

The Authentic Leader: Rebuilding Trust in Leadership by Embracing Core Values

In recent years, it has become commonplace to learn that a corporate or political leader has been caught in a lie, accused of misbehavior, or is involved in corrupt business deals. There is a growing deficit of trust in leadership around the world. According to the [2020 Edelman Trust Barometer](#), a global survey of trust in leaders and institutions, only 55% of people trust business organizations to do what is right, and 66% do not have confidence that current leaders can successfully address today's challenges. More than ever, people are looking for genuine, authentic leaders to take the helm of organizations and institutions. Stakeholders are seeking leaders with an internalized moral perspective that drives ethical behavior. Employees seek managers who genuinely care about other people and are aware of how their actions affect the world around them. Lack of trust in leadership and institutions harms engagement, decreases productivity and creates a negative culture. The need for authentic leadership is clear, but what does that mean?

What is Authentic Leadership?

The concept of authentic leadership has been around for a long time. It has been in the corporate lexicon since the 1960s when research began to show that leaders must display qualities that promote trust and loyalty to engage their teams effectively. Leadership expert and author Bill George explains that "no matter how effective your strategy, your vision, or your communication, you will fail to achieve



the desired results for your organization if you cannot inspire trust as a leader."

Authentic leadership is built on a person's character and is not a system that can be adopted or a method to be applied. Authentic leaders have many different management styles and personality types. And as the name implies, it's not an act, nor can it be effectively imitated. Practicing authentic leadership requires leaders to take responsibility for themselves and their actions in order to build stronger relationships with others. While there are many theories on the concept, most people agree that authentic leaders share some common traits.

4 Traits of Authentic Leadership

1. Authentic leaders stay true to their core values. Authentic leaders are highly self-aware individuals that make decisions and create strategies in alignment with their personal values.

They have a strong internal moral compass that drives their value system, and they act on those values. Best-selling author and leadership expert Simon Sinek explains that "authenticity is more than speaking; authenticity is also about doing. Every decision we make says something about who we are." For example, if a leader values family above other things, they might create family-friendly leave policies or flexible work schedules for their organization. They will also be likely to inquire about their employee's families and commit their names to memory. This alignment of behavior with stated values builds trust in the workplace. However, suppose a leader talks about the importance of family but never shows interest in other people's children or spouses or fails to make corporate policies that support working parents. In that case, they will come across as disingenuous, and employees may stop taking leadership's messaging seriously.



2. Authentic leaders are purpose-driven. These leaders are motivated by the mission and goals of the organization. They find that having a clear purpose provides clarity when making tough decisions. Clarity of purpose can make or

break an organization, and authentic leaders effectively orient their teams around a common goal to give a sense of meaning to their work.

Authentic leadership is built on a person's character and is not a system that can be adopted or a method to be applied.

They tend to be more interested in pursuing the desired results than in power or money and can put their ego aside to benefit the team. In his book *Drive*, Daniel Pink found that "the most deeply motivated people—not to mention those who are most productive and satisfied—hitch their desires to a cause larger than themselves." Younger generations also want to work for companies with an authentic purpose, with more than [70% of millennials](#) expecting their employers to focus on societal or mission-driven problems. It is becoming imperative for companies to embrace a greater purpose than profits to attract talent and customers. To be authentic, they must take actions that align with a commitment to that purpose or risk losing trust by creating the impression they don't "walk the talk."

3. Authentic leaders connect with people. Leaders are not just responsible for revenue and budget projections. Their success is contingent on connecting with others. Customers, employees, and suppliers are at the heart of every business, and creating positive relationships with people is key. In the book [Everybody Matters](#), Bob Chapman, CEO of Barry Wehmiller, writes, "We measure success by the way we touch the lives of people." By leading from both the heart and the mind, great leaders create positive connections and build lasting relationships. Authentic leadership requires a high level of emotional intelligence. These leaders are in touch with their own emotions and can also express

empathy for others and manage stress effectively. Authenticity requires both vulnerability and compassion for others, neither of which can be faked. People can sense when someone is insincere about emotional connections, and trying to force it or pretend will create distrust.

4. Authentic leaders have a growth mindset. A genuine leader can recognize and acknowledge mistakes and will learn from them. They are interested in listening to and learning from others. They know there is always room for improvement and are focused on nurturing long-term growth for themselves, their organizations, and their teams. A growth mindset allows leaders to embrace challenges and overcome obstacles. Authentic leaders can handle feedback and criticism well and use it to continuously improve performance. They are also more likely to provide meaningful developmental feedback to their employees. They don't believe in predetermined limitations to intelligence or creativity and believe that these skills can be cultivated and enhanced through effort and determination. Authenticity is not a static state, and having a growth mindset allows leaders to understand that they can adapt, change their minds, and take on new roles without betraying their core values.

Developing Authentic Leadership

While many agree that there is a growing need for authentic leadership to restore trust in organizations and governments around the world, some people argue that authenticity cannot be taught. By definition, authenticity is not a skill but rather a quality of being genuine or not corrupted from the original (the original in this case being the "true" self). Arguably it is not possible to teach someone how to be themselves and act in accordance with their personal

values. However, it is possible to develop the skills that help leaders embrace their unique personality and value system and find their own authentic leadership style.



Building Self-Awareness

The roots of authentic leadership can be found in the ancient Greek aphorism, "know thyself." Developing a strong sense of self is the key to becoming an authentic leader. Strong leaders need to be aware of their strengths, weaknesses, and values. A strong sense of self is necessary, especially in high-pressure situations and when making tough decisions. However, this does not imply that leaders should be rigid in their definition of a "true self." Because many outside factors influence behavior at all times, it can be difficult to identify what makes someone authentically themselves.

To some extent, most people have a version of themselves at work and one at home. There are situations where formal manners are required, but that's not necessarily inauthentic. Making minor changes in communication styles and dress,

depending on the context, is usually appropriate. However, most people can recall a time they felt inauthentic because they were trying to conform to or impress others in a way that felt out of alignment with who they are.

Developing a strong sense of self is the key to becoming an authentic leader.

Self-awareness can be cultivated through practices like meditation, journaling and seeking feedback from others. A meditation practice can be as simple as focusing on the breath for a few moments to check in with feelings and stress levels on a regular basis. Many leaders rely on some form of journaling to improve awareness and focus. Taking time to write down thoughts, feelings, plans, and priorities each day can also build a greater understanding of deeper motivations and values, which is key to becoming a more authentic leader. It can also be valuable to seek regular feedback from friends, colleagues and mentors. Part of building self-awareness is understanding personal strengths and weaknesses. Seeking regular feedback is a great way to gain perspective and learn how other people perceive certain behaviors.

Boosting Emotional Intelligence (EQ)

There is a strong positive correlation between emotional intelligence and authentic leadership. They require similar skills such as self-awareness and relationship building. Another key component of EQ is self-management, which is vital for cultivating authentic leadership. Leaders must learn to take full responsibility for both their emotions and their behavior. They must become adept at managing themselves to maintain a schedule, manage stress, and

practice self-discipline in areas like diet and exercise. Leaders that can recognize and identify emotions in others and genuinely express empathy can build a strong rapport that is the foundation for positive relationships. The capacity to understand other people's values and experiences is vital to creating authentic connections.

Understanding Personal Values

Authentic leaders connect their actions to their personal values, so having a thorough understanding of their own core values is important work. Leaders can explore their own life stories to better understand their passions, values and core principles. Reflecting on difficult challenges and formative experiences from the past can increase a leader's understanding of their own values. It is through life's difficulties that values and beliefs are tested and defined. One helpful exercise would be to write out a personal biography. When someone distills their life history into a



story that could be shared with others, it clarifies what events they found most impactful on who they are as a person and what shaped their views of the world. Many leaders find their motivations come from the transformative effect of a personal loss, such as the death of a loved one or being fired from a job. Telling the story of these events can provide insight into how these events gave meaning to their lives and inspired them to rise above challenges to become better leaders.

Finding a Support Team

Great leaders know they cannot succeed on their own. Authentic leaders build support teams that help them stay focused by providing feedback and perspective. This group can consist of peers, family members, mentors or friends. This support team should allow the leader to be authentically themselves in a safe space while also coaching and challenging them to grow. Being part of a peer group can hone social skills, increase self-awareness, and build self-confidence. Being able to reach out for help



and support can also help leaders learn to be comfortable showing vulnerability to others, a trait vital to authentic leadership. To develop a support network, leaders can join professional associations, social clubs, and other types of support groups available in their area.

Improving Communication Skills

Strong communication skills are important for any leader. Improving skills such as active listening, giving and receiving feedback, and conflict resolution will enhance a leader's ability to connect with others. Learning to be aware of non-verbal communication can help leaders gauge other people's feelings and respond appropriately. It is also helpful for leaders to be mindful of the messages they send with their own body language. Learning to communicate effectively strengthens other soft skills vital to authentic leadership, such as empathy, team-building, and problem-solving. While leaders have different communication styles, they must convey their vision effectively, inspire employees and persuade customers. Leaders can improve communication skills by joining a public speaking group or finding a coach or peer to provide opportunities for practice and feedback.

Learning to communicate effectively strengthens other soft skills vital to authentic leadership, such as empathy, team-building, and problem-solving.

Pursuing Lifelong Learning

Embracing a growth mindset is important for any leader. Authentic leaders make lifelong learning a priority for themselves and their teams. They know that there is always more to learn, and people can always sharpen both hard and soft skills. An effective development strategy is important to

any organization or team looking to cultivate more effective and authentic leaders for the future. One way to encourage and support such learning is to enroll in a leadership development program. [Crestcom International](#)'s year-long leadership development curriculum addresses this need through interactive training, coaching and an opportunity to network with peers from other industries.

Rebuilding Trust with Authentic Leadership

Embracing authentic leadership is essential to creating trust in both leaders and organizations, and there is a strong case for working to earn that trust. Compared with employees in low-trust organizations, individuals at high-trust companies report 74% less stress, 106% more energy at work, 50% higher productivity, 13% fewer sick days, 76% more engagement and 40% less burnout. The cost of being inauthentic is high. Leaders must tune in to their internal moral compass and start aligning what they say and do with what they believe is right. It is time for leaders of the future to find the courage to be true to themselves and to lead from their hearts. In the words of Bill George, "Leadership is the sum total of who you are. Leaders are developed, not simply born, and we can all develop ourselves to be able to guide others. Anyone who follows their internal compass can become an authentic leader."



References

- Braden, M. (2018, March 13). Council Post: Seven Ways To Develop Your Authentic Leadership Style. Retrieved November 04, 2020, from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbescoachescouncil/2018/03/13/seven-ways-to-develop-your-authentic-leadership-style/?sh=768b375669e6>
- Chapman, B., & Sisodia, R. (2015). Everybody Matters: The Extraordinary Power of Caring for Your People Like Family. Retrieved November 04, 2020, from <https://www.everybodymattersbook.com/>
- Deloitte. (2020, October 28). Deloitte Global Millennial Survey 2020. Retrieved November 04, 2020, from <http://www2.deloitte.com/global/en/pages/about-deloitte/articles/2014-millennial-survey-positive-impact.html>
- Edelman. (2020). 2020 Edelman Trust Barometer. Retrieved November 04, 2020, from <https://www.edelman.com/trustbarometer>
- George, B. (2015, November 30). Authentic Leadership Rediscovered. Retrieved November 04, 2020, from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/what-is-your-true-north/201511/authentic-leadership-rediscovered>
- Jones, R. (2014, August 01). Managing Authenticity: The Paradox of Great Leadership. Retrieved November 04, 2020, from <https://hbr.org/2005/12/managing-authenticity-the-paradox-of-great-leadership>
- Kruse, K. (2014, April 25). What Is Authentic Leadership? Retrieved November 04, 2020, from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kevinkruse/2013/05/12/what-is-authentic-leadership/>
- Riggio, R. (2014, January 22). What Is Authentic Leadership? Do You Have It? Retrieved November 04, 2020, from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/cutting-edge-leadership/201401/what-is-authentic-leadership-do-you-have-it>
- Sims, P, & George, B. (2020, October 22). Discovering Your Authentic Leadership. Retrieved November 04, 2020, from https://hbr.org/2007/02/discovering-your-authentic-leadership?ab=at_articlepage_relatedarticles_horizontal_slot1
- Smerek, R., Ph.D. (2019, January 08). What Does it Mean to Be Authentic? Retrieved November 4, 2020, from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/learning-work/201901/what-does-it-mean-be-authentic>
- Zak, P. (2019, November 27). The Neuroscience of Trust. Retrieved November 04, 2020, from <https://hbr.org/2017/01/the-neuroscience-of-trust>