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Leadership demands the expression of an authentic self. Try to lead like someone else—say, Jack Welch, Richard Branson, or Michael Dell—and you will fail. Employees will not follow a CEO who invests little of himself in his leadership behaviors. People want to be led by someone "real." This is partly a reaction to the turbulent times we live in. It is also a response to the public's widespread disenchantment with politicians and businesspeople. We all suspect that we're being duped.

Our growing dissatisfaction with sleek, ersatz, airbrushed leadership is what makes authenticity such a desirable quality in today's corporations—a quality that, unfortunately, is in short supply. Leaders and followers both associate authenticity with sincerity, honesty, and integrity. It's the real thing—the attribute that uniquely defines great leaders.

But while the expression of an authentic self is necessary for great leadership, the concept of authenticity is often misunderstood, not least by leaders themselves. They often assume that authenticity is an innate quality—that a person is either authentic or not. In fact, authenticity is a quality that others must attribute to you. No leader can look into a mirror and say, "I am authentic." A person cannot be authentic on his or her own. Authenticity is largely defined by what other people see in you and, as such, can to a great extent be controlled by you. If authenticity were purely an innate quality, there would be little you could do to manage it and, therefore, little you could do to make yourself more effective as a leader.

Indeed, managers who exercise no control over the expression of their authentic selves get into trouble very quickly when they move into leadership roles. Consider Bill, a manager in a large utility company in Pittsburgh. Bill started out as a trainee electrician, but senior management at the company swiftly spotted his talent. The HR department persuaded Bill to go to university, from which he graduated with a good degree. Afterward, he was warmly welcomed back to his job. His work at the utility company often involved managing projects, and he became adept at assembling and lead-

ing teams. His technical abilities and his honesty were his biggest leadership attributes.

Things started to unravel when Bill moved to the head office and became an adviser to some of the most senior executives in the company. HR suggested to Bill that this new job would be good preparation for a major leadership position back on the front lines. But the head office was political, and Bill found that his straight talk hit many wrong notes. He started to get feedback that he didn't fully understand the complexity of situations and that he should develop better skills for influencing others. Bill tried to curb his directness, but he could never mimic his superiors' politically savvy behaviors. He started to lose his way. He alternated between indecision, while he tried to understand the office politics, and sudden bursts of outright aggression as he struggled with his old forthrightness. He began to seriously doubt his abilities.

Bill is still at the utility company, but he will not progress further there. Most of you have probably met more than one failed leader like Bill in your organizations. His story illustrates perfectly how difficult it is for leaders to find a balance between expressing their personalities and managing those of the people they aspire to lead or at least influence. Yet the ability to strike that balance—and to preserve one's authenticity in the process—is precisely what distinguishes great leaders from other executives. The challenge of great leadership is exactly that of managing one's authenticity, paradoxical though it undoubtedly sounds.

Let us be absolutely clear: Authenticity is not the product of pure manipulation. It accurately reflects aspects of the leader's inner self, so it can't be an act. But great leaders seem to know which personality traits they should reveal to whom and when. They are like chameleons, capable of adapting to the demands of the situations they face and the people they lead, yet they do not lose their identities in the process. Authentic leaders remain focused on where they are going but never lose sight of where they came from. Highly attuned to their environments, they rely on an intuition born of formative, sometimes harsh experiences to understand the expectations and concerns of the people they seek to influence. They retain their distinctiveness as individuals, yet they know how to win acceptance in strong corporate and social cultures and how to use elements of those cultures as a basis for radical change.

In the following article, we'll explore the qualities of authentic leadership, drawing on our five years of research as well as our work consulting to leaders at all levels of organizations in diverse industries. To illustrate our points, we will recount some of the experiences and reflections of the authentic leaders we have known and studied. We don't pretend to have the final word on the subject, of course. Artists, philosophers, and social scientists have debated the concept of authenticity for centuries, and it would be foolish for us to imagine that this discussion could be synthesized by us or anyone else. Nonetheless, we believe that our reflections will contribute to a better understanding of the relationship between the expression of self and the exercise of leadership. Leaders who know how to manage their authenticity will be all the more effective for it, better able to both energize and retain loyal followers.

