



The Search for Authentic Leaders

Authenticity has become the gold standard for leadership. But a simplistic understanding of what it means can hinder your growth and limit your impact.

~ Herminia Ibarra, "The Authenticity Paradox," *Harvard Business Review*, January 2015

Employees at all organizational levels seek meaning and fulfillment at work. Most are willing to work hard for authentic, trustworthy leaders.

People are not easily fooled or quick to offer their loyalty, which explains why inauthentic leaders struggle to hire and retain exceptional staffers. Unmotivated direct reports often "phone it in" each day.

Authentic leaders have mastered three key skills: clear vision, formulating sound strategies and finding approaches that inspire others to act. To join this elite club, you must align people around a common purpose and set of values. As they perform at peak levels, they'll know precisely what's expected of them.

It helps to be fluent in more than one leadership style (i.e., authoritative, democratic, collaborative or coaching), flexibly applying the most appropriate one as situations dictate. No style will be effective, however, if you're inauthentic.

There's no shortage of authenticity training for executives. Since 2008, the number of articles on this topic has almost doubled in the business press, including *The Wall Street Journal*, *Forbes*, *The Economist* and the *Harvard Business Review*.

While virtually every leader has a sense of what "authenticity" means, few know how to develop it as a skill. To complicate matters, being authentic in today's rapidly evolving global marketplace has its share of challenges. As Ibarra points out in her HBR article:

In my research on leadership transitions, I have observed that career advances require all of us to move way beyond our comfort zones. At the same time, however, they trigger a strong countervailing

A Message from Nancy...

I have a couple of questions to ask you:

1. Is your business as successful as you think it should be?
2. Are you and your team able to pinpoint the solutions necessary to create positive changes to get where you need to go?



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impulse to protect our identities: When we are unsure of ourselves or our ability to perform well or measure up in a new setting, we often retreat to familiar behaviors and styles...

The moments that most challenge our sense of self are the ones that can teach us the most about leading effectively. By viewing ourselves as works in progress and evolving our professional identities through trial and error, we can develop a personal style that feels right to us and suits our organizations' changing needs.

Three Problems with Authenticity

A too-rigid view of oneself can be an obstacle to leading effectively. Three common leadership pitfalls include:

1. **Being true to yourself.** Which self? Depending on your role and the context, you show up differently. You grow and shift with experience and evolve into new roles. How can you be authentic to a future self that is uncertain and unformed?
2. **Maintaining strict coherence between what you feel and what you say or do.** You lose credibility as a leader if you disclose everything you think and feel, especially when you're unproven.
3. **Making values-based decisions.** When you move into a bigger role, values shaped by past experiences can misguide you. In the face of new challenges, old decisions may produce authentic, but wrong, behaviors that fail to suit new situations.

In Search of Leaders' True Selves

As we've learned from well-documented business failures and leadership catastrophes, when boards choose leaders for the wrong reasons—charisma, not character; style over substance; or image instead of integrity—people lose trust in their leaders and companies.

In 2012, when trust began to climb after several rocky years, only 18% of employees surveyed said they trusted business leaders to tell the truth, according to the Edelman Trust Barometer. Fewer than 50% trusted businesses to do the right thing.

Employee morale is also at an all-time low. A 2013 Gallup poll found that only 13% of employees worldwide are engaged at work and psychologically committed to their jobs. When public confidence and employee morale are suffering, it makes sense that organizations are encouraging leaders to discover their "true selves."

The Authentic Profile

Leaders cannot be adequately described by lists of traits or characteristics. In 2003, Bill George's book, *Authentic Leadership: Rediscovering the Secrets to Creating Lasting Value*, challenged a new generation to lead authentically.

Authentic leaders demonstrate a passion for their purpose, practice their values consistently, and lead with their hearts and heads. They establish long-term, meaningful relationships and have the self-discipline to get results. They know who they are.

