

Why Authentic Leaders Matter In The Real World

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Authenticity has been explored throughout history, from Greek philosophers to the work of [Shakespeare](#) (“To thy own self be true.” –Polonius, Hamlet). *Authentic leadership* has been explored occasionally as part of modern management science but found its highest levels of acceptance since [Bill George’s 2003 book, *Authentic Leadership*](#).

Research has shown *authentic leadership* serves as the single strongest predictor of an employee's [job satisfaction](#), organizational commitment, and workplace happiness. To ensure long-term happiness and productivity out of your team, then, it's critical you demonstrate a level of authenticity as a leader.

What is an Authentic Leader?



The roots of *authentic leadership* come from ancient Greek philosophy that focuses on the development of core, or cardinal, virtues. These virtues are prudence (fair-mindedness, wisdom, seeing all possible courses of action); temperance (being emotionally balanced and in control); justice (being fair in dealings with others); and fortitude (courage to do the right thing). (Riggio,2014)

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 organization 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 ultimately be successful.

Characteristics of an Authentic Leader



Below are common traits that make *Authentic leaders* so rare:

1. Overconfidence

The most common reason to explain why *authentic leaders* are rare is plain [overconfidence](#). According to research from the [Berkeley 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](#). 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 their 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.

Examples of Authentic Leaders



One example of a leader who was seen as being an authentic leader is Steve Jobs. [Steve Jobs](#) fits the common themes of authentic leadership in that he was honest to himself and others and truly believed that his work and the goal for Apple was for the common good. Jobs stated that his passion was to build an enduring company where people were motivated to make great products (Isaacson, 2012).

Others cite Warren Buffet as a classical example of an authentic leader. Warren displays authentic leadership in showing a real commitment (both in words and deeds) to improving “stakeholder value” over time.

Other examples cited by an article by AllBusiness blog are:

- Martin Luther King, Jr., leader of the Civil Rights Movement
- Sam Palmisano, former CEO of IBM
- Oprah Winfrey, actress, television show host
- Jack Welch, former CEO of GE
- Anne Mulcahy, former CEO of Xerox
- Eleanor Roosevelt, former First Lady

Authentic Leadership Theory

As described in the Journal of Nuclear Medical Technology, Authenticity in leadership is a complex theory with similarities to several other leadership theories. *Authentic leadership theory* is most like the relational styles of leadership, such as the [servant](#), transformative, charismatic, spiritual, and ethical styles. The servant and [transformative styles](#) are the two relational leadership styles that are most closely connected to authenticity. *Authentic leadership* is similar to servant leadership in the focus on humanistic qualities, altruism, and helping others develop personally and professionally.

According to Mason (2017) (cited in the Journal of Nuclear Medical Technology), Authentic leadership theory maintains that 3 factors influence the development of an authentic leader: positive psychologic capabilities, moral reasoning, and critical life events. Positive psychologic capabilities include balanced cognitive reasoning and resilience. Resiliency and balanced reasoning are the skills that enable a leader to overcome difficulties, face challenges, and see alternative perspectives when making difficult decisions. Leaders with balanced cognitive processing capability see multiple perspectives and consider all information objectively (Hinojosa et al, 2014). Balanced processing includes making objective decisions while taking into account all opinions and relevant information. Leaders with this characteristic often solicit views that challenge their own when making decisions.

Moral reasoning describes the decision-making process needed to address moral and ethical dilemmas, whereas critical life events refer to hardships or personal crises that enable people to grow. Authentic leaders typically have life stories in which a tragedy or series of tragedies helped that leader gain self-awareness and discover the life purpose that supports the authenticity in leadership (Shamir & Eliam, 2005). In their research, Shamir and Eilam discovered that it is through life stories “that people can develop a self-concept of a leader that supports and justifies their leadership role because the life story not only recounts but also justifies” (Shamir & Eliam, 2005). In other words, critical life events often enable the leader to gain a better sense of compassion and humanism, which helps the leader relate to followers. Underlying positive psychology and moral reasoning combined with critical life events support the development of key characteristics of authentic leaders.

In an article by Hubspot, the following four components were highlighted as distinct components of Authentic Leadership Theory:

1. **Self Awareness**- it's critical for a leader to have a strong sense of self, including your strengths, weaknesses, and values. It's impossible to demonstrate authenticity as a leader if you are unsure of who you are or what you stand for in the first place. [Self-awareness](#) is also critical for you to

grow as a leader, and strengthen other components of authentic leadership.

In Bruce J. Avolio and Tara S. Wernsing's essay *Practicing Authentic Leadership*, they outline three ways authentic leaders should practice self-awareness:

- Seek feedback from the environment
- Use self-reflection to better understand your behavior
- Practice regular self-observation to stay aware of your feelings at all times

Self-awareness is vital for acting appropriately as a leader and feeling empathy for how your employees might perceive your feedback.

2. **Relational Transparency-** To truly foster authenticity, a leader must remain genuine, straightforward, and honest with his or her team. Let them know where they stand -- if they mess up, tell them. [Transparency](#) and honesty must be encouraged from the leadership level if you want your business to be successful. authentic leadership must start with you displaying the behavior you hope to see in your employees, as well. If you aren't transparent and honest, how can you expect your employees to come forward with problems when they arise?
3. **Balanced Processing-** A leader needs to make decisions and stay true to her decision in the face of opposition -- but she must also be capable of receiving and considering alternative viewpoints before choosing a plan of action. To be an authentic leader, you must create an environment in which employees feel both safe and encouraged to share their opinions. By collecting outside feedback, you're able to see more potential weaknesses in your decision.
4. **Internalized Moral Perspective (“Do the Right Thing”)** - An authentic leader needs to know when to put the needs of the company and its customers ahead of him/herself and his/her team. Ultimately, a leader should be focused on doing the right thing for the long-term success of the business-not for personal gain. "Being an *authentic leader* means leading by example. It's demonstrating through your actions that you practice the same values and behaviors you expect from your team."(Emmy Jonassen, Director of Acquisition at HubSpot)

Becoming an authentic leader is not easy. It takes a great deal of self-reflection (getting to know oneself), and the courage to do the right thing. It involves a degree of selflessness. In a world full of morally corrupt and dysfunctional leaders, authentic leadership theory has become quite popular as people search for “good” leaders (Riggio,2014). No matter who you are or what you’re leading,

authenticity is important.

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