

How to be an authentic leader

The higher up the organisation you go, so different leadership skills and capabilities are called on and you need to adjust to the new demands. The saying “it’s lonely at the top” has many truths about it as there are few people you can take into your confidence, when you’re in a senior position. All eyes are on you and what you do sets the tone for your people. This makes it all the more important to be fully self-aware and to be able to be genuine, reliable and trustworthy. If you put on an act as a leader it puts you under stress, added to the usual stresses of a leadership role, this can lead to derailment – with potentially disastrous impact on your wellbeing, trust in the workplace and confidence in the leadership team.

What is ‘authentic leadership’?

Authentic: a. genuine, b. reliable and trustworthy¹

Lead: 1. Cause to go with one, esp. by guiding or showing the way, 2. a. direct the actions or opinions of, b. guide by persuasion or example or argument

So we are looking at what it takes to be genuine, reliable and trustworthy in how you guide, persuade or direct others. Is there a paradox for business leaders here? When I talked through this thinking with some managers, the response was, “there’s no such thing as authentic leadership, it’s impossible!” The argument is that the leader has to deliver the business results first and to do that they may well have to compromise or take actions that are not fully in accord with their values.

Leadership is different from Management.

Management: the professional administration of business concerns, public undertakings, etc.²

There is a big difference in the intent of administering and guiding; the managing role is more about organising the resources you have to deliver the business plans, the leading role is more about establishing direction and inspiring others to do their part in following. Therefore it does not follow that all managers are leaders, or that you have to be in a management position to lead. Leaders are those who are willing to take a stand for something and to be accountable for delivering it.

Being a leader

Taking a stand means having a clear vision and communicating it articulately, showing ways of achieving the vision. The passion in the vision inspires others to follow and to seek the opportunities of the vision, this works in the dimensions of emotion and spirituality, not simply cognitive reasoning.

This demands the skills of:

- a. Authentic communication
- b. Managing emotions – your and others
- c. Providing a real sense of purpose and meaning
- d. Living and working to clear values

¹ Concise Oxford Dictionary

² (Interestingly one of the definitions of Management is “trickery, deceit”)

A leader requires great self-awareness to achieve these skills, which is a pre-requisite for authentic leaders, made easier because they are doing what they believe in and are open and collaborative creators. Let's look at these skills in more detail.

Authentic communication

Key qualities:

1. Straightforward and clean articulation
2. Engaged listening
3. Actively aware of self and others – insight and compassion, outcome-oriented
4. Open and honest dialogue

1. Straightforward and clean articulation

The intent of the communication is to have the other person share your understanding, so you choose clear terms. Bearing in mind the other person's position, you speak in their 'language' to ensure clarity.

2. Engaged listening

This is the honest engagement of self in the interaction. When you don't pay full attention, you have already decided, "I have reasons not to be engaged", this immediately sends signals to the speaker that his contribution is not valued. Typically poor listening falls into one of three categories: listening without focus, listening without respect, listening with bias. Note what is going on in your head and bring your attention to the speaker. With focused attention you can guide the speaker to stay on topic by asking appropriate questions.

3. Actively aware of self and others

This requires mindfulness – awareness of your impact on others and their impact on you, how the 'dance of communication' is working towards achieving the outcome and adapting accordingly.

4. Open and honest dialogue

Openness and honesty are values, which most people want, however they are often absent in organisations as people play 'political' games. An authentic leader brings those values to life in her communication, even though it may demand considerable care in how messages are crafted.

Developing trusting relationships, where feedback is genuine, information passed on is clear and accurate, and the message is consistently reliable, is the kind of cutting edge advantage that is difficult to duplicate by a competitor. There is significant intellectual, emotional and financial investment in these activities. The return on investment is significant, through increased productivity, the retention of good people, an increase in the intellectual capital available to the organisation and a broadening in its range of capabilities.

Managing emotions

Key qualities:

5. Understand and manage own emotions, demonstrating commitment and congruence
6. Understand and lead others emotions ethically according to shared values
7. Create an environment that provides both support and challenge
8. Allow the character to shine through

Understand and manage own emotions, demonstrating commitment and congruence

Understand and lead others emotions ethically according to shared values

These are the skills popularly known as 'Emotional Intelligence', Daniel Goleman³ has written extensively on the subject and demonstrated the effectiveness of emotional intelligence in generating business results through people. By being aware of emotional responses in self or others, the leader can control the situation so they stay in a productive state. The authentic leader is congruent in how he handles himself, making judgments based on shared values. He is able to show his conviction and commitment to the vision and is open to others' contributions in keeping the vision up-to-date and meaningful.

Create an environment that provides both support and challenge

When we undertake change, one of the biggest barriers is the fear of the unknown, people have a need to know they are supported in the change and learning. Yet at the same time we seek challenge and growth, which mean going into the unknown. The authentic leader recognises this and is able to provide both support and challenge depending on the needs of the individual.

Allow the character to shine through

We typically create a persona that copes with the world as we experience it, this is not necessarily our true self, it's the one that works for us in the workplace. Authentic leaders are true to their character and allow their sense of self to lead and inform what they do. This brings out their passions and energy and allows them to be truly effective. When the character shines through the individual is inspired and inspiring, working with them is easy and communication and motivation flows.

Provide vision, purpose and meaning

Key qualities:

9. Articulate a clear vision, keep it up-to-date and take a stand for it
10. Express the why of our existence in the organisation
11. Encourage meaningful contribution and appreciate others
12. Serve others authentically

Articulate a clear vision, keep it up-to-date and take a stand for it

To lead you must have a vision of where you are going to encourage others to follow you. Authentic leaders feel their vision from within and are willing to take a stand for it, they communicate it often and clearly in everything they do. Maybe as a manager your vision is fairness and fun in the workplace, you will ensure that everything you do fits into that vision and those working with you will be clear on your vision and values and able to make decisions on how they work based on that clear framework. Or you may lead a new product development project and you are clear and consistent on what that product will bring the business, the customer, the employee and the community; you will find that your people will make it happen. (Steve Jobs and Apple iPhones are a good example of this).

³ Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence, Working with Emotional Intelligence, Primal Leadership*
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Express the why of our existence in the organisation

People need to know where they fit in and why they are doing what they are doing. The authentic leader gives purpose and credibility for all. When people know how their contribution counts, they are motivated to deliver results. The story of the cleaner at NASA demonstrates this, when JF Kennedy was touring the facility, he came across a man cleaning the floor and asked him, “what do you do here?” he replied, “I’m helping to put a man on the moon”. He understood how his contribution fitted into the main purpose of NASA at that time and it gave his life meaning.

Encourage meaningful contribution and appreciate others

This leads on from providing purpose, once people understand their role in delivering the purpose, they can make meaningful contribution to this. Contribution is more than simply fulfilling the tasks; it is also generating ideas for improvement, enhancing processes, contributing constructively to the dialogue. The authentic leader appreciates others; this energises people and makes them want to excel.

Serve others authentically

The authentic leader recognises that he is ultimately judged by how well he serves – the organisation, people, customers, stakeholders, community, all relationships. When a leader moves from control to service, she acknowledges that she is not the sole achiever, but that it is through her relationships and interdependence with others that she creates value.

Live the values

Key qualities:

13. Do what you say
14. Create a values-led environment
15. Maintain momentum behind the values

Do what you say

Being congruent in what you say and what you do is the most obvious test of genuineness. This congruence establishes a leader’s credibility, which is essential to encourage followers. This is not a test you pass once and then can relax, people judge the leader’s credibility continuously and while a leader can make mistakes, he needs to handle them in a transparent way according to his values, otherwise he could lose credibility rapidly.

Creates a values-led environment

The leader is influential in ensuring that how people work in the organisation is congruent with the values. This includes systems, processes and communication, particularly all those to do with how people work together and with the customer.

Maintain momentum behind the values

The authentic leader does not blow hot and cold with various fads, her values are strongly held. Similarly she signs up to the organisation’s values because she believes in them and they are aligned with her values. So sticking with the values and maintaining the values-led way of working is easy for the authentic leader, she is a robust role-model and inspires others through her consistency.

Authentic leadership

The authentic leader allows his energy to flow and express his genuine power. It is a liberating way of working and frees up those working with the leader. Working in this way is highly effective; people operate from a position of openness and trust, which allows for enormous creativity, productivity and passion. People are clear where they are going and how they fit in, they contribute willingly and are ready to co-operate, develop relationships and make progress.

Being an authentic leader is accessible to everyone; it is something you tune into. Working with a coach can help you bring out your qualities and develop the skills.

“New leaders access the energy of new leadership and power, working with the profound potential of themselves to gift the sourcing of new life to everything they touch ... people, projects, companies, everything.” Soleira Green: *New Leadership and Power*

If you want to discuss this topic further or would like to work with a coach to develop your own leadership capability, contact amanda@amandabouchconsulting.co.uk.