

Be the Authentic Leader Your People Need

Many leaders are unaware of how their lack of authenticity chips away at people, breeding dissatisfaction, distrust and disloyalty. Organizational effectiveness and productivity suffer when workers view leaders as inauthentic.

One out of three people distrusts his or her employer, according to the 2017 Edelman “Trust Barometer.” Four out of five don’t see authenticity in their leaders’ performance. When only 20 percent of leaders come across as genuine, they risk handicapping their organizations with insufficient influence, poor worker engagement and, ultimately, disappointing corporate results.

People want to be led well. They want assurance that their best interests are important and that their future is in safe hands. They need to believe their leaders will make sound, effective decisions. Inauthentic leaders destroy employee confidence.

The Real Deal

Authenticity is an emotionally vital state of well-being for employees—one that heavily relies on a leader’s consistent trueness, explains consultant Karissa Thacker in *The Art of Authenticity* (Wiley, 2016). The author suggests that leaders recognize this principle as irrefutable in order to enhance interdependence. The best leaders undergo continual self-assessment and improvement to convert habitual behaviors into authentic ones.

Being authentic encompasses several other key leadership mandates:

1. Be self-aware
2. Earn respect
3. Connect
4. Convey credibility
5. Earn trust

A Message from Nancy...

Let me ask you:

- Are the people on your team engaged and committed or just collecting a pay check?
- Do you have the right people in the right seats on the bus? Are *you* in the right seat?
- Is the high cost of turnover eating away your organization’s bottom-line?
- Are your processes and procedures (or lack thereof) delivering productive and efficient results?
- How comfortable are the members of your senior team managing and leading others?



In today’s highly competitive environment, it’s no surprise that “*what got you here may not get you there.*”

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Successful leaders optimize each of these behaviors to develop character and broaden influence.

Be Self-Aware

Great leaders know themselves well, notes Brenda Ellington Booth, a clinical professor of management at Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Business.

When you recognize your limitations and weaknesses, you can openly admit to them, and learn to compensate and find workable solutions. Focusing on self-improvement, with an emphasis on asking others to assist you, is as authentic as it gets.

Leaders who fully understand and express their vision are clear about promoting it—and more successful in getting others to believe in it. People will follow a leader who has a passion for everyone's future. Understand what motivates this passion within you, and apply it to your advantage.

When you identify the values that affirm you, there's no need to focus on being popular. You grow stronger from these inner affirmations—not from others' approval. Your objective should be to give your best, even when those around you don't. Authenticity allows you to move forward, confident in knowing who you are and where you're going.

"The essence of leadership is not trying to emulate someone else, no matter how brilliant they are. Nor is it having the ideal leadership style, achieving competencies or fixing your weaknesses. In fact, you don't need power or titles to lead. You only have to be authentic." ~ Bill George, Harvard Business School Professor, author *True North*.

How can you become a more self-aware leader? You need to reflect on what you have learned from your experiences. Introspection can come from keeping a journal, meditating, praying or just sitting quietly. Next, seek honest feedback from people you work with. The best developmental tool is 360-degree feedback from peers, subordinates and superiors.

Earn Respect

Being respected begins with showing respect to others, both upline and downline in your organization. Model respect for everyone and it will be contagious.

The phrase "leading by example" is more than a suggestion. Leaders who model the behavior they want their organization to exhibit make the most effective strides in establishing a healthy culture. Employees respect leaders who "walk the talk" and regard them as authentic. Who doesn't want to follow someone who displays noble values in decisions and behaviors?

Humility, expressed as a willingness to listen to and learn from others, is one of the most effective ways to earn respect, asserts leadership coach Brent Gleeson in his Inc.com article, "7 Simple Ways to Lead by Example."

Humility is a particularly refreshing attribute these days, and it can prove to be a valuable tool. Authentic leaders recognize they don't have all the answers, and probably never will. Soliciting and appreciating others' ideas showers them with affirmation, which commands respect in return.

Connect

Sincere leaders say what they mean and mean what they say, thus coming across as authentic. A genuine, relational approach to people shows them they're valued, Booth notes. When they see a leader who's interested in them, they'll reciprocate, thereby satisfying their need for security and value, while fueling engagement and productivity. A leader's vision is compelling under these conditions.

When leaders want to connect with people, it shows. Their actions draw people to them, and connections grow. Relationships ascend to the next level when you seek feedback from your staff, especially regarding how they're being managed. Your willingness to listen demonstrates an authentic sense of vulnerability that reveals courage, candor and caring.

Convey Credibility

People don't believe leaders who exhibit questionable behavior. Being true, inwardly and outwardly, avoids this potential pitfall.

Trueness to oneself is the most basic form of genuineness, which aligns with authenticity. Be the real you. Faking things is deceptive and eventually evident to all. People aren't fooled for long. They'll question and distrust inconsistencies. Being true to yourself requires healthy self-

awareness and self-worth. Who you are is the person people will see, and it's the noble character in you they want to see.

Consistency in trueness builds credibility. People know who they'll face day in and day out, through good and tough times. Great leaders are mindful of this. They've trained themselves to proactively discern the high road and take it, with honorable motives.

Noble character, lived out on a regular basis, is the anchor of authenticity that people need to weather any storm.

Outward truthfulness is also critical. Honesty shouldn't be the best policy; it should be the only policy. Leaders caught in a lie inflict damage to themselves and those around them. A quick glance at today's headlines should serve as a brisk confirmation. Nothing builds barricades faster than a leader who tries to deceive. Truthfulness is a pillar your culture cannot be without, so lead with it.

Exercise judgment when truth must be guarded. Confidentiality is required for credibility. Sensitive, personal or private information must be handled carefully and discreetly. Don't jump to conclusions or make decisions based on assumptions or rumors. Once inappropriate things are said or misinformation falls into the wrong hands, it cannot be retracted. Tension soars, and credibility plummets.

Credible leaders avoid these kinds of risks. They use professional language, with the proper sensitivities, cautions and accuracies. This doesn't mean there can't be light or even humorous moments, but they shouldn't be careless or reckless.

Earn Trust

You can earn trust by practicing the four previous attributes—improving self-awareness, earning respect, connecting, and building credibility—but there are other ways to enhance your trust quotient and demonstrate authenticity.

Accountability is key. Establishing a system of personal checks and balances conveys the importance of responsibility. Submitting to the

authority of peers or top leaders helps assure people that the decisions governing them can be trusted as prudent and beneficial for everyone (catering to their inward need for safety and assurance). This builds trust.

When you accept blame for errors and give credit for victories, you're demonstrating accountability and setting the stage for greater trust. Your actions place value on the most appropriate people: those doing the work. Without your people, you accomplish nothing, so be sure to express appreciation. You'll be rewarded with their trust.

Autonomy: The greatest leaders give their people the most freedom possible to make decisions, pushing authority down to the most foundational level. This is a powerful sign of trust in staff, and it is returned with something just as powerful: trust in the leader. Employees free from overcontrol and micromanaging acquire a sense of empowerment that raises productivity and innovation.

Finally, authentic leaders are flexible. They adapt to shifting situations and go off script if needed, always keeping in mind their people's well-being. Sticking to routines or insisting on preferences shows inflexibility, which is usually self-serving.

Your willingness to change plans in response to a challenge or crisis, with authentic good judgment, is a sign of your trustworthiness. You're putting your people's best interests at the forefront, building a solid foundation of trust.

Refine your character and insights: you owe it to yourself and your people to think and respond in credible, authentic ways. Work toward making effective decisions and powerful impressions that draw your people into an engaging and productive unity you never thought possible.

Does earning this kind of respect and trust come easy? Not at all. It takes hard work, but the alternative should be unacceptable. Choose to pursue these authentic leadership traits, and refine them.

Let an experienced leadership coach assist with the areas that challenge you the most.



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