

“I had no idea that being your authentic self could make me as rich as I’ve become. If I had, I’d have done it a lot earlier.” –Oprah Winfrey

It’s amazing how many of us have two sides to our personality, a ‘work me’ and a ‘home me’. At work, we often try to come across a certain way, whether it’s to garner more recognition or to fit in with our managers and colleagues; we end up changing ourselves and how we act. This is especially true in leadership, where managers often feel pressure to fit their personality to match their role. The problem is that by ‘acting the role’ of leader, those around them often feel like they’re being lied to or deceived. Then leaders are stunned when their employees don’t like them, don’t trust them and end up leaving. But if individuals can remain authentic in their leadership approach, they can bring their whole self to work while still being effective, productive and inspiring leaders.

What is authentic leadership?

The idea of authentic leadership has been around for a long time, even if it was known by different names until Bill George’s book ‘Authentic Leadership’ popularised the term out in 2003. Since then, the term has become business jargon, often overused and not well enough understood to be meaningful. But there is something behind the jargon – ideas and concepts that have been around for centuries that can help leaders lead people by having a sense of self-awareness, identity, honesty and passion.

We all have a different idea of what authentic leadership is, based on our own knowledge and experiences:

“At its most basic level, authenticity means being genuine – not a replica, not a copy or imitation. In leadership being genuine implies that we are embodying our true selves into our leadership role. Being true to ourselves calls us to draw on the very essence of our values, beliefs, principles, morals and that all of these create our ‘guiding compass’ in the job. Not somebody else’s compass – our own! Authentic leadership holds making the most of our strengths, recognising and trading off our weaknesses and taking full self-accountability for the impact we have on others. What authentic leadership is not about is adopting the styles or traits of other leaders.”

– Steve Robinson



“Authentic leadership for me encompasses the whole leader and a leader cannot be authentic just some of the time or when times are buoyant. It is about showing the behaviours of an authentic leader all of the time and not just ‘in pockets’. An authentic leader demonstrates their ability to exhibit the right behaviours especially when needed in times of change and challenge. A high level of self-awareness is of paramount importance and the foundations required for being an authentic leader. A leader cannot be authentic with others if they do not understand what this looks like for them.”

– Victoria O’Dea

The key behaviours of an authentic leader

The central component of authentic leadership is genuineness, which means every authentic leader is different. However, there are several markers that these leaders tend to share.

Authentic leaders:

- demonstrate behaviours which enable you to trust in them all of the time
- take ownership when they have made a mistake and share responsibility for any mistake
- show the necessary courage to push further up the leadership chain, to question current status quo or defend their people or processes

There is a perceived level of expectation around what a great leader should do and how she/he should behave. These expected norms can create myths about leadership being inspirational, exhibiting unrelenting confidence, having unwavering decision making, showing unshakeable self-belief and revealing no signs of personal weakness. In authentic leadership, whilst some of these may well help in the execution of the role, the real test is somewhat more grounded.

Authentic leaders:

Continually commit to their own learning in order to understand themselves as a person and how they and others see the world

Deep self-awareness is the foundation here. And it builds and grows – it's a lifelong journey of learning from experiences and being able to share these along the way. They resonate with others by telling stories of success and defeat, of good times and tough times and of accomplishments and setbacks. Truly knowing their values – who they are, what do they believe in, what's the right thing to do – for the right reason and in the right way is often all that leaders have to help navigate by when the deep mist of uncertainty prevails.

Have an ability to get their ego out of the way - they truly empower and develop others

'Big ego leadership' lies at the opposite end of the continuum to authentic leadership. Authentic leadership holds out the first and foremost principle, 'it's not about me'. It's akin to the truly brilliant magician who knows that he cannot cross over into the world of magic until he puts everything else aside and behind him – including his own desires and needs – and focuses totally on bringing an experience to the audience.



They influence and inspire others by revealing a bit themselves

In being able to 'lift their veil' and reveal their true selves, authentic leaders transfer humility, credibility and trust to those around them. They generate believability by being 'human'. People follow them not through the leader's manipulation, carrot or stick strategy, or through threats or even because of their power or position – but through compelling influence. Authentic leaders demonstrate some vulnerability and at the same time fully understand their genuine influential 'edge' with others.

Deliver great outcomes over longer periods of time

In a world increasingly impatient for results and demanding immediate outcomes, authentic leadership is continuously tested. The pressures of instant delivery versus longer-term desirable outcomes are a true leadership tension in itself. Authentic leaders though, know what they can and

can't settle or compromise on in the short term – because it will impact on the longer-term outcome. Authentic leaders have a ferocious tenacity on the longer-term goals. They align their personal values develop future leaders and build sustainable successful organisations.

How to be an authentic leader

An in-depth study by the Harvard Business Review of effective leaders ranging in ages from 23 to 93 found that there is no “cookie cutter leader”. Every person interviewed had a different idea of what an ideal leader looks like, with each individual having a unique combination of characteristics, traits, skills and styles that led to their own success. The one common theme was that all the leaders were consciously or subconsciously taking in their real-world experiences continuously, and using those experiences to frame who they were at their core. As a result, they found the “purpose of their leadership and learned that being authentic made them more effective”.

This study is one that we all can learn from, whether we're managing other people professionally or not. That's because the study shows that leaders are not born leaders; they become great leaders throughout the course of their life by taking in experiences and letting it guide them and their leadership style. That is a tactic anyone can adopt well before they reach managerial level, or even before they enter the workforce.

“Authenticity is the alignment of head, mouth, heart, and feet - thinking, saying, feeling, and doing the same thing - consistently. This builds trust, and followers love leaders they can trust.”

– Lance Secretan



Conclusion

The rampant pace of change in our world in itself requires agility, flexibility and adaptability of leadership styles and approaches to an ever-changing landscape. Complexity will increase around technical, economic, financial and social issues in the world and when we add in the very ethical, moral and consciousness testing dilemmas, that complexity will be exacerbated.

Perhaps all of us striving to be our unique, authentic selves will create a collective array of authentic perspectives, values and principles to complex situations. The tensions and conflict here will be vividly apparent but paradoxically this may also give rise to the existence of the one last bastion of stability – authenticity.

About the authors

Steve Robinson, CEO and Founder, Si Consulting Ltd



Steve is an experienced business leader and consultant with a highly diverse and successful background in multi-disciplined leadership. As owner and CEO of Si Consulting, he works with leaders and teams in developing and sustaining their

performance and impact. Steve adds a powerful mix of useable and sustainable approaches that will see individuals, teams and organisations achieving greater performance.

Steve brings 25 years of first hand commercial experience, including a Board appointment and senior positions with Specsavers and Fitness First, built on the foundation of a successful career in corporate finance and banking. Steve is also a licensed practitioner of Insights Discovery, a coach, group facilitator, trained trainer and speaker at business events and seminars.

Victoria O'Dea, Client Relationship Manager, Insights



Victoria is a Client Relationship Manager at Insights and manages a wide range of accounts. Prior to joining Insights Victoria had 10 years+ experience in Sales and Learning and Development within large FMCG Blue Chips

Organisations. Victoria prides herself on understanding clients' business needs and drivers, and developing measurable solutions which help them provide the required deliverables for the individuals, teams and organisation.

Victoria first got introduced to Insights in 1999 when she was a delegate on an Insights Discovery Workshop and received her first Insights Discovery Personal Profile. It was at this moment that Victoria realised the true potential that Discovery could bring for enhancing relationships and in turn enhancing sales with clients. This realisation soon evolved into a genuine passion and enthusiasm for learning and development and developing people in order to help them maximise their potential.