



# The Importance of Being Authentic

How many times have you worked with or for a person you thought was being straightforward and honest, only to find out later that he or she was fooling you and others to achieve some goal? Good leaders don't do this.

**L**eaders are those individuals who have a vision that can inspire others to work with them to achieve it. Leaders may be described as confident, charismatic, and passionate, but the reality is that they come in all shapes and sizes, and, like so many things in life, there isn't just one right way to be a leader. And there's certainly no shortage of advice on how to be a leader. Countless essays and books have been written on the subject. To the average person, it can be a little overwhelming and confusing.

Yet one trait stands out above all others: Leaders should strive to be authentic.

What does "authentic" mean? According to [Merriam-Webster.com](http://Merriam-Webster.com), one definition of authentic is "not false or imitation; real or actual," and that's what it means in terms of leadership. Authentic leaders lead as who they truly are without imitating others or pretending to be something they aren't. This doesn't mean that they don't learn and develop over time or change their leadership

style based on their experiences. It means that they stay true to their real self and lead from that perspective.

Why is authenticity important for leaders? It removes any pretense about who they are and how they should act—freeing them to leverage their own strengths. It also builds trust across the organization because the team is getting the real person rather than a leader pretending to be someone else. No organization can succeed in the long term without trust. Also, authenticity burnishes a leader's reputation. A highly respected leader attracts high-caliber talent that helps the organization find further success. This self-reinforcing cycle can help teams reach new heights.

## Leverage Your Strengths

Everyone has strengths and weaknesses or areas for improvement. As a leader, it's important to remember that no one on your team expects you to be perfect, but they aren't as forgiving if you aren't honest with yourself about your limitations. In most cases, if you've been selected as a leader, you probably have significant strengths that outweigh any weaknesses you may have, so it's impor-

tant to leverage these strengths and build on them while you work on your areas for improvement. If you're upfront about the areas you're working on, your team will support you and even cheer you on as you develop new strengths.

When I became a manager, it wasn't the first time I had led a group, but it was the first time that I was the official leader of a sizable team. Everyone on my team knew this, and I readily admitted that I was finding my way. At first, I was apprehensive because my predecessor was a well-liked and successful manager with many years of experience. Our team was considered a high-performing team, and I didn't want to mess things up. Though I had attended some management and leadership courses, I was still unsure about how I wanted to lead. I was fearful that the team wouldn't accept me as their leader and that I would fail as a result, but I was confident in my abilities and resolved to focus on the things that I knew I could do well.

By focusing on my strengths and leveraging them as much as possible, I was able to excel in these areas while I learned in other areas. For example, planning and organizing have always been one of my strongest skill sets. As a

frontline manager, my job was more focused on accomplishing the goals set by the senior leadership team, so I leveraged these skills to help my team accomplish the goals successfully. In the meantime, I developed and honed my influencing skills by working with my mentor and my current manager to improve in this area.

Had I approached the role as a know-it-all new manager, I would have been dogged by the image I had to uphold rather than leveraging my strengths to buy time to work on my areas for improvement. My team supported me because they got the real me, not some impostor, and in the end my first manager role was a success that led me to increased responsibilities and bigger roles in the future.

### **Build Trust**

At this year's IMA Annual Conference & Exposition, Stephen M.R. Covey closed out the event with a session called "The Speed of Trust" that was based on his book by the same name. In his speech, Covey talked about how high-trust organizations tend to be collaborative, innovative, creative, and effective, while low-trust organizations tend to be the opposite. In high-trust organizations, things

get done faster and at a lower cost. Covey builds a strong case for trust in organizations, but his advice won't change a thing if you're practicing his principles only for the sake of following the latest things you've learned about leadership. To be truly effective, you can't simply imitate his ideas—you have to sincerely believe in them and live them in an authentic way. Otherwise, those you lead will surely see right through your efforts.

One of the best examples I have of an authentic leader occurred several years ago when a new leader took over a group I was in. The previous group leader was successful and had built the group around her leadership style, which was very different from the new manager's style. There was noticeable apprehension among team members as the new leader took over. But the new manager essentially laid everything on the line in an all-hands meeting focused on helping the team get to know him. He talked about his values and ideas and answered questions about himself as a leader. He put himself up for close scrutiny by the team and won a lot of respect and trust in the process.

Not only did he explicitly state

his values and leadership approach in a single meeting, but he proceeded to live by them in his successive interactions with the team. Actions do speak louder than words, and as our relationship with the new leader developed, we realized that his actions were consistent with his words from that first all-hands meeting. His level of candor and transparency built even more trust with the group. He started with the right idea and didn't try to hide who he was or how he wanted to lead. He was authentic, and the trust he earned as a result helped our group evolve into that high-trust organization that Covey described in his talk.

### **Burnish a Reputation**

Every leader has a reputation. It may be ill-formed from little information, or it may be supported by a long history of leadership. Regardless of how this reputation is derived, it sticks with you wherever you go in an organization, and, in some cases, it may follow you to different companies. It may change over time as you gain more experience or take on different assignments, but it's always there. Again, one of the surest ways to build a solid reputation is to be authentic in your approach to

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leadership. Stick to your core principles. Doing so earns you a lot of respect and makes people want to work for you. The more people who want to work for you, the more likely you'll attract high-caliber team members who can help you reach even greater heights. It's a self-reinforcing cycle where success breeds success.

In one of my previous companies, my team in Finance supported a large internal organization that generated most of the revenue for our company. The leader of that organization was a young, charismatic guy who had spent his entire career with the company, rising steadily through the ranks to become a senior vice president. Despite his relative youth, he was a very popular leader who attracted a lot of the top talent in the company, and those who worked for him were extremely loyal to him, including those on the Finance team who supported his organization.

My first impression of him was that he seemed like an average guy at the company. He had a huge role there, yet he was down-to-earth and straightforward. There was no bluster or sheen that came with his title. Instead, what you saw was what you got, and this permeated his leadership style. His authentic approach to his role won him many fans and made him successful, and that approach helped him attract the top people to perpetuate his success.

## Stay Authentic

Authentic leaders focus on their strengths and work on their weaknesses with their team's support. Because they're authentic they can quickly build trust within their team, and this trust lays the foun-

ation for success. An authentic leader builds a strong reputation that attracts high-performing people who help perpetuate that success. Though they may develop their leadership style and change it over time, they never lose themselves in the process. So, remember, despite all the leadership advice out there, above all, be authentic. It can be the difference between success and failure. **SF**

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