadership brand requires consistent efforts, energy, investment, and time. It specifies the outlets used to effectively reach a target audience such as websites, blogs, emails, interviews, podcasts, and webinars. It demonstrates how life’s lessons learned can strengthen rather than compromise character. It implores individuals to learn from their own mistakes and to strive to seek alternate routes. It concludes that Chiranjeevi is a passionate personality, an experimental actor, and a living legend in the Indian film industry who has built an enduring brand.

Introduction

“Branding demands commitment; commitment to continual re-invention; striking chords with people to stir their emotions; and commitment to imagination. It is easy to be cynical about such things, much harder to be successful.” — Sir Richard Branson

Building a leadership brand requires consistent efforts, energies, investment, time, and resources. Most people fail to accomplish this because they are in a hurry to build their leadership templates. However, there are several celebrities and leaders who invest their energies and efforts consistently to excel in their areas and professions and build their leadership brands successfully. For them, investing efforts is the end product and building their leadership brands is the byproduct. In this regard, we will take the case study of India’s film star Chiranjeevi – who has attained widespread public recognition and admiration through his work in the Indian film industry – to demonstrate how a leadership brand originated and is nurtured and which ultimately provides similar opportunities to other aspirants.

Early in life, Chiranjeevi developed an affinity for movies and a penchant for acting. He started his journey in Chennai, India with a trunk box to pursue his career aspirations. He

worked diligently to gain a foothold in the local film industry and intentionally surrounded himself with supportive influences.

Chiranjeevi – A Self-Made Man

Initially, Chiranjeevi played the role of a character artiste and villain – taking less enviable roles – as he was new to this profession and had not yet had a chance to develop any substantive networking within the Telugu film industry (also known by its sobriquet, *Tollywood*). In fact, Chiranjeevi became a self-made man without *any* lineage in Tollywood. Lacking familial relationships in Tollywood was the most challenging part of his career paralleled, in part, by the presence of senior actors, including N.T. Rama Rao, A. Nageswara Rao, Krishna, and Sobhan Babu who had maintained a seemingly impenetrable hold in Tollywood for many years. Hence, he accepted whatever roles were offered to him.

He was gradually noticed by those in control of film creation and distribution and began to receive parts that were heroic in content and perception, thereby creating a particular niche. There were other film stars including Balakrishna, Nagarjuna, and Venkatesh who entered into the film industry as a result of their familial connections and influence. They achieved career success partly due their lineage. Of course, they also worked hard to prove and establish themselves. But it was a cakewalk for them in Tollywood. However, Chiranjeevi had to work much harder to establish himself in Tollywood since he did not have any film connections and readymade fans. He mastered all types of acting skills including comedy, tragedy, dance, love, romance, and stunts to become a complete actor.

Chiranjeevi – An Experimental Actor

Initially, Chiranjeevi encountered stiff resistance in Tollywood as politics permeated all facets of the industry. But he overcame these obstacles as he was keenly aware that it is the people who decided the fate of actors and politicians in every country and India was surely not an exception. His unique combination of innovative stunts, energy, enthusiasm, dancing style, grace, and charisma distinguished him from other actors and stars.

He followed the road less travelled. After proving his acting prowess in the movie *Khaidi* in 1983, his work and presence had become well known and well respected. Some of his movies – including *Jagadeka Veerudu Athiloka Sundari*, *Gharana Mogudu*, *Mutha Mestri*, *Indra*, and *Tagore* – catapulted him to superstar status. He tried various genres to excel as a full-fledged hero by acting in different types of films including *Rudraveena*, *Swayam Krushi*, and *Apadbandavudu*. He became increasingly image-conscious, however, as his fan base multiplied exponentially and had begun to expect more auspicious performances from him.

He tried different scripts and worked under directors and producers who were committed to issues of social justice. He changed heroines for every film. Gradually, he garnered more attention from the public that could be attained by his colleagues. After he evolved into a stand-alone force in Tollywood, Chiranjeevi plunged into politics – his swift exit causing a vacuum in the film industry. Some of his former co-actors openly critiqued his political aspirations and, without hesitation, never refrained from highlighting his failures.

After almost a decade, Chiranjeevi returned to the film industry with the film, *Khaidi No 150*, which broke all Tollywood records. His staying power and resiliency secured his return to Tollywood prominence and placed him in a position where he could compete with those who had achieved personal success in his absence. Many lost expected roles; others capitulated

to his enduring acting brand. His fan base was unwavering in their re-acceptance as was aptly demonstrated by his box office profits.

Tumble Makes Humble

Every person experiences challenging, dark times in his or her lifetime where pause is given for self-analysis and reflection and where ego is jettisoned and substituted with humility. This is truly when *tumble makes people humble*. Trying times can help identify realistic objectives, support networks, and formidable foes. Chiranjeevi experienced many of these darker periods but always seemed to emerge stronger and more endearing to the public. He learned from personal hardships and tried to avoid repeating poor choices and ill-fated actions.

Chiranjeevi – A Passionate Personality

Regardless of personal challenges, Chiranjeevi's audacious vision to steadfastly pursue his professional goals appeared unconstrained and largely free from the all-consuming narcissism many expect from established celebrities. He was passionate about his profession while being fully engaged in matters of social justice. He welcomed feedback regularly while maintaining a thirst for knowledge to augment his leadership brand.

Chiranjeevi's Leadership Brand Building

Chiranjeevi is a versatile actor and a multifaceted leader who has diversified his talents into pursuing many areas including films, business ventures, charitable projects, and politics. While acknowledged as average in intelligence, he has displayed an extraordinary passion toward his chosen profession. And although he was not necessarily regarded as an expert in branding himself initially, he learned it gradually from his fans and close associates by accepting feedback regularly. He created a cinema model, carved a niche for himself as a mass-appeal actor, and targeted the market in a focused manner. After building his credibility and visibility in the Telugu film industry over the years, he released films systematically by understanding the pulse of the people. He cemented his position in the film industry and built his leadership brand effectively.

Chiranjeevi – A Living Legend

"I've come to believe that each of us has a personal calling that's as unique as a fingerprint - and that the best way to succeed is to discover what you love and then find a way to offer it to others in the form of service, working hard, and also allowing the energy of the universe to lead you." — Oprah Winfrey

Chiranjeevi is an experimental actor who doesn't hesitate to explore new ways of achieving his career objectives. He follows his directors and acts according to their instructions with humility. He is simple and humble at his core. In the opinion of this author, he is the most passionate actor that the Indian film industry has ever witnessed. He is the living bible of acting. He is a role model for up and coming actors. He is a lifelong learner who doesn't hesitate to entertain people through films and serve people through politics. Time will only

tell whether he will succeed as a politician. But it is a widely-accepted fact that Chiranjeevi has carved out a significant following where others have failed.



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