

## **Trusted, but for What Now? Building a Personal Brand When the Company Reinvents Itself**

The slide on the screen read “Your Leadership Brand: What are you known for?”, and below it a blank text box waited for an answer. It was a Tuesday afternoon in February 2025, and Karthik Mohan, Deputy General Manager of Powertrain Engineering at Vetri Motors, had been staring at it for the better part of ten minutes. The slide belonged to a leadership-development workbook that Human Resources had circulated to every manager above a certain grade. Most of his colleagues had filled it in over coffee and forgotten about it. Karthik could not get past the first box.

He had spent sixteen years at Vetri. He had been promoted four times. If you had a difficult engine problem — a knocking that no one could trace, a field failure that defied the data, a new variant that would not meet its fuel-economy target — you brought it to Karthik, and more often than not he found the answer. He knew this about himself. What unsettled him was that he could not write it down in a way that sounded like it mattered any more.

Two weeks earlier, the Managing Director had stood on a stage and told three thousand employees that Vetri was no longer in the business of making motorcycles. “We are becoming a mobility solutions company,” she had said, and the auditorium had applauded. Karthik had applauded too. Only later, driving home, did a quieter question surface: in a mobility solutions company, what exactly was he known for — and was it something the new company still needed?

### **Background: The Engineer**

Karthik Mohan joined Vetri Motors in 2009 as a graduate engineer trainee, soon after completing his master’s in mechanical engineering. He was assigned to the engine testing group at the company’s plant in the Hosur–Chennai industrial belt, and he never really left the world of internal-combustion powertrains. Over sixteen years he moved from test-cell engineer to combustion specialist to the head of a calibration team, and finally to Deputy General Manager, with responsibility for the engine families that powered Vetri’s best-selling commuter motorcycles and scooters.

Colleagues described him in remarkably consistent terms. He was thorough. He was calm under pressure. He did not guess. When a problem landed on his desk, he asked for the data, sat with it, and worked the fault tree patiently until the root cause revealed itself. Younger engineers competed to be assigned to his projects, because two years with Karthik taught them more than any training programme. He had quietly mentored a generation of the company’s combustion and calibration talent, several of whom now ran teams of their own.

What Karthik had never done was talk about any of this. He held a near-instinctive belief, formed early and never examined, that good work announced itself. “I am not a marketing person,” he would say, half in pride and half in apology, whenever the subject of self-promotion arose. He did not post on internal forums. He turned down most invitations to present at company events, preferring to send a capable junior in his place. His profile on the company directory had not been

updated in six years. He assumed, reasonably enough, that the people who needed to know what he was good at already knew.

For most of his career, that assumption had held. Vetri was an engineering company that made engines, and the man who understood its engines best did not need to explain himself.

## **Vetri Motors and the New Vision**

Vetri Motors had been founded in the 1970s and had grown into one of India's most respected two-wheeler manufacturers, known above all for reliability and fuel efficiency. For two generations of Indian families, a Vetri motorcycle was the dependable first vehicle — unglamorous, economical, and almost impossible to break. The company's engineering culture reflected its products: conservative, meticulous, proud of getting the fundamentals right.

By the early 2020s, the ground beneath that identity had begun to move. Electric two-wheelers, once a fringe curiosity, were taking real share in Indian cities. Customers increasingly expected their vehicles to be connected — to a phone, to a charging network, to a service app. New competitors arrived who had never built an engine and did not intend to. Fleet operators and last-mile delivery companies wanted not vehicles but mobility, sold by the kilometre or the month. Software, batteries, and data were becoming as central to the product as pistons and gears once were.

In late 2024, after a year of internal debate, Vetri's board approved a new strategic vision. The company would reposition itself from a “maker of two-wheelers” to a “provider of mobility solutions.” In practice this meant a heavy bet on electric vehicles across two- and three-wheeler segments, a connected-vehicle platform, an in-house battery and charging ecosystem, and a new line of subscription and fleet-mobility services. A new business vertical, Electrification and Software, was created and given the lion's share of the next three years' capital budget, the most aggressive hiring targets in the company, and a direct line to the Managing Director.

The internal-combustion business was not shut down — it still generated the overwhelming majority of Vetri's revenue and would for some years. But everyone understood where the company's attention, ambition, and future were now pointed. The town halls, the press releases, the campus recruitment pitch, and the language of leadership had all shifted. The word “engine” was heard less and less.

## **The Nature of His Value**

Much of what made Karthik valuable had always been difficult to see directly. His real contribution was not any single design but a quality of judgment — the ability to look at a confusing set of symptoms and sense where the problem actually lived. This kind of value is hard to point to. It does not show up cleanly on a slide. In the old Vetri, it did not need to: the organisation had decades of shared memory about who solved which crisis, and that memory did Karthik's positioning for him.

The difficulty was that the new organisation was being built faster than memory could travel. The Electrification and Software vertical was full of recent hires — battery engineers, software developers, data scientists, mobility-services managers — many of whom had joined in the previous eighteen months and had never heard the stories about Karthik. To them he was a name on an organisation chart attached to a business the company was trying to move beyond. They did not distrust him. They simply did not know what he was for.

## **How Others Saw Him**

**The Protégé.** Arvind Nair had joined Karthik’s team five years earlier as a calibration engineer and had become, by common agreement, one of the most promising young engineers in the powertrain group. In January, he came to Karthik’s cabin to say he had applied for a transfer to the new battery-systems team.

*“I have learned everything I know from you,” Arvind said. “But the future is on that side of the building. I have to go where the company is going.”*

Karthik wished him well and meant it. After Arvind left, however, the younger man’s parting question stayed with him, because it had not been unkind, only honest: “Sir — what will you do?” Karthik had not had an answer ready. He had assumed, without ever quite saying it to himself, that the question would never be asked of him.

**The Visible Peer.** Meera Iyer was three grades junior to Karthik and had joined Vetri only four years before, from a startup. She now led the connected-vehicle programme in the new vertical. She was, by the standards of Vetri’s older engineers, relentlessly visible: she posted regularly on the internal network, volunteered to present at every town hall, wrote short explainers about the company’s technology direction, and was quoted by name in a recent newspaper article about Vetri’s electric ambitions. Some of the older engineers grumbled that she spent more time talking about work than doing it. Yet when the Managing Director needed someone to explain “the new Vetri” to investors, it was Meera who was asked.

Karthik did not envy Meera exactly. He was confident that on any question of engineering depth he could hold his own and more. What disturbed him was the realisation that depth was no longer the only currency, and possibly no longer the decisive one. Meera had made herself legible to the new organisation. He had not.

**The Boss.** Karthik’s reporting head, the Vice-President of Engineering, valued him without reservation — and, without meaning to, kept placing him firmly in the past. In a recent leadership review, asked about his strongest people, the VP had said of Karthik: “He is our rock on the current platforms. As long as the IC business is running, I sleep well because Karthik is on it.” It was a generous thing to say. It was also, Karthik recognised when he heard it repeated back to him, a sentence that contained no future tense.

## **The Signals He Was Sending**

At the suggestion of the same HR workbook, Karthik reluctantly looked at himself the way a stranger in the new organisation might. The exercise was uncomfortable.

His title still read “DGM — Powertrain (IC Engine) Engineering.” His directory profile described his expertise as “combustion, calibration, and engine reliability for two-wheeler applications.” Every recurring meeting in his calendar concerned a current-generation motorcycle or scooter platform. He sat on the engine quality council and the supplier-development committee for castings and forgings — forums that mattered enormously but were tied entirely to the legacy business. He was not a member of any of the new cross-functional groups where the electric platforms, the battery strategy, or the connected architecture were being decided. No one had excluded him. He had simply never asked to be included, and no one had thought to ask him.

Every one of these was a signal, Karthik realised, and every one of them said the same thing: this is a man who belongs to the engine. The signals were not wrong — he was proud of every one of them. But taken together they told a story about his past, and said nothing at all about whether he had a place in the company’s future.

### **Where His Time Went**

To complete the workbook, Karthik reconstructed a typical working week (Exhibit 3). The result was sobering, though not surprising. Almost all of his hours went to servicing the current business — reviews, problem-solving, supplier issues, and the steady stream of difficult questions that found their way to him because they always had. The time he spent learning about the technologies the company was betting its future on, or making himself visible in the parts of the organisation building that future, rounded to almost nothing.

It was not that Karthik had decided the new world did not matter. It was that the urgent, familiar, and genuinely important work of the present filled every available hour, leaving none for the important but not-yet-urgent work of repositioning himself for what was coming. The very competence that made him indispensable to the old Vetri was quietly ensuring he had no time to become relevant to the new one.

### **The Trigger**

Three things happened in the space of a single month, and together they turned a vague unease into a decision Karthik could no longer postpone.

First, at the February town hall, the Managing Director listed the capabilities “the new Vetri” would be built on: electrification, software and connectivity, battery and energy management, data, and mobility services. Karthik listened for something that described him. Engineering judgment, reliability, the discipline of root-cause problem-solving — the things he was genuinely best at — were not on the list, at least not in any words he recognised as his own.

Second, the company announced the leadership of its flagship new programme: a modular electric powertrain platform that would underpin the next decade of products. The role of overall platform

integration lead — a job that called for exactly the systems thinking and reliability discipline Karthik had spent a career developing — went to an engineer eight years his junior, who had been with the electric team from its start and was well known across the new vertical. Karthik had not been considered. It was not clear he had even been thought of.

Third, there was the HR workbook, and its stubbornly empty first box. “What are you known for?” He was known, he finally admitted to himself, for an engine that the company had decided to spend the next decade moving away from.

## **The Decision**

Karthik was not in danger of losing his job. He was too valuable to the present business for that. The danger was subtler and, in its way, worse: that he would remain quietly excellent at something the company needed less each year, until one day he looked up and found that the future had been built without him — not because anyone had shut him out, but because no one had thought to invite a man so completely defined by the past.

He saw three broad paths in front of him.

**Stay the specialist.** He could continue doing what he did superbly well, rely on his quietly earned reputation, and trust that deep expertise would always find its value. The internal-combustion business would run for years yet, and it would need him. The risk was that he would grow slowly more peripheral as the company’s centre of gravity moved, and that the reputation he had earned would, like the engines, gently depreciate.

**Reposition, selectively and authentically.** He could try to make his durable strengths — diagnostic judgment, systems and reliability thinking, the development of engineers — visible to the new organisation, and translate them deliberately into the language and forums of electrification and mobility. This need not mean abandoning who he was. It might mean leading a reliability effort for the new electric platforms, mentoring engineers across the old–new divide, asking to join the forums where the future was being designed, and letting the organisation see that judgment, not pistons, was what he had always offered. The risk was discomfort: it would require him to do the very thing he had spent a career avoiding.

**Reinvent loudly.** He could rebrand himself aggressively as “an EV person,” claim the new domain, and promote himself into it the way the visible younger engineers did. The risk was authenticity: the people who had known him for sixteen years would see a man chasing the bandwagon, and he was not sure he could carry the new identity convincingly, or wanted to.

As Karthik closed the workbook for the evening, the question was no longer whether the rules of his profession were changing. They had already changed. The question was what a man who had never once thought about how he was perceived should now do about it — and whether deliberately shaping that perception was, for someone like him, a betrayal of good work or simply the next form of it.

*How should Karthik shape his future as Vetri reinvents itself — and what role, if any, should deliberate personal branding play for someone who has never done it, and is wary of it?*

### **Exhibit 1 Vetri Motors: The Shift in Vision**

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>The Old Vetri</b>	<b>The New Vetri</b>
Self-description	Maker of two-wheelers	Mobility solutions provider
Core product	Reliable IC-engine motorcycles and scooters	Electric vehicles, connected platforms, services
Source of advantage	Engineering reliability, fuel economy	Software, batteries, data, customer experience
What is sold	A vehicle	Mobility (by subscription, fleet, per-km)
Where investment flows	Plant, engine, supplier base	Electrification & Software vertical
Prized capabilities	Combustion, calibration, manufacturing	EV systems, connectivity, energy, mobility services

### **Exhibit 2 Where the Organisation’s Attention Is Moving (Indicative)**

<b>Indicator</b>	<b>IC / Legacy Business</b>	<b>Electrification &amp; Software</b>
Share of FY25 revenue	~88%	~12%
Share of 3-year capital plan	~30%	~70%
Net new hires, last 12 months	Low	Highest in company
Mentions in last town hall (count)	4	37
Programmes reporting to MD directly	1	5

### **Exhibit 3 Karthik’s Typical Working Week (Self-Reconstructed)**

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Hours per Week</b>
Current-platform reviews and problem-solving	18
Supplier and quality issues (legacy)	9
Team management and mentoring (IC group)	7
Administrative and reporting	5
Learning about EV / connected / battery technology	1
Visibility in new-vertical forums or initiatives	0–1

### **Exhibit 4 How Colleagues Describe Karthik (Qualitative Extracts)**

<b>“Best engine man we have. If something is failing on the current bikes, he finds it.”</b>
“He is our rock on the current platforms.”
“Brilliant engineer — but is he an EV person? Not really, no.”
“He taught half of us everything we know. We just never see him on this side of the building.”

“Very quiet. Never pushes himself forward. You have to already know him to know how good he is.”

### **Exhibit 5 How Rising Peers Are Described in the New Vision (Market Snapshot)**

<b>Engineer / Role</b>	<b>How They Are Known</b>
Connected-vehicle lead	“Our voice on the future of mobility”
Battery-systems lead	“The person who understands our energy strategy”
EV platform integration lead	“The one holding the new platform together”
Mobility-services head	“The one thinking about customers, not just vehicles”
Karthik Mohan	“The engine man”