

DOES A PERSONAL BRAND REALLY CREATE TRUST? LEADER'S PERSONAL BRAND AND TEAM TRUST

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Purpose: This article presents pilot study findings on team leaders' use of the personal brand concept to support team trust-building.

Design/methodology/approach: A literature review identified personal branding activities potentially aligned with trust-building attitudes and behaviors. Preliminary empirical research, conducted via a diagnostic survey in May 2024, involved members and leaders of five teams from a major Polish retail chain.

Findings: The highest rated characteristic of strong personal brands surveyed team supervisors noted was communication ability. This is one of the factors necessary to build a personal brand. According to the survey results, personal branding activities can be effectively used in supporting the process of building team trust.

Research limitations/implications: The conclusions obtained from the presented research are worth verifying by conducting further research in other organizations. Furthermore, it is worth correcting and completing the list of activities that contribute to building a personal brand in the organization.

Practical implications: The results can help leaders effectively use the knowledge and skills needed to build a personal brand in supporting building trust within the teams they lead.

Social implications: Ensuring equal treatment of team members is a socially significant aspect of leadership, essential for building team trust. Such practices within work teams can influence broader social awareness and behaviors.

Originality/value: The analysis results and theoretical considerations discussed in this article complement existing research concerning the use of personal brand concept in building team trust.

Keywords: leader's personal brand, team trust, team management

Category of the paper: Research paper.

1. Introduction

Functioning in a world fraught with constant change is demanding for all organizations and individuals involved in social or economic life. The nature and size of the entity are not important here, although they undoubtedly influence the type of challenges it confronts. Collective, economic, institutional units and individuals are functioning nowadays in the B.A.N.I. world. (Cascio, 2020; Grabmeier, 2020; Le Roux, Lucinda, 2022). Reality is perceived therein as *brittle* (the world and all entities are exposed to catastrophes, nothing is certain), *anxious* (no decision is without risk, organizations and individuals therefore move constantly between fear and passivity), *nonlinear* (strategic planning in the classical approach no longer provides an advantage, every decision in a non-obvious and nonlinear way can lead to unimaginable consequences, often distant in time), *incomprehensible* (the possibility of action is the need to accept the impossibility of knowing all the answers). People naturally search for meaning and cause-and-effect connections. In modern reality, this is extremely difficult and often impossible.

The reality, which is proving to be so complex and unfavorable, enforces the search for even the smallest havens of respite allowing the fulfillment of the tasks assigned or the goals set. Precisely under such conditions trust gains importance. Trust is becoming the currency of the future (Szafranski, 2018). However, in the intermingling virtual and real worlds, it is difficult to trust even the simplest message, for it could appear to be a well-crafted fake news or deepfake. This can have an even stronger impact on the need for trust in teams, with people performing their assigned tasks daily. Research on team trust is developing rapidly in many directions, with many indications suggesting that it is one of the significant factors influencing teamwork's effectiveness (Dirks, de Jong, 2022). Distrust in the team can be seen as a fundamental dysfunction of teamwork (Lencioni, 2016a). Analyzing the factors that affect the ability to build trust in a team and developing recommendations for techniques that support trust are some of the significant challenges of today's organizations as well as team leaders.

Business practitioners as well as management and especially marketing researchers recognize that branding today is one of the important tools for building trust in an organization, product or service (Kall, 2001; Kim et al., 2019; Maurya, Mishra, 2012). While brand trust is not the same concept as people trust (Mathews, Gotsi, 2018), by looking at teams through the perspective of their members' personal brands, some potential synergies can be seen precisely in the use of a personal brand to build trust within a team. However, this possibility has not been sufficiently explored so far.

2. Leader's personal brand and team trust

The personal brand (PB) concept has been of interest to business researchers and practitioners since at least the late 20th century (Peters, 1997). However, many of its components were analyzed and practiced much earlier. The range of activities included in the broad catalogue supporting building a personal brand (BPB) has today become the preserve of people with very diverse professions: aristocrats (Otnes, Maclaran, 2018), politicians (Armannsdottir et al., 2020), entrepreneurs (Gandini, 2016), managers (Górska, Mazurek, 2021; Muszyńska, 2021; Nanton, Dicks, 2015), white-collar workers (González-Solar, 2018; Kucharska, 2022; Shyle, 2022), artists (Cocker et al., 2015; Kucharska, Mikołajczak, 2018). Personal branding is a concept used not only by the self-employed, although the intensity and variety of personal branding activities undertaken varies among different professional groups (Walczak-Skałecka, 2023; Walczak-Skałecka, Mieszajkina, 2021). Increasingly, personal branding is a tool used in corporate marketing, and employee personal brands are considered one of the value forms an organization can offer to various stakeholder groups (Kucharska, 2022; Muszyńska, 2022; Wojtaszczyk, Maszewski, 2014). It is also becoming increasingly challenging for team leaders to manage a team with employees committed to building their own personal brands (Sidor-Rządowska, 2016).