Managing the Perception

Establishing your authenticity as a leader is a two-part challenge. First, you have to ensure that your words are consistent with your deeds; otherwise, followers will never accept you as authentic. Everyone acknowledges and understands the need for consistency when establishing authenticity, but a great leader does a lot more than just pay lip service to it. He will live it every moment of the day. Indeed, it's not an exaggeration to say that a great leader is obsessive about embodying his beliefs.

Consider the case of John Latham, who was until recently the head teacher of an award-winning state school in the United Kingdom. Latham was passionate about creating an academic institution where students, teachers, and administrators respected one another and their environment. As at any school, litter and graffiti were major issues. So who picked up the trash and scrubbed the walls? Latham did. If you visited the school at break times, you would probably have found Latham on the grounds picking up litter rather than in his office behind a desk. "It's the simple, mundane things that matter," he told us, "and I personally fix many of them before day is done." This kind of demonstrated personal commitment to a few basic principles is essential to authentic leadership.

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But it is not enough just to practice what you preach. To get people to follow you, you also have to get them to relate to you. So the second challenge of authentic leadership is finding common ground with the people you seek to recruit as followers. This means you will have to present different faces to different audiences, a requirement that many people find hard to square with authenticity. But, as Shakespeare recognized long ago, "All the world's a stage…and one man in his time plays many parts." Such role playing doesn't have to be fake or insincere. That's not to say it's easy—far from it. As we've pointed out, people instinctively recognize fraudulent behavior. If a leader is playing a role that isn't a true expression of his authentic self, followers will sooner or later feel like they've been tricked. And once that impression is out there, it's hard for a leader to recover.

Nestlé CEO Peter Brabeck-Letmathe explicitly recognizes that the very different roles he plays as a leader must be true expressions of his personality. The cover of one of Nestlé's annual reports depicts him sitting in the Swiss mountains wearing climbing clothes. But in the pages of *The Nestlé Leadership and Management Principles,* he is dressed in a dark suit and standing outside corporate headquarters. As he explains, "I wanted to use the image of the mountaineer because water and the environment are emotional issues for many people. But the photo is not artificial. That's what I wear on weekends. I'm a climber. In the mountaineering picture, it's a human being talking. In the [other picture], I am talking for the institution. The photographs are different, but they both capture something essential about me."

A long-successful music industry executive we'll call Dick is also a careful communicator of his multiple selves. Dick is from the Caribbean, and on many occasions in the rough-and-tumble of the music business, we have seen him switch from corporate-speak to an island patois liberally sprinkled with expletives. He is absolutely at home in the cutthroat environment that recording artists and their agents operate in. But, at the same time, Dick's parents are affluent, well-established members of Caribbean society, and, on the occasions that require it, Dick can play up this aspect of himself to create a rapport with the media moguls and

Establishing Your Authenticity

There's no one right way to establish and manage your authenticity. But there are conscious steps you can take to help others perceive you as an authentic leader. Some of these steps entail building up knowledge about your true self; some involve learning more about others.

Get to know yourself and your origins better by:

Exploring your autobiography. Familiarize yourself with your identity anchors—the people, places, and events that shaped you. Share these discoveries with others who have had similar experiences.

Returning to your roots. Take a holiday with old friends. Spend time away from the normal trappings of the office.

Avoiding comfort zones. Step out of your routines, seek new adventures, and take some risks.

Getting honest feedback. Ask for 360-degree feedback from close colleagues, friends, family, and so on.

Get to know others better by:

Building a rich picture of your environment. Don't view others as one-dimensional; find out about people's backgrounds, biographies, families, and obsessions.

Removing barriers between yourself and others. Selectively show a weakness or vulnerability that reveals your approachability to your direct reports, assistants, secretaries, and so on.

