

S2: E166: This is the Year Thought Leaders Rise

Hey, hey! Welcome back to the Make Your Message a Movement podcast. I'm your host, Tiffany Neuman, and this is the year thought leaders rise.

There's something I've been feeling very strongly about lately, which is typically what I bring to the podcast—following my intuition and where I'm guided to share. What I really believe is that we are entering a season where thought leadership matters more than ever. Not in the "build a personal brand" sense—which, by the way, everyone calling themselves a personal brand strategist and kind of monopolizing that term has really allowed me, as an actual brand strategist for over 20 years, to play with the idea of what a personal brand actually means.

Building a personal brand can mean a lot of different things, and that's not really what this podcast is about. It's not in an "influencer" sense; it's more in a "leadership" sense. There's a definite differentiation between showing up as an influencer as a personal brand and as a thought leader. So, I want to be very clear that we are talking about true thought leadership here.

When the world feels noisy, uncertain, and fragmented, as it does now—and I've said this so many times lately—people are not looking for more information; they're looking for orientation. That is our role moving forward: being a guide and orienting people.

A thought leader is not about being the loudest voice, the most visible or liked person, vanity metrics, or posting the most content. It's really someone who sees patterns that others don't see yet, names what people are already feeling but can't articulate, creates coherence in moments of confusion, and helps others move forward with clarity and confidence. It's someone who has a body of work—IP—that helps guide others. It's not about having all the answers; it's helping people make sense of where they're at and where they're going.

This is exactly why I primarily support coaches, speakers, and authors. These are the people whose work is inherently about guiding others, shaping perspective, facilitating transformation, and influencing how people think, decide, and act. Coaches hold people through change, speakers move rooms and conversations, and authors shape ideas that live far beyond them. All of you create a legacy. You don't just sell a service; you carry ideas that ripple out. And when those ideas are unclear, fragmented, or buried, your impact is limited.

I've had a front-row seat to the major shift that's been unfolding, in my opinion, since 2020. I've watched overly polished brands lose trust, "bro marketing" burn people out, and shallow visibility tactics fail to convert. At the same time, I've watched something else rise quietly: leaders who are grounded, values-led, deeply competent, and genuinely service-oriented are gaining traction. Often they do this without shouting, without playing the game, and sometimes without even realizing they're stepping into leadership.

I've seen many hesitate right at that edge—especially women. Not because they're not capable, but because stepping into thought leadership requires owning your perspective and giving yourself permission, not just delivering your service. I often say that there's no fairy godmother coming to boop you over the head and say, "You are now a thought leader."

So, here's what feels different now, this year specifically. We all know AI is accelerating everything. Information is everywhere, and the noise is constant. This means our differentiator is no longer access to ideas; it's discernment. People are asking: "Who can I trust? Who can guide me without fear or hype? Who actually understands this landscape?"

This is why I believe this year marks a rising moment for true thought leaders—but only for those willing to claim their authority, stop hiding behind over-delivery, and allow their perspective (which might be a little bit triggering sometimes) to be seen, heard, and felt.

When true experts stay quiet, the void doesn't remain empty. Instead, it gets filled by louder voices, shallower ideas, better marketers, and sometimes people who want to do real harm. I've watched men and women both, but I'm speaking mostly to the women today because, being a woman myself, we often minimize our voice. We minimize our worth and our value. The ones of us with deep credibility often wrestle with the most imposter syndrome, while others with far less substance dominate the conversation.

I am done pretending that this is okay. Thought leadership is actually an act of service. I want to reframe this for you today: thought leadership is not about ego; it's about responsibility. If you can see what's happening, name what matters, and guide others through uncertainty, then visibility is not self-promotion—it's service. Clarity is what allows you to lead without shouting.

Today, I want to share a simple framework I've been working with called the Three Types of Thought Leaders. I want to offer you this simple framework to reflect on. This episode is a bit shorter and clearer because I feel it didn't need a lot of extra explanation. It's really simple if we boil it down, but not all thought leaders lead in the same way. You may embody all three, but most people tend to lead with one. When you understand which type you lead with, your messaging, visibility, and leadership start to feel much more aligned.

Type 1: The Wayfinder

These are created from my 20-plus years of experience as a brand strategist, creative director, professor, and now a thought leader myself. These are patterns I've recognized. The Wayfinder helps people make sense of complexity. They see patterns, connect dots, and name what others are already feeling but can't articulate. If people often say, "Wow, that finally makes sense," you may lead as a Wayfinder.

Type 2: The Builder

Builders turn insights into structure by creating frameworks, methods, and systems people can follow. If you are often asked, "Can you show me how to do this step-by-step?" you may lead as a Builder.

Type 3: The Catalyst

Catalysts create movements. You help people take brave action, move through fear, and step into momentum. If people often say to you, "Wow, after talking to you, I finally did the thing," you probably lead as a Catalyst.

Again, I truly believe the strongest thought leaders have all three within them, but you are likely leading with one. This matters because many people struggle with the idea of thought leadership because they're trying to lead in a way that isn't natural to them, or they don't want to claim it because they believe it's an ego-driven motive.

When you understand that's not the case—that it's really service—and you identify how you naturally lead, your message becomes clearer, your visibility feels less forced, and your leadership lands more powerfully. It's not a matter of trying to be everywhere; you can start showing up with intention.

Leading as a Wayfinder, a Builder, or a Catalyst is going to shift how you show up, how you guide, and how you attract your perfect-fit clients. If this episode resonated, I share a lot more of this kind of thinking, reflections, frameworks, and real-time insights over on LinkedIn. If you're navigating this season of leadership and want to stay in conversation, stay tuned—I release these episodes every Tuesday. I'd also love for you to follow me on LinkedIn so we can connect there.

Remember, you don't have to lead like anyone else; you just have to lead like you. The biggest thing I'd love for you to walk away with today is giving yourself permission and fully stepping into your own version of thought leadership. I believe this is the year true thought leaders are going to rise—and we're going to rise together.

I'll see you next week. Have a blessed week, sending so much love!