2.1. Personal brand in the organization

Building a personal brand can be done in many ways. Models discussed in the literature include: expert, celebrity, artist, creator, hustler, nomad, activist, politician or inspirer (Walczak-Skałecka, 2022a). Due to the business nature of their activities and diverse target groups, people building a personal brand decide on diverse actions, activities, communication channels, as well as diverse message categories. A scientist will build, enhance and communicate his brand differently from a personal finance specialist, an athlete or a performative artist.

One of the most frequently used models and the most appropriate in the case of an employee brand is the expert brand. Organizations, due to the nature of their activities, need employees with diverse intellectual capital, different fields of expertise and specific but undoubtedly very differing skills and qualifications. Assuming that every employee engages or should engage in personal branding activities hardly seems right, although the activity of every employee in one way or another affects the organization's ability to achieve its goals, as well as build its competitive advantage. Considering this, employees' intellectual capital seems to be an important factor (Szara, Pierścieniak, 2007; Stähle et al., 2011; Beyer, 2012; Rosińska-Bukowska, 2017; Panasiewicz, 2021). Personal brand – the expert focuses on using and communicating own knowledge and skills. This may be done through direct meetings, organizing or participating in internal and external events, sharing knowledge through internal

communication platforms within the organization or by blogging and speaking at conferences and meetings on topics related to one's area of expertise. A person focused on building a personal brand within an organization does not have to but can share knowledge with a wider audience (a presentation at an important industry event will influence the perception of such a person within the organization as well). These are activities related only to the brand presentation. However, the brand building process is not confined to communication alone (Wojtaszczyk, Maszewski, 2014; Scheidt et al., 2020; Walczak-Skałeczka, 2023), although this indeed is often the most accessible indicator of BPB activities undertaken.

In the case of a manager's personal brand, a leader's brand can equally prove effective, a model combining elements of activities and communications characteristic of either the expert model or the inspirer or hustler model.

2.2. Leader's personal brand as a tool to support building team trust

Trust is undoubtedly a complex concept, as it comprises a set of beliefs and predictions about certain social structures or individuals' intentions and behavior (Miłaszewicz, 2016). Trust and distrust are two opposite ends of a continuum within which we navigate in everyday social situations, they „are peculiar bets on the future, uncertain actions of other people” (Sztompka, 2006, p. 310). People don't only trust other people. The term is also used to refer to specific professions or functions, not individuals performing these responsibilities. Nowadays we trust companies, brands, products, political and economic systems (Sztompka, 2007). Trust is the bond that builds cultures, societies and teams. Trust in organizations is also the conviction that the people with whom we interact have the right knowledge, skills, qualifications (Penc, 2011, p. 326) and attitudes that will support the realization of the common goals that organization sets for individuals. Organizational trust is one of the factors supporting today's crucial enterprise innovation. Manager-employee trust and trust in other team members are important components of organizational trust and influence team members' commitment, openness and innovation (Krot, Lewicka, 2012; Lewicka, Krot, 2014). The literature on team trust is quite extensive (Feitosa et al., 2020; Dirks, de Jong, 2022), and the rapid changes we are experiencing necessitate further exploration of this topic (np. Breuer et al., 2016; De Jong et al., 2016; Costa et al., 2018; Grossman, Feitosa, 2018). The situation is similar in the brand trust area (np. Dryl, 2012; Kim et al., 2019; Marmat, 2023), although to analyze so far here have been institutional or product brands. Area of building team trust appear to be still insufficiently explored, at least when we consider a team not only as a work team, but also as a team of people building their own personal brands.