Empathizing passionately with your people. Care deeply about the work your people do.

Letting others know what's unique (and authentic) about them. Give people feedback that acknowledges and validates their origins.

Connect to the organizational context better by:

Getting the distance right. Be wary of creating the wrong first impressions. Use both your sense of self and your understanding of your origins to connect with, or to separate yourself from, others.

Sharpening your social antennae. Seek out foreign assignments and other experiences to help you detect the subtle social clues that may spell the difference between your success and failure in attracting followers.

Honoring deeply held values and social mores. You are unlikely to make connections by riding roughshod over other cultures' strongly held beliefs.

Developing your resilience. You will inevitably experience setbacks when you expose yourself to new contexts and cultures. Prepare yourself by learning about and understanding your own values.

celebrities with whom he must also deal. All these facets of his personality ring true; his skill is in deciding which to reveal to whom and when.

Playing multiple roles usually demands a lot of thought and work. "Before I go into a situation, I try to understand what it is [people] will be thinking. I prepare what I am going to say and who I am going to be in that context," explains Jean Tomlin, former HR director at Marks & Spencer and one of the most influential black businesswomen in Britain. "I want to be me, but I am channeling parts of me to context. What you get is a segment of me. It is not a fabrication or a facade—just the bits that are relevant for that situation."

Let's look more closely at just what makes it possible for Brabeck-Letmathe, Tomlin, and executives like them to present fragments of themselves—without seeming inauthentic.

No leader can look into a mirror and say, "I am authentic." A person cannot be authentic on his or her own.

Know Yourself and Others

It goes almost without saying that the exercise of leadership is complex and requires both skills and practice. Over time, and through various life experiences, a leader develops an extensive repertoire of roles, which can make her seem very different to different people in different situations. Indeed, if a leader doesn't acquire this complexity, she will be able to recruit as followers only those people with whom she already shares some common ground.

But it is one thing to develop this complexity and another thing entirely to wield it effectively. Using your complex self (or, rather, selves) requires a degree of *self-knowledge* and the willingness and ability to share that self-knowledge with others, what we call *self-disclosure.* This is not to say that authentic leaders spend a lot of time exploring their inner lives through meditation or therapy. They may be profoundly self-aware and essentially authentic (in the sense that we are giving the term here), but not because of contemplation or analysis; they are not characters in some Woody Allen film. Few authentic leaders will even be conscious that they are engaged in self-expression and self-disclosure, which is probably why they are so hard to imitate.

So how do authentic leaders acquire these attributes? The relative simplicity of their goals often helps. A great leader is usually trying to accomplish no more than three or four big goals at a time. He is unwavering about these goals; he doesn't question them any more than he questions himself. That's because the goals are usually connected in some way to one or another of the leader's authentic selves. His pursuit of the goals, and the way he communicates them to followers, is intense—which naturally promotes the kind of self-disclosure we are talking about and educates him further about his various selves.

We have also found that great leaders keep close to them people who will give them honest feedback. As Roche Pharmaceuticals head Bill Burns told us, "You have to keep your feet on the ground when others want to put you on a pedestal. After a while on a pedestal, you stop hearing the truth. It's filtered by the henchmen, and they read you so well they know what you want to hear. You end up as the queen bee in the hive, with no relationships with the worker bees. My wife and secretary are fully empowered, if they ever see me getting a bit uppity, to give me a thumping great hit over the head."

As consultants, we often have been called in to do precisely that for senior executives, acting both as priests and spies as we try to make leaders more open to truths about themselves and their relationships with others. This does not necessarily mean helping these leaders develop more of what psychologist Dan Goleman calls emotional intelligence; rather, it means helping them to sharpen their skills in disclosing the emotional intelligence they already have so they can give better performances for their followers.

