

Making the LEAP

From Influencer to
Thought Leader



Donn LeVie Jr.

Making the Leap from Influencer to Thought Leader

Most people don't like being stuck in obscurity in their profession. They want recognition and compensation for their value. Here's how to build a reputation or professional brand as an influencer in your field. If you want to build your leadership influence or executive leadership, you should have an idea about your brand.

How do you become an influencer? The journey from expert to influencer begins by recognizing a knowledge gap in your professional specialty and filling a void with your unique perspective, knowledge and experience that can result in the creation of the “Big Idea.” You have to learn how to promote and distribute your Big Idea in different ways that launch you from expert status into influencer standing.

Experts who often embrace labels such as influencer and thought leader typically have written a book, given a TED Talk or conference presentation, or have one million followers on Twitter. In truth, it's not easy to be considered an influencer or thought leader. Those are labels of distinction you'll have when the elements of your influence or thought leadership have reached critical mass in your profession, field or industry.

“Influencer” and “thought leader” are titles others give you

During the “Influencer and Thought Leader Masterclass for Executives” corporate program I taught, I asked attendees, “How many of you consider *yourselves* to be influencers or thought leaders in your profession?” Only once has anyone raised their hand.

However, when I ask the question differently — “How many of you *have been called by others* influencers or thought leaders in your profession?” — more hands go up. That second question is based on the opinions of others, usually people they work with or who are familiar with their reputations in the profession. At that point, I ask, “Do you know by what criteria they base that on?” That question gets people to think: *Hmmm ... Do people say that about me because of my position or title, or have they recognized where my Big Idea has generated a shift in my profession, field or industry?*

Most of us don't proclaim such titles because: 1) we have a deep personal sense of humility or 2) we realize that we have more currency (standing within the community) as an influencer or thought leader when others refer to us in those terms — not when we do it. (You can scatter a crowd at a cocktail party by referring to yourself as a member of the Mensa Society.)

Let's look at five techniques that can elevate your status from expert to influencer and maybe on your way to the next level — thought-leader status.

-1. Are you an advocate or contrarian of key issues in your field/industry?

Every issue has two opposing positions: the *advocate* and the *contrarian*. Pick one in which you have a strong belief and commitment to and run with it farther than anyone else. If you're an advocate for some key issue, your voice must elevate the issue **above its current standing** with the status quo. Otherwise, you're just one of many thousands of voices all saying or agreeing to the same thing.

If you take a contrarian position because you see flawed thinking or erroneous assumptions, your arguments **must be sufficiently cogent and convincing** against an issue to devalue its importance.

Regardless of the position you take, if it's well-reasoned and clearly articulated, it can become your Big Idea. It can become the message no one's heard before. As someone once told me, "A great idea is one that people will write a check for."

-2. Can you illustrate your "big idea"?

Can you depict your Big Idea/concept graphically?

A picture is still worth a thousand words, and nowhere is this old saying more applicable than with communicating the essence behind your Big Idea. The eyes are the gateway to reasoning and evaluation of your position or concept. If you can't picture your concept, neither can others.

If you can graphically illustrate your concept so others can quickly grasp the overall context of it, you've planted a seed. Image or pattern recognition is easier on the brain than recall because recognition relies on context.

The illustration below (Figure 1) shows two ways of communicating how to escape a rip current. Of course, you're going to remember the image better than the written five points. The important information transmitted through context of the image occurs nearly instantaneously, which is a good thing when you have to escape a rip current.

Or, you can try to recall the numbered list in the midst of panic.

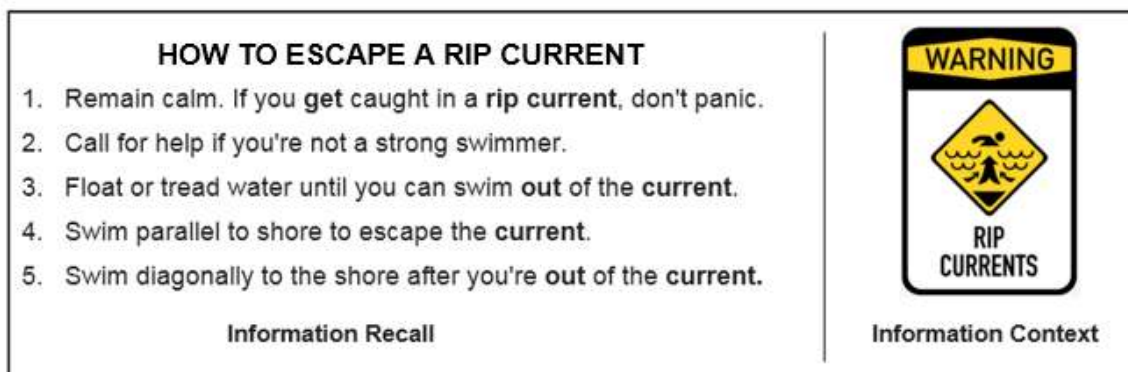


Figure 1. Information Recall vs. Information Context

-3. Can you craft a metaphor for your big idea?

Can you craft a metaphor or simile that captures the essence of your Big Idea?

The verbal picture-painting characteristics of a metaphor or simile provide flashes of insight to grasp the equivalency of your concept. A metaphor communicates how your Big Idea is something else. A simile aligns your concept with a different but parallel concept using the words as or like. Here are examples of both:

Metaphor: Influential and persuasive intelligence *is the pathway* that takes emotional intelligence to new levels.

Simile: Describing the concept of leadership presence *is like* trying to describe a summer breeze; you can only see the effect it has on things it encounters as it moves through the surroundings.

-4. Can you become quotable?

Can you re-spin a famous quote or create your own that captures your Big Idea?

When it comes to quotations, there are those who borrow from the remarkable lives of others and those who live remarkable lives others quote from. (Sorry, that quote is taken — by me.) Anyone can post a quote on LinkedIn or Facebook from some famous person (that's called "thought repeating," and there's too much of that on social media), but what are you doing to create your own memorable bits of wisdom?

Influencers are quoted more often than experts and thought leaders more often than influencers. Influencers (and thought leaders) use their quips or their own takes on well-known quotes in their domain to reinforce their advocacy or contrarian positions.

Start by gathering quotations from all sources that relate to your Big Idea. Next, begin replacing keywords in the quotations you've identified until you create a new direction of thought.

Here's an unsourced quote and one incorrectly attributed to Ralph Waldo Emerson that embraces a contrarian perspective which has application to leadership development: "Do not go where the path may lead; go instead where there is no path and leave a trail."

If Emerson actually did pen that gem, then any rewording would require a preface such as "To paraphrase Emerson..." to avoid any accusations of plagiarism.

Next, begin substituting words. Here's how I spun that unsourced quote:

- "Don't follow where the crowd may lead; go instead where there is no one and forge a new direction."
- "Don't follow from behind as the view isn't flattering; instead lead from the front where your vista is unrestricted."
- "The beaten path is congested with followers; elect to create a new route that others so inclined may as well tread."
- "The problem with the beaten path is that it's littered with the bodies of the beaten; instead, a new trail lies undiscovered awaiting your journey."

-5. Can you develop new ways to distribute your intellectual property?

Moving from expert to influencer or thought leader status requires the development of your Big Idea into different forms and formats of intellectual property (books, white papers, journal articles, LinkedIn articles, videos, TED Talks, conference keynotes or presentations, speeches, seminars, blogs, podcasts, etc.) for distributing the value-rich, paradigm-shifting content you're creating. The secret is to repurpose your content into different formats and reusing your content in different channels.

If you work in the private sector, your employer might have restrictions on what you can and can't develop as your intellectual property. However, you might be even more restricted if you're in the public sector, especially if your organizations use social media as distribution channels for creative works, and your employer might actually "own" your work.

Unfortunately, these restrictions can lead to a digital footprint void and are major impediments for public-sector employees who are seeking to transition to private-sector jobs.

-6. Can you integrate ideas from outside your domain of expertise?

The term "consilience" describes the ability to link together principles — even wildly divergent ones — from different disciplines. Author Malcolm Gladwell is a master of consilience as evidenced in the stories from his very successful books (*Tipping Point*, *What the Dog Said*, *Blink*, and others). Consilience is very important when developing a comprehensive approach to problems.

Here's an example. A few years ago, I was researching the pros and cons of bringing in C-suite leaders from other companies vs. promoting fast-rising leaders from within the organization. I was looking for a parallel comparison in other areas and found it in baseball.

The same question applied there: Do we spend big bucks on hiring the big brand CEO from another company (baseball parallel: do we push up against the team salary cap for the big-time slugger or pitcher playing elsewhere), or do we promote our up-and-coming leaders from within to positions of greater responsibility (baseball parallel: or do we focus on the up-and-coming talent in the farm team system and groom them for the bright lights)?

The result: An approach to leadership development I call "Moneyball Leadership™" as shown in Figure 2.

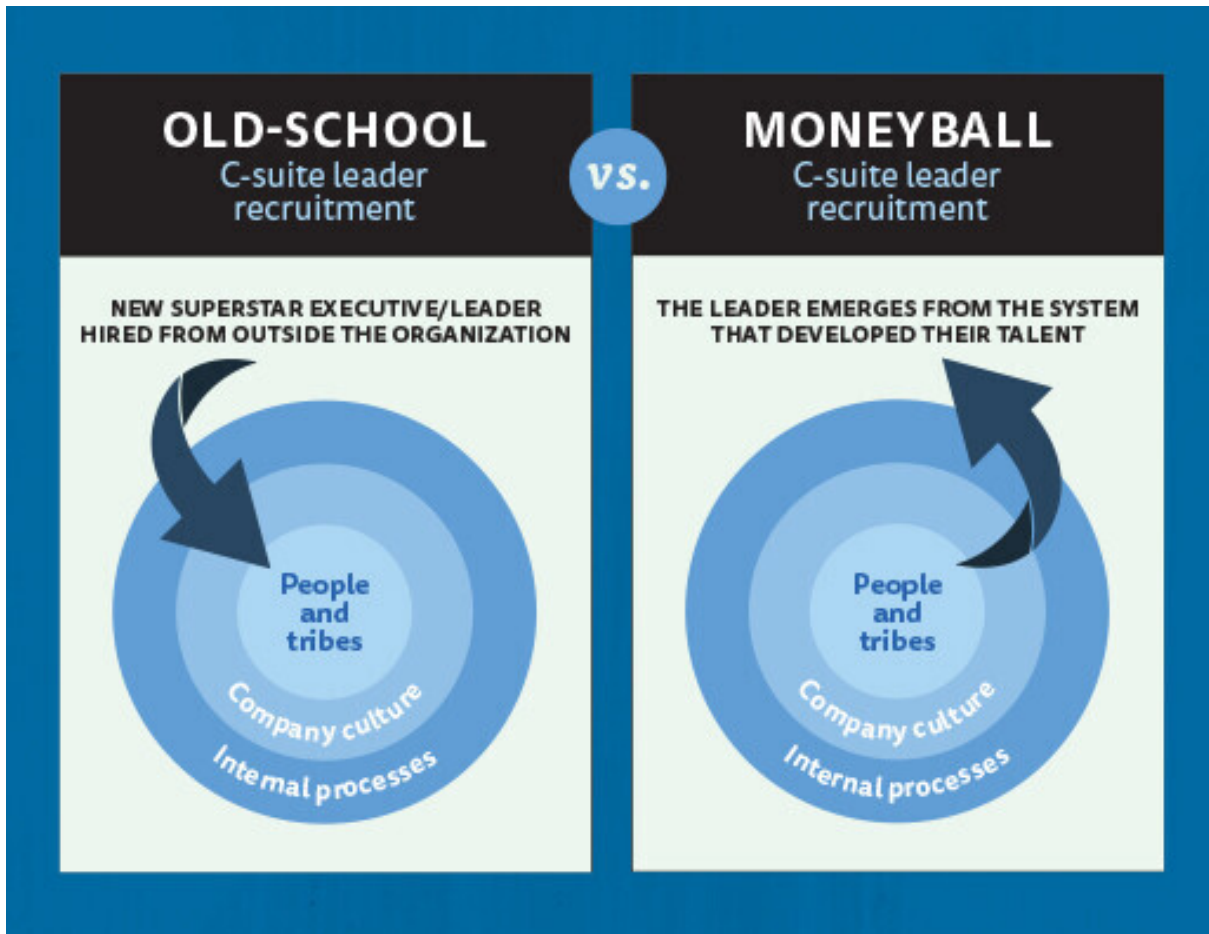


Figure 2. Old School Leader Recruitment vs. Moneyball Leader Recruitment

You can also use consilience to combine disparate words/concepts to create a new one. For example, I combined "value" with "velocity" and came up with "valueocity" which is defined as "the speed (financial value of time) with which your influence adds value to the strategic objectives of the organization."

-7. Can you relate concepts and ideas through storytelling?

Being able to use relevant storytelling to attach transferable concepts in the minds of audiences makes it easier to relate facts, evidence, and data in a message. **All audiences relate to relatable stories!** Use storytelling to transfer emotion of the story to audience.

Use the present tense to tell the story because present tense pulls in the audience to the action that is happening "in the moment." Give characters a name, and put yourself in the story. Listeners become participants in the story instead of observers on the sidelines.

Relevant, context-focused storytelling involves knowing your audience and the environment where you'll be speaking.

- **Executive team or board of directors:** Use a business story/narrative about the audience you are intending to motivate. The goal is to always solve a business need.
- **Conference breakout audience:** They want relevant stories *about you* tied to content and context to demonstrate they can do it too.
- **Event keynote audience:** They want relevant stories *about you* tied to your message that motivates and inspires them.

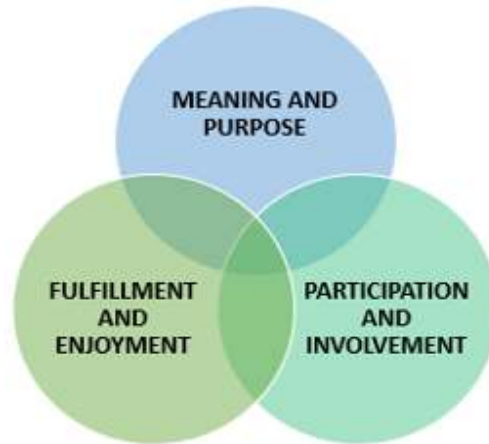
When you seek approval for a proposal, task force, signing a new client or customer, a **resolution of the business narrative** is your prescribed strategy, next steps, or call to action that will solve the conflict, challenge, or issue you've just demonstrated in narrative. The emotional response from the audience makes them care about your ideas and comes from carefully laying out relevant context, conflict, and then your strategy and recommendations.

-8. Are you building or enhancing your professional brand?

Brand building is something that should always have some forward momentum. It's never standing still. In fact, each of the previous seven elements contribute to that brand-building effort. Amazon's Jeff Bezos says that your brand is what your customers, clients, and other say about you when you aren't around. Check out the eBook entitled, Rebrand, Rebuild, and Repurpose Your Fraud Expertise to learn more. The old saying that "it's who you know" has been modified to reflect the importance of enhancing your brand and your likeability: "it's not who you know...it's who knows you and who likes you"

Big ideas move the needle for others

Your ever-expanding scale of influence can change your organization's roadmap and hasten your path to personal and professional success. Your Big Idea just has to be big enough to affect some change that radiates through other's lives directly or indirectly.



Special Note: This eGuide is derived from the 2.5-day corporate program by the same name, where we go into more detail on these 8 different factors. [Send me an email](#) if you're interested in having me present at your organization. An online course of the same name is in the works.



Donn LeVie Jr. is a respected leadership influence strategist/consultant, award-winning author, leadership coach and mentor, and global speaker who focuses on how people speak (**linguistics**), how they think (**cognitive psychology**), and how they make decisions (**behavioral economics**).

In his roles leading people and programs for Fortune 100 companies (**Phillips Petroleum, Motorola, Intel Corp.**), government agencies (**National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration**), and academia (the **University of Houston Downtown College – Department of Natural Sciences and Mathematics**), Donn has been directly involved with global oceanographic research projects, multimillion-dollar offshore oil and gas exploration programs, high-tech chip design initiatives, and teaching fundamentals of petroleum exploration and production to undergraduate students.

Donn stepped away from the corporate world in 2013 to launch Donn LeVie Jr. STRATEGIES, LLC. Over his career he's spoken at more than 70 conferences and since 2011 has been a regular presenter and leadership strategist at the annual Global Fraud Conference sponsored by the Association of Certified Fraud Examiners.

Donn's client and audience list spans organizations from the public, private and education sectors, including the FBI, Dept. of Education Inspector General's Office, New York Port Authority, National Science Foundation, FDIC, Enterprise Holdings, Ernst & Young, the City of Nashville, Franklin and Marshall College, and many more.

As an author, Donn's books have won the Global eBook Award and the International Book Award (***Confessions of a Hiring Manager***, 2012; ***Strategic Career Engagement***, 2016). Donn's newly released books, ***From the Underworld to the Boardroom: True Tales of Fraud, Corruption, Counterfeiting, and Cons*** and ***STACKING THE DECK: Career Strategies for Outsmarting the Competition*** are available only through his programs

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