3. Methods

Building a personal brand involves specific knowledge, skills and competencies, with specific cultural and social capital. Undoubtedly, it is a concept and elaborate set of tactics and tools nowadays, designed to influence the building of a positive image, increase credibility and recognition in specific audiences, in particular contexts, based on a specific set of desired associations and activity fields. The research problem can be formulated as follows: whether people who engage in building a personal brand use competencies from this area in their leadership roles, among other things, to build the team trust they lead. The research conducted aimed to identify key abilities used in leaders' personal branding, which they also use to build trust within teams.

'For today's business leaders, personal branding is seen as a necessity' (Macalik, 2023, p. 42). The efforts of managers at various levels in this area of activity are often focused on social media presence, building contacts and creating a consistent image (Cottan-Nir, 2019; Gandini, 2016; Harris, Rae, 2011; Muszyńska, 2021). On this basis, a hypothesis H1 was formulated.

H1. Leaders undertake various activities such as social media activity, networking and creating a consistent image to build their personal brand.

The impact of a leader's personal brand on different stakeholder groups is related to their perception of that brand (Cottan-Nir, 2019; Górska, Mazurek, 2021), which leads to the H2 and H3 hypotheses.

H2. Employees are aware of actions taken by leaders in building a personal brand.

H3. Employees positively evaluate the effects of leaders' personal branding efforts regarding team trust.

Among many characteristics that are associated with personal brand builders (Walczak-Skałeczka, 2022b), authenticity, empathy, honesty and the ability to communicate effectively stand out as those that contribute to building better relationships outside the context of personal branding (Costa et al., 2018; Dirks, de Jong, 2022; Krot, Lewicka, 2012; Mathews, Gotsi, 2018). On this basis, hypothesis H4 was formulated.

H4. Leader's personal brand characteristics perceived as key to team trust are authenticity, empathy, honesty and the ability to communicate effectively.

The research presented in this paper is a pilot study. A diagnostic survey method using a computer-assisted web interviewing (CAWI) technique was used to verify the hypotheses. The research tool was proprietary survey questionnaires – one for the team leader, one for the other team members. The questionnaire for team leaders focused on the personal branding activities undertaken by the leader. The questionnaire for team members, in addition to questions on evaluating the diversity of leaders' personal branding efforts, included questions

on assessing the trust level within the team, including in the team leader. Both questionnaires used a five-point Likert scale.

The survey was conducted among employees from one of the largest retail chains operating in Poland. The company offers a wide range of food products, household chemicals, hygiene products and various everyday products. The organization has been present in the Polish market for almost thirty years. Participation in the survey was voluntary. Five teams participated in the survey. The only inclusive condition was the response from both the team leader (manager or deputy manager) and team members (in two of the five teams surveyed, all employees participated). The total number of participants in the survey was thirty-nine, 74% were women.

4. Results

Trust in the supervisor in the surveyed teams was highly evaluated (Table 1). One indicator was rated lower than the others (averaging 3.90) - the supervisor's efforts to treat all team members equally.

Table 1.
Trust evaluation for supervisor in individual teams

Item	Team 1	Team 2	Team 3	Team 4	Team 5	Average evaluation
I have trust in my supervisor	5	5	4.75	5	5	4.95
In case of difficulties at work, I can turn to my supervisor for help	5	5	4.88	5	5	4.98
In conversations with me, my supervisor is honest	4.67	4.67	4.88	4.86	4.67	4.75
My supervisor tries to treat everyone equally	3.33	3.33	4.63	4.71	3.5	3.90
My supervisor keeps his promises	4.67	4.67	4.5	5	4.83	4.73
My supervisor is not withholding important information from me	4.5	4.5	4.5	4.71	4.17	4.48
I have trust in the decisions that my supervisor makes	4.5	4.5	4.63	5	5	4.73
My supervisor shows empathy and understanding towards my needs	4.67	4.67	4.63	4.86	4.83	4.73

Source: own elaboration.

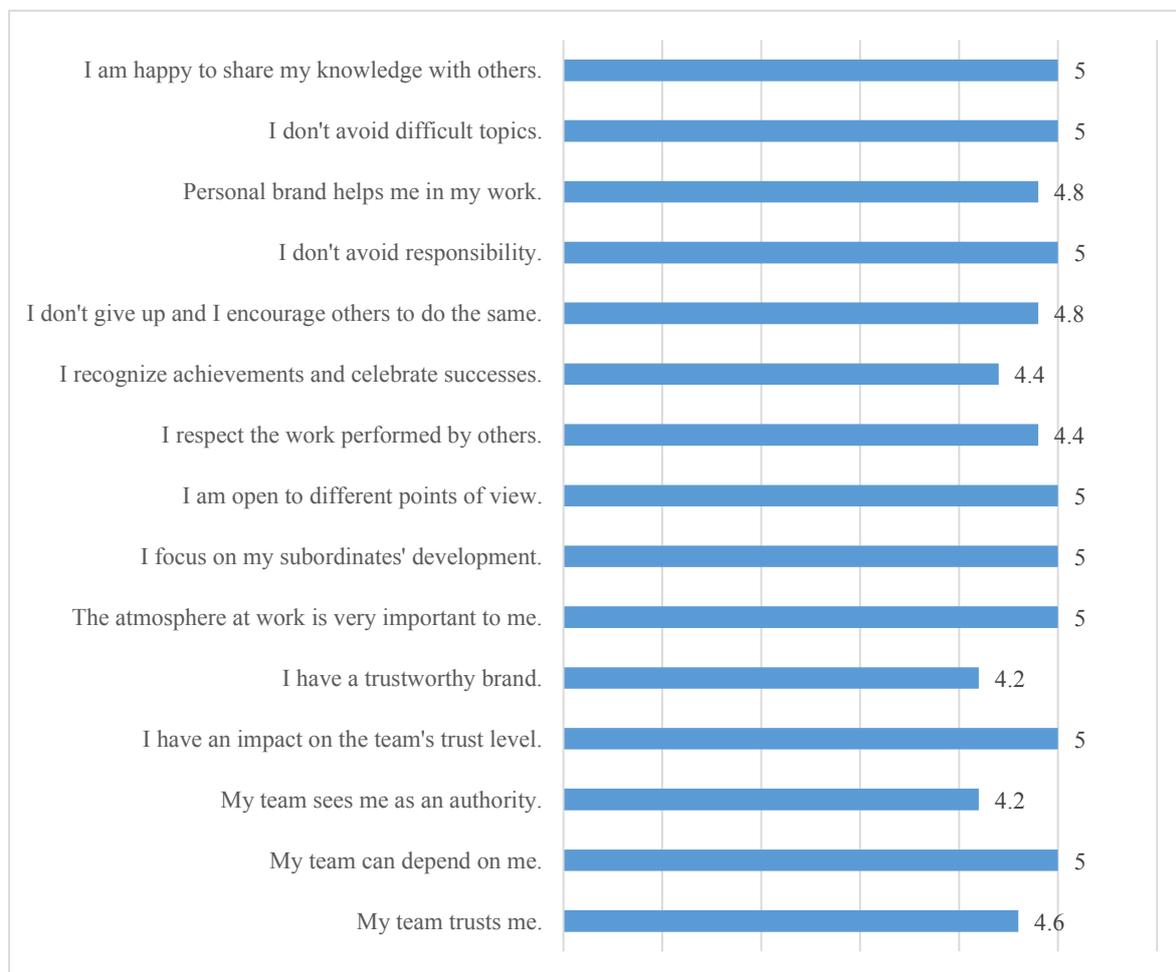
Team members also evaluated which supervisor behaviors they believe affect building team trust (Table 2). In all teams, the evaluation of the behaviors presented by supervisors performed very well. The average evaluations ranged from 4.54 to 4.9. These behaviors are large components of certain corporate standards that should be but are not always, respected in specific organizations or teams.

Table 2.*Evaluation of behaviors affecting trust building in the team (evaluation of team members)*

Item	Team 1	Team 2	Team 3	Team 4	Team 5	Average evaluation
Ability to admit mistakes made	4.57	5	5	4.86	4.17	4.72
Providing feedback	5	4.83	4.83	4.86	4.67	4.84
Listening and asking the team for their opinions and suggestions	5	4.83	4.83	4.71	3.83	4.64
Acting fairly	4.57	5	5	4.86	4.67	4.82
Showing respect	4.86	4.83	4.83	5	5	4.90
Taking responsibility	4.86	4.5	4.5	5	5	4.77
Showing results	5	4.5	4.5	5	5	4.80
Defining expectations	5	4.5	4.5	5	4.5	4.70
Righting the wrongs	4.71	4.83	4.83	5	4	4.67
Giving trust to others	4.71	4.83	4.83	4.86	5	4.85

Source: own elaboration.

Team leaders were asked to self-assess the proposed indicators of the team's trust in the supervisor (Figure 1).

**Figure 1.** Evaluation of the leader's behaviors that build trust among team members (self-assessment).

Source: own elaboration.

Three of them averaged less than 4.5 in the self-assessment: I have a trustworthy brand, my team sees me as an authority, and I recognize achievements and celebrate successes.

Surveyed team leaders were asked to self-assess their degree of involvement in various personal branding activities (Figure 2).

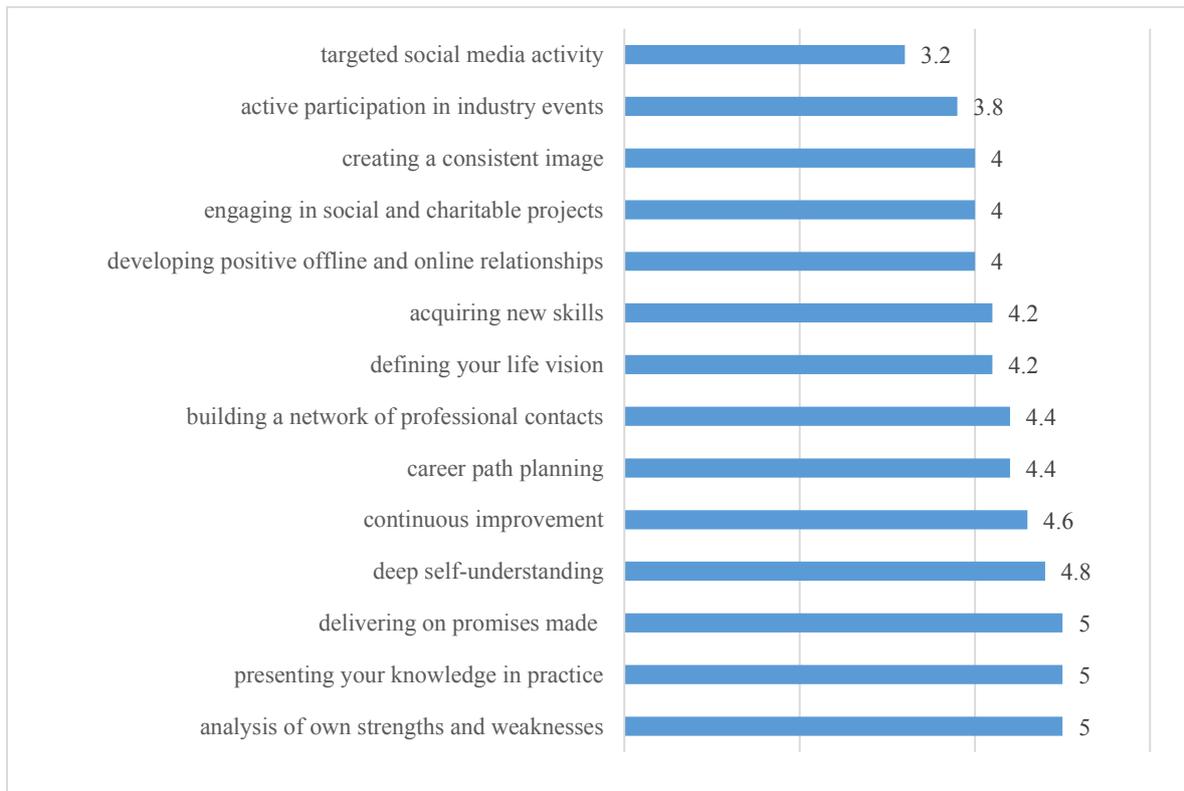


Figure 2. Activities undertaken by leaders in building a personal brand (self-assessment).

Source: own elaboration.

They are least likely to engage in targeted social media activities. Of the fourteen indicators, as many as nine received an average evaluation of less than 4.5. Therefore, the surveyed team leaders undertake a variety of personal branding activities, but they are not very intensive. Hypothesis one cannot be confirmed, no group of activities included in it received an average score of 4.5.

Team members also evaluated their supervisors' engagement levels in personal branding activities (Table 3). The only indicator evaluated below 4.5 was *the skillful use of social media*. It received an average score of 4.35. This evaluation can result from several reasons, ranging from a lack of interest in keeping in touch with a supervisor on social media, to a supervisor's lack of interest in using this means of communication to build a personal brand, to a lack of ability to use social media or to evaluate that use. Also interesting is the low rating in the two indicator teams *has clear values and mission*. Lack of understanding of a supervisor's personal values and missions can indicate an inability to communicate them adequately, as well as other reasons. However, regardless of the reasons, misunderstanding in this area can long term affect team trust.

Table 3.*Team members' level of awareness of supervisors' efforts to build their personal brands*

Item	Team 1	Team 2	Team 3	Team 4	Team 5	Average evaluation
Is consistent in his actions	5	4.83	4.75	5	4.67	4.85
Is consistent in his words	5	4	4.63	5	4.83	4.69
Has clear values and mission	4.86	4.17	4.88	5	3.83	4.55
Has the ability to communicate effectively	5	4.5	4.75	5	4.5	4.75
Has the ability to build relationships with other people	5	4.5	4.75	4.86	4.67	4.76
Takes care of his personal development	5	4.67	4.75	4.86	4.83	4.82
Takes care of his professional development	5	4.83	4.88	4.86	4.83	4.88
Skillfully uses social media	4.29	4.33	5	4.14	4	4.35
Works according to the declared values	5	4.83	4.5	5	4.67	4.80

Source: own elaboration.

Hypothesis two should be considered confirmed. Employees are aware of the personal branding activities undertaken by their superiors.

The impact of supervisors' actions on the team was evaluated (Table 4). The average scores for all indicators were high: 4.51-4.89. Interestingly, the greatest fluctuations are seen between the teams regarding *stimulating creativity and encouraging innovation*.

Table 4.*Evaluation of the supervisor's actions on the team*

Item	Team 1	Team 2	Team 3	Team 4	Team 5	Average evaluation
Inspire	4.71	5	4.5	4.57	4.17	4.59
Motivate	4.86	5	4.63	5	4.67	4.83
Stimulate innovation	4.57	4	4.63	4.86	4.5	4.51
Stimulate creativity	4.71	4	4.63	4.86	3.83	4.41
Encourage personal development	4.86	4.5	4.63	4.86	5	4.77
Encourage professional development	4.86	4.33	4.63	4.86	5	4.74
Improve communication	4.57	5	4.75	5	4.83	4.83
Facilitate conflict management	4.43	4.83	4.63	5	4.83	4.74
Improve the atmosphere	4.86	5	4.75	4.86	5	4.89
Improve cooperation	4.86	4.67	4.75	5	5	4.86

Source: own elaboration.

Hypothesis three should be considered confirmed.

Team members evaluated the extent to which their superiors demonstrate qualities identified as important for personal branding (Table 5). The highest average ratings were given to *communication skills and responsibility*. The lowest, on the other hand, was *humility and a person who is known*.

Table 5.

Important characteristics in building a personal brand presented by the surveyed teams' supervisors

Item	Team 1	Team 2	Team 3	Team 4	Team 5	Average evaluation
High qualifications	4.86	4.63	4.88	4.86	4.83	4.81
Extensive experience	5	4.33	4.75	5	4.67	4.75
Professional in his field	4.86	4	4.75	4.86	4.33	4.56
Effectiveness in achieving goals	5	4.5	4.88	4.86	4.67	4.78
Role model	4.86	4.33	4.88	4.71	4.5	4.66
Successful person	5	4.33	4.63	4.71	4.17	4.57
Has an extensive network of contacts and business relationships	5	4.5	4.88	4.57	4	4.59
Person who is known	4.86	4.67	4.38	4.71	3.17	4.36
Persistence	4.86	4.17	5	4.86	4.5	4.68
Confidence	5	4.17	5	4.71	4.5	4.68
Authenticity	5	4.5	4.63	4.71	4.83	4.73
Empathy	4.57	4.33	4.67	4.71	4.83	4.62
Honesty	4.86	4.5	4.88	4.86	4.67	4.75
Ability to cooperate	5	4.5	4.88	4.71	4.83	4.78
Determination	5	4.5	4.63	5	4.5	4.73
Respect for others	4.71	4	4.75	5	5	4.69
Has communication skills	5	4.67	4.88	5	4.83	4.88
Appreciates achievements	5	4.37	4.75	4.71	4.33	4.63
Decisiveness	4.86	4.17	4.5	5	4.33	4.57
Humility	4	4.17	4.38	4.57	3.67	4.16
Engagement	4.86	4.33	4.88	5	4.83	4.78
Openness to change	4.57	4.17	4.88	5	4.33	4.59
Responsibility	5	4.5	4.88	5	5	4.88

Source: own elaboration.

The fourth hypothesis can be considered partially confirmed. Surveyed team members ranked communication skills as among the most important characteristics presented by their superiors for building a personal brand, which positively impacts team trust. Authenticity, empathy and honesty were evaluated highly, but not the highest.

5. Discussion

Team members who participated in the preliminary survey trust their superiors, as indicated by their acceptance of the attitudes and behaviors presented by their superiors. This is the basis of all relationships in the organization (Ghosh, 2014; De Jong et al., 2016; Dirks, de Jong, 2022). However, trust has its own internal dynamics, so trust can not only be given, but also lost. This means that once gained, the trust of team members must be nurtured. Therefore, team trust should be continuously worked on (Lencioni, 2016b). Among the surveyed teams, *equal treatment of team members by the supervisor* proved to be an issue worth examining. It is an extremely important topic in research, business practice and public debate (Blustein

et al., 2016; Allan et al., 2020; Nourafkan, Tanova, 2023), and the sensitivity of employees as well as managers on this issue is undoubtedly growing.

Surveyed team leaders rated quite highly their behaviors and attitudes toward building team trust. One of the lowest rated items was *having a trustworthy brand*. This may indicate that these individuals do not see themselves in the personal brand context. Another reason may be humility, although this one in the average team evaluations was indicated as rarely present among the surveyed team leaders. Leaders participating in the survey were reluctant to admit that they were seen as authorities by their teams. Perhaps because of the personal definition of authority, which would be worth clarifying in the next survey. Their team members evaluated them highly regarding their responsibility, authenticity, knowledge and experience, while their actions were described as motivating and inspiring. Aren't these the qualities and terms we tend to ascribe to our personal authorities? These are also qualities that are often associated with personal brands (Malinowska-Parzydło, 2015, p. 302; Walczak-Skałeczka, 2022b).

Subordinates notice their superiors' activities in building their personal brand. Their observations are also largely consistent with their superiors' self-assessments in this regard. This confirms the widespread use of the personal brand concept. (Osorio et al., 2020; Gorbатов et al., 2023). The low level of engagement in the purposeful use of social media for team leaders' personal branding is in keeping with the need to tailor the tools to both the nature of the brand and the recipient group of the personal brand. In the context of strengthening team trust, such activity appears unnecessary in light of these results. Interpersonal communication skills are more important, as they are not only a basic tool for a leader working with a team, but also a basic tool for building a personal brand in an organization. Therefore, at this point, the use of the personal brand concept can support the building of trust in the team.

Organizations create behavioral standards and develop competency profiles for individual positions. Not every organization can afford to do such actions, and not every organization has people with the right knowledge and skills. However, where such documents are introduced, it is essential to periodically verify to what extent they are completed. The scales used in the research were based on literature research and some minimum standards of social coexistence. It would be interesting to see to what extent they are consistent with the standards prepared and implemented by the organization under survey.

It also seems interesting that humility and recognition received such low indications. A personal brand is a concept that considers recognition in specific circles to be one of the primary outcomes of actions taken (Żyrek-Horodyska, 2020; Muszyńska, 2024). However, perhaps the terminology in this area needs to be refined. It is also possible that building a personal brand within an organization, as well as the leadership role itself, differs significantly in this regard from the practices and effects of building a personal brand in the free market among independent professionals or influencers. This is one of the interesting directions for further research.

6. Summary

Personal brand is an interesting field of theoretical inquiry, as well as a developing set of practices in various areas of market activities. Although the concept is directly derived from marketing, it is used in the personal field of individual human activity, and this means that it is primarily a concept for building relationships in different contexts, with different groups, for different purposes, using different tools. Therefore, it seems important to examine how building a personal brand affects these relationships also regarding teamwork, where trust is a basic condition for building any relationship. The pilot study's results seem interesting given that team leaders more or less consciously engage in personal branding activities, and their team members not only notice this but are also able to consider the extent to which personal branding competencies are useful in their collective teamwork.

Due to the preliminary nature of the research, the possibilities for broader conclusions are limited. In the future, it is worth inviting organizations from other industries and of varying sizes to the survey. Indeed, there is a possibility that the involvement in team leaders' personal branding activities will be significantly different in large, corporate-type organizations and medium-sized or small enterprises.

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