

A CEO's role in shaping, living, and amplifying the employer brand

It's no surprise that the most successful employer brands are led by CEOs who drive from the top. They bring a compelling business strategy - but just as importantly, they recognise that it's the people strategy that delivers the objectives.

 By Celeste Sirin 26 Jun 2025



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What sets them apart is how they lead by example - through presence, visibility, and clarity of message. True leadership isn't about directing from a distance - it's about co-creating with those on the ground. When CEOs invite people into the vision, they give permission for ownership, autonomy, and pride in building the business together.

- **Leadership action:** The most trusted CEOs create space for shared ownership by spending time on the ground - asking questions, listening without agenda, and inviting input. These moments often lead to surprising sparks of innovation and even unlock your next best business idea.

More than just strategy: It's about presence

Having worked closely with startups and scaling SMEs, I've seen how the tone of an organisation is often set by its founder or CEO. Even without meeting them, you can sense their presence in how employees behave, speak, and engage with one another.

The way people describe their leaders - how they talk about values, workplace culture, and "*how things are done around here*" - reflects just how personally invested the CEO is in the people agenda.

Culture isn't hidden. It's lived. And it starts at the top.

- **Leadership action:** CEOs who host regular townhalls, CEO Connects, or informal video broadcasts create rhythm and relevance around culture. Their communication lands because it feels two-way - personal, present, and grounded in real context.



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In startups, SMEs, and high-growth companies - particularly across emerging markets - the CEO isn't just a figurehead. They're a visible influencer, a culture carrier, and a deciding factor in whether someone joins or stays. They show up as they expect others to. They lead by example.

For the emerging generations especially, working with a visionary, people-focused CEO is part of the value exchange. These are the leaders people want to learn from - or walk away from. They'll research the CEO before applying. Check Glassdoor. Scan LinkedIn. A CEO's presence - or absence - tells a story.

- **Leadership action:** Credible CEOs treat LinkedIn as an extension of the employer brand - updating their profiles to reflect current strategy and culture, and sharing short, human stories that reinforce internal truth through external visibility.

Tick-box leadership vs. cultural stewardship

It's easy to spot when a CEO is 'doing employer branding' because they have to. The language is polished but disconnected. The culture feels staged - more like routine than real.

By contrast, when a CEO genuinely lives the brand - when they share stories, show vulnerability with honesty and actively support their people - it resonates. The difference is felt in how values are modelled, not just mentioned. And in whether the people agenda is owned at the top or delegated as a task.

This is why, when embarking on any talent brand or culture journey, the belief, commitment, and visible sponsorship must come from the CEO. Without it, these initiatives won't stick.

- **Leadership action:** Forward-thinking CEOs prioritise regular check-in conversations with CHROs or talent leads - not just to track metrics, but to understand what people are feeling and where the culture and heartbeat need calibration.



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The employer brand lives in daily moments - and the CEO plays a central role in shaping those moments. In smaller, founder-led businesses, the CEO is not just the strategic driver - they're often the emotional heartbeat.

Employees respond to leaders who don't just show up, but show they care. When CEOs share reflections celebrate team wins, or communicate directly through informal videos, they build real trust. It's in these sm consistent moments that culture becomes tangible.

- **Leadership action:** Some of the most resonant leadership moments come from short, unscripted CEO messages - recorded in the moment, without polish. These simple, direct touchpoints help employees experience the brand through the person leading it.

Closing reflection

If you're a founder, CEO, or visionary leader - someone whose heart, passion, and emotional connection i tied to the brand - here's the truth:

- People don't just join organisations - they join the people shaping them.
- Culture doesn't scale unless it's embodied by those at the top.
- And credibility isn't claimed - it's experienced through how leaders consistently show up.

If your brand carries your heartbeat, make sure people feel it - first-hand.

Because in today's world, especially for Gen Z and emerging talent, a personal brand isn't separate from t employer brand. And for the CEO, that truth matters even more.

ABOUT CELESTE SIRIN

Celeste Sirin is an employer branding specialist, speaker, facilitator and founder of Employer Branding Africa which aims to develop employer branding best practice in South Africa by educating South African leaders. She is a leading authority in positioning and elevating employer brands for companies, offering extensive insight into local, African and international employer branding trends.

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