9 reasons why authentic leaders are rare

Author: Carl Tapi . September 2020

What is an Authentic Leader?

Authentic leaders are self-actualized individuals who are aware of their strengths, their limitations, and their emotions. They also show their real selves to their followers. They do not act one way in private and another in public; they do not hide their mistakes or weaknesses out of fear of looking weak. They also realize that being self-actualized is an endless journey, never complete.

Being awarded a leadership role within an organisation may feel like an amazing accomplishment, but that is only half the battle. The second, and arguably most important half, lies in building and maintaining a highly-effective team (Backhaus & Tikoo 2004). However, according to a recent survey conducted on UK workers, managers are failing miserably at this task, and are instead fostering feelings of hate and resentment among their workers.

The survey states that while 22% of the UK public say they hate their boss, a staggering 52% identify their boss as their main source of job dissatisfaction. So, where is it that managers are going wrong, and what can they do to improve their employees' perception of them?

Compelling research by V. Jon Bentz – Vice President for Human Resources at Sears during the 1970s – found that *authentic leadership* had little to do with IQ or personal attractiveness. Rather, it was linked directly to interpersonal competence. With ever-increasing demands at work for both mid-level and senior leaders, the ability to execute and get things done is a key driver of success. But it can ultimately become a leader's downfall, resulting in unintended costs for the individual, as well as for their teams and organizations.

The high levels of efficiency that allow highly task-focused leaders to be so productive often come at the expense of a more people-based focus. Things like building relationships, inspiring a team, developing others, and showing empathy can fall by the wayside. Highly efficient leaders often lose their focus on people due to a limiting belief that more people-focused activities will slow them down and impede their ability to execute and to ultimately be successful.

In this article, we take a deeper into the reasons why *authentic leaders* are rare.

1. Overconfidence

The most common reason to explain why *authentic leaders* are rare is plain overconfidence. According to research from the Berkley HAAS School, social status itself increases the risk of this development and every success contributes to the delusion of one's infallibility.

Self-confidence and self-directedness are important attributes of *authentic leaders*. No one who is chronically low in self-esteem will ever be a successful inspiration to others, nor will they be capable of taking the responsibility necessary to run a successful enterprise. The problem is that modern management practices stress self-reliance, decisiveness, and independence, it is common to lose sight of the importance of the "soft" aspects of leadership— empathy, compassion, and the ability to second guess oneself. What is needed for *authentic leaders* is an ability to combine a strong sense of self with an acceptance of one's potential for error.

2. Less focus on Employee Development

Authentic Leaders are those who actively participate in the continuous development of their staff (Balmer 2001). *Authentic leaders* can effectively delegate tasks and make sure that everyone on their team is learning, growing, and is being challenged. When leaders start to do the work that they should be passing down to their employees, they end up hurting themselves. They become stressed out because they are overloaded with work and their employees get bored and want to leave.

3. Too Much Focus On Office Politics.

Leaders have to play politics all the time at the office (Maxwell & Knox 2009). They have to do the right thing, at the right time and make the right allies without angering too many people. Some leaders tend to be overly focused on office politics (Barney 1991). This tends to get in the way of productivity and makes them lose focus on important goals. *Authentic Leaders* instead focus on doing excellent work and managing their team effectively.

4. Some Leaders Do Not Understand Self-Leadership.

For any individual to be an effective leader, you have to know yourself, control yourself, and communicate your core values, expectations, and beliefs (Roper & Davies 2007). You need to understand your strengths, weaknesses, and goals to be able to give your best self to your team and to have fulfillment.

Very few leaders engage in self-introspection which provides an opportunity not only to be more present but also to improve your self-awareness. Ask yourself reflective questions to help gain insights into what's driving your behavior, such as "What am I trying to avoid?" or "What's my fear in terms of slowing down?"

5. They Are Too Reactive.

Authentic Leaders need to be proactive, not just reactive. If you find yourself spending all of your time trying to put out fires, then you are not using your time effectively (Moroko & Uncles 2008). Proactive leaders influence the future and form the right alliances to advance their causes. Of course, you should make sure your group is getting all the answers and resources they need, but do not ignore the future.

6. Poor Communication

Authentic Leaders need to be able to constantly communicate with their teams and make sure they are all in the know (Mosley 2007). If leaders do not communicate effectively, people will not know what to do next or where the group is heading

7. They Do Not Give Enough Criticism.

It is very easy for leaders to try and please everyone and to befriend co-workers but that is not always effective. *Authentic Leaders* take a step back and look at the weaknesses of your team and talk to them about what they can improve. If all you do is compliment everyone, then you are doing them a disservice. At the same time, you should accept criticism from them. Some leadership tactics might not be best for the group and you need to know that.

8. Excessively "Brittle" Approach

Consistency is generally a good thing, but it can be taken too far. Sometimes goals need to be altered, but a leader who is focused on the original goals at all costs risks leadership failure. Ironically, this can go along with fear of failure and excessive avoidance of risk. What can end up happening is the organization can do a remarkably good job at achieving a goal that turns out to be completely wrong or misguided. By contrast, *authentic leaders* demonstrate flexibility.

9. Pathological Personality Traits

Sometimes there is an extremely fine line between confidence and arrogance. Likewise, healthy insecurity can sometimes border on paranoia. To differentiate between a competent, energetic leader and a power-hungry megalomaniac, you have to look carefully at a person's track record.

As we grow up and mature emotionally, we go through several stages of moral development, from the simplest (be good: avoid punishment) to the most complex (understanding universal ethical principles). Sometimes people get stuck at an early stage of moral development, perhaps asking of every situation, "What's in this for me?" In such cases, it is the person in the leadership position who benefits, to the detriment of the people he or she leads.

Carl Tapi is a Consultant at Industrial Psychology Consultants (Pvt) Ltd, a management and human resources consulting firm. **https://www.linkedin.com/in/carl-tapi-45776482/** *Phone +263 (242) 481946-48/481950 or cell number +263 772 469 680 or email:* **carl@ipcconsultants.com** *or visit our website at www.ipcconsultants.com*

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