Authentic leadership requires a commitment to developing yourself. As with musicians and athletes, realizing your potential is a lifetime pursuit. Authentic leaders:

- Frame their life stories in ways that allow them to see themselves as proactive individuals who develop self-awareness from their experiences. They know their stories and use them to teach others.
- Act on this awareness by practicing their values and principles.
- Are careful to balance their motivations so they're driven by inner values (as well as a desire for external rewards or recognition).
- Keep a strong support team around them, ensuring they live integrated, grounded lives.

Frame Your Life Stories

"Leaders are defined by their unique life stories and the way they frame their stories to describe their passions and the purpose of their leadership," notes George.

The journey to authentic leadership begins with understanding your life story, which provides a context for your experiences. Your story is powered by experiences that can help you inspire others and influence them to follow your lead.

That said, life stories are not always pretty. While most of us can reframe negative experiences in a positive light, authenticity requires us to face up to our mistakes and failures. An honest appraisal may prove uncomfortable, but it's necessary for self-improvement. It also paves the way for authenticity and resilience.

Mistakes are inevitable, but learning from them is a choice. Authentic leaders continually examine their crucible moments and move forward, gaining strength along the way.

When the 75 members of the Stanford Graduate School of Business' Advisory Council were asked to recommend the most important area of leadership development, their answers were nearly unanimous: self-awareness.

Practice Values and Principles

It is relatively easy to list your values and to live by them when things are going well. When your success, your career, or even your life hangs in the balance, you learn what is most important, what you are prepared to sacrifice, and what trade-offs you are willing to make. - Bill George, Finding Your True North: A Personal Guide

The values that form the basis for authentic leadership are derived from your beliefs and convictions, but you cannot truly know them until they're tested under pressure.

Leadership principles are values translated into action. Without action that supports your stated values, you cannot be authentic. The hard decisions you make reflect what you truly value.

Balance Extrinsic and Intrinsic Motivations

As an authentic leader, you must sustain high levels of motivation to keep your life in balance. Know what drives you.

If you're like most leaders, you may be reluctant to admit that you measure your success against the outside world's parameters. You enjoy the recognition and status that come with promotions and financial rewards.

But intrinsic motivations are derived from your life's meaning and purpose. They're closely linked to your life story and how you frame it (i.e., personal growth, helping other people develop, social causes, making a difference in the world).

Authenticity requires you to balance your desire for external validation with the intrinsic motivations that provide fulfillment at work.

Build Your Support Team

Authentic leaders build extraordinary support teams to help them stay on course. Team members provide counsel in times of uncertainty, offer extra assistance in difficult times and share in celebrations of success.

Support teams consist of spouses and families, close friends and colleagues, and mentors and coaches.

Leaders must give as much to their supporters as they receive from them. Only then can mutually beneficial relationships develop.

Develop as an Authentic Leader

As you read this article, think about the basis for your leadership development and the path you need to follow to become a more authentic leader.

In "Your Development as an Authentic Leader" (Harvard Business Review, February 2007), Bill George, Peter Sims, Andrew N. McLean and Diana Mayer urge leaders to ask themselves the following questions:

1. Which people and experiences in your early life had the greatest impact on you?

2. Which tools do you use to become self-aware?

- What is your authentic self?
- In which moments do you say to yourself, "This is the real me?"

3. Name your most deeply held values.

- Where did they come from?
- Have your values changed significantly since your childhood?
- How do your values inform your actions?

4. What motivates you extrinsically?

- What are your intrinsic motivations?
- How do you balance extrinsic and intrinsic motivations?

5. What kind of support team do you have?

- How can your support team make you a more authentic leader?
- How should you diversify your team to broaden your perspective?

6. Is your life integrated?

- Are you able to be the same person in all aspects of your life (personal, work, family and community)?
- If not, what's holding you back?

7. What does authenticity mean in your life?

- Are you a more effective leader when you behave authentically?
- Have you ever paid a price for your authenticity? Was it worth it?

8. What steps can you take today, tomorrow and over the next year to develop authentic leadership?

Authentic Leaders Get Long Term Results

It may be possible to drive short-term outcomes without being authentic, but authentic leadership is the only way we know to create sustainable long-term results. Ultimately, superior results over a sustained period make for an authentic leader.

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