Consider an executive we'll call Josh, the CEO of one of the world's largest TV production companies for the past ten years. When we first met him, Josh was one of the early innovators in the field of documentary TV. Over the years, as he moved up the corporate ladder, he matured into a highly knowledgeable and effective executive who, in the process, became rather serious—even distant and austere—in the eyes of some of his employees. These perceptions were weakening his ability to attract and retain followers, so we coached Josh to return to the mischievous sense of humor that he had displayed more readily earlier in his career. He has an amazing sense of comic timing, which he has learned to use to devastating effect to disarm opponents and delight his fol-

lowers. At a recent retirement celebration, for example, people expected him to deliver a rather sober speech concerning the departing senior executive. Instead, they were treated to a comic tour de force, which thrilled the retiring executive and stunned Josh's followers, none of whom would have guessed their boss was so funny. Josh's ability to use humor is an especially important attribute in the entertainment business, and his reputation as a leader has benefited accordingly.

Besides possessing self-knowledge and skills in self-disclosure, great leaders have to be able to recognize which aspects of their authentic selves particular groups of followers are looking for. Most great leaders have highly developed social antennae: They use a complex mix of cognitive and observational skills to recognize what followers are consciously—and unconsciously—signaling to them.

If a leader is playing a role that isn't a true expression of his authentic self, followers will sooner or later feel like they've been tricked.

The good news is that while some people seem to be born with these discernment skills, others can, in fact, learn them. We have found that individuals who have had a great deal of mobility early in their lives possess these skills to a higher degree than those who have stayed mostly in one place. It's no coincidence that many CEOs start out in sales and that most senior executives in multinational companies have gone on multiple foreign postings. Exposure to a wide range of experiences during a manager's formative years enhances her ability to read and empathize with different people and situations.

Experiences outside of an individual's comfort zone can also sharpen her social awareness. Marks & Spencer's Jean Tomlin, for example, developed her social skills during her journey to establish credibility as a black businesswoman operating in an environment dominated by white males. And Nestlé's Peter Brabeck-Letmathe learned much from his stint in the military at age 17. The living conditions and treatment were barely tolerable, and several of his fellow soldiers attempted suicide. Brabeck-Letmathe survived by observing his superior officers very closely; the better he anticipated their behavior, the easier it was to stay out of their way.

Use Where You Come From

By the time a manager rises to a senior leadership position, he may seem like—and, indeed, may well be—a very different person than he was at the start of his journey. But despite any role playing that goes on, the leader's authenticity is still closely linked to his origins. The *Oxford English Dictionary,* for example, defines "authenticity," in part, as "of undisputed origin." As a result, we think it is fair to say that no leader will ever succeed in establishing his authenticity unless he can effectively manage his relationship with his past and his followers' connections to their roots.

Authentic leaders use their personal histories to establish common ground with their followers. The desire to establish his bona fides with his employees as a regular, approachable guy probably explains why Niall FitzGerald, a former cochairman at Unilever, speaks often and with insight about his Irish heritage and the influence of his mother on both his moral and political worldviews. Similarly, Antony Burgmans, a current chairman at Unilever, obstinately remains the Dutch countryman—as demonstrated in his dress, even in his walk—despite his elevated status. In both cases, these executives are comfortable displaying something of their origins, in a very different context, in order to connect with their followers.

Pride in one's roots, however, needs to be carefully handled. An organization whose CEO trumpets his heritage may well be intimidating or offensive to employees—and customers—who hail from elsewhere. This is one reason that so many authentic leaders work to stay curious and open to their followers' origins. We have worked for many years with a senior executive at a U.S. chemicals company. When he meets new team members, he always begins the conversations with the same question: "Tell me, how did you come to be the kind of guy you are now?" He has an almost insatiable interest in the complex factors that reveal where his direct reports come from because he understands that they (and the organization) will be more likely to succeed if they feel comfortable with their origins.

It is important for leaders to recognize that people frame their backgrounds in different ways and that there are differences among and within cultures. The salient characteristics that people use to define themselves include gender, class, race, status, and geography. And these may be expressed in many ways—through dress, speech, food, and even in different styles of walking. Given these variables, we should be cautious about making simple gen-

eralizations about status and societies, though we can draw some comparisons. For instance, some societies focus more on people's *ascribed status*—attributes that are perceived as innate to particular individuals. Others focus more on people's *achieved status*—attributes and roles that individuals attain through their own endeavors. At the most general level, American society places great emphasis on achieved status; the belief that where you're going outweighs where you've been lies close to the heart of the American dream. This is not to say that American society always acts according to this belief. Many commentators worry that the growing gap between rich and poor in the United States will decrease the prospects of social mobility for many. Even so, the idea that you will get your chance remains strong.

In other societies, elite status remains relatively fixed. For example, the French business elite comprises individuals educated in the grand *écoles*—often from all the same rather privileged backgrounds. In Asian societies, especially in China, family and geography remain highly relevant to people's understanding of their origins.

The variability of social status has important implications for leaders. The relative fluidity of American society, with an avowed emphasis on aspirations, is reflected in followers' attitudes toward their leaders. The Yale-educated Yankee aristocrat George W. Bush, for example, can pose as a regular guy from Texas and be believed because Americans, unlike Europeans, will accept that he can transform himself, and they will respect his aspiration to do so. That kind of metamorphosis simply wouldn't seem authentic in Britain; to the working-class voter, once an aristocrat, always an aristocrat.

Authentic leaders are comfortable in their skin; they know where they come from and who they are, and they know how to use their backgrounds to build a rapport with followers. Authentic leaders are not threatened by people with other origins; they welcome them. They are sensitive in communicating their origins and are aware of the differences in cultural attitudes toward their backgrounds. As Albert Einstein once said, "I speak to everyone in the same way, whether he is the garbageman or the president of the university." That statement reflects not only Einstein's comfort with himself but also with the more open society he chose to live in.

Conform—But Only Just Enough

When picking which aspects of themselves to reveal, and to whom, authentic leaders must judge just how much they need to conform to social and organizational norms. The challenge for these executives is to create just enough distance from the norms so followers will perceive the leaders as special and attractive. It's a very fine judgment call: Too much conformity can render leaders ineffective; too little can isolate them.

Graham, a dynamic sales guy in a fast-moving, Boston-based consumer goods business that we advise, provides a good illustration of what happens when a leader conforms too much. He was, and is, a very effective salesman, albeit in an old-fashioned, in-your-face kind of way. Some people found him brash. We thought he was very bright but a little too

A Man For All Seasons

Critics of British Prime Minister Tony Blair often contend that because of his desire to maximize his personal appeal, Blair moves between different, contradictory selves, lacking any central personal beliefs. We would argue, however, that Blair's winning ways stem not from sacrificing himself on the altar of electability but rather from his consummate skill in managing his authenticity. His behavior in a single dramatic week in early July 2005 exemplified how well he does this.

The week began with the Bob Geldof- and Bono-inspired Live 8 pop concert, an event to raise awareness about poverty in Africa. That was followed by Blair's trip to Singapore to lobby the International Olympic Committee, during which he danced a gleeful jig in public when the UK bid to land the 2012 Summer Games was successful. Also that week, he attended the G8 summit in Scotland, where he was able to make headway in addressing some of his most passionate concerns. Then Blair was urgently called back to London because of the terrorist bombings there.

In each of these instances, Blair played different roles to attract followers in different ways. Yet despite the different behaviors he exhibited, Blair was able to communicate a core self; he always connected powerfully with his known personal passions—for pop music, sport, the elimination of poverty in Africa, and the defeat of terrorism. Indeed, his performance that week wrung praise even from his critics. As Andrew Rawnsley wrote in the *Observer,* "People turn admiring when they observe [Blair's] capacity to read, articulate, and mould critical political moments."

forthright for the rather polite culture in which he worked. We urged his managers to give him a chance to grow, though, feeling that his high-energy leadership style could help bring about some much-needed change in the organization.

Graham moved from sales to marketing, then briefly into a production role at a factory, and then back into a senior marketing role. We were amazed and disappointed at the transformation in him when we saw him again. He spoke in nuanced phrases, and he carefully weighed his opinions before expressing them. He defended the status quo, remarking that our proposed change agenda for the organization was "a little simplistic." He even told us that he preferred the quiet corridors of headquarters to the hurly-burly of the marketplace. Graham had attempted to fit in to the dominant culture. Instead, he had merely conformed—and lost the chance to be an effective change leader.

Leaders may be profoundly self-aware and essentially authentic but not because of contemplation or analysis; they are not characters in some Woody Allen film.

At the other end of the spectrum, Disney's former president, Michael Ovitz, provides a cautionary tale about not conforming enough. As his boss, Michael Eisner, told Britain's *Telegraph* newspaper: "He started to rub people the wrong way. He was controversial, and it got worse as things went on....We'd all take a bus [at the corporate retreat] and he had a limousine; a special driver. Everyone had a walkie-talkie, and you heard [people] saying, 'Who was this guy, and why was he demanding this?' It was a bad vibe, let's put it that way." Ovitz lasted 14 months at Disney.

Authentic leaders know how to strike a balance between their distinctiveness and the cultures in which they operate. They do not immediately seek out head-on confrontations because they recognize that their survival as leaders (and, by extension, the survival of their initiatives) requires a measured introduction to, and adaptation of, the organization's established business networks and social relationships. To influence others, authentic leaders must first gain at least minimal acceptance as members of their organizations.

Perhaps the best example we've seen of this was the case of an executive we'll call Miyako, one of the first female finance directors in a Japanese company. Miyako was an outstanding leader. She helped the company modernize its accounting practices, brought in new talent, and succeeded in breaking up the cozy male cabal at the top. But even as she broke new ground, Miyako was careful to play the role expected of a Japanese woman in social settings. Her situation highlights the universal challenge that women face in establishing themselves as authentic leaders: Unless female leaders acknowledge and validate some of the prevailing organizational norms surrounding gender roles, they will find it hard to obtain acceptance from male followers.

In complex organizations, leaders can select the specific norms and elements they want to be identified with and those they need to reject. Greg Dyke, former director general of the BBC, one of the world's largest media organizations, understands very well how to play different organizational norms against one another. When he took over at the BBC in January 2000, employees across the organization were unhappy. Shortly after coming into the job, Dyke began poking his nose into offices and studios to understand the staffers' situation better. The more visits he made, the more he came to see that he could win broad acceptance for the major changes he needed to introduce by appealing to the organization's rank and file.

To that end, Dyke began phasing out the cars and chauffeurs that had been assigned to each member of his executive board. The program producers and support staffers were pleased by this move: In an organization with a strong egalitarian aspiration, the long line of expensive black cars parked outside headquarters had been a source of irritation—even alienation—for many staffers. Dyke also cut the large budget spent on outside consultants—in one year, it went from £22 million to £3 million—symbolizing the faith the director general had in the people already inside the organization. He was implicitly saying, "I know we have the talent here."

But it wasn't enough to identify with people near the bottom of the hierarchy. Unlike a typical CEO, Dyke needed the approval of the BBC's very powerful board of governors as well as its chairman at the time, the patrician Sir Christopher Bland. To win their acceptance, Dyke had to show respect for their established mores even while he was appealing to the antiestablishment instincts of most of his employees. For a while, he proved quite adept at managing this relationship. In public, at least, he always addressed Sir Christopher

and the other governors in formal language. He was also careful to rein in his own iconoclastic instincts. He moderated his language, dressed more formally than was his normal taste, and publicly emphasized those of his interests (notably museums and science education) that appealed most to the board. In the end, however, the political machinations of the BBC overwhelmed even Dyke, and he was forced to resign.

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Authenticity has often been thought of as the opposite of artifice—something that is straightforward, sincere, and uncomplicated. But that conception of authenticity is not only simplistic, it is also wrongheaded. Managers who assume that their authenticity stems from an uncontrolled expression of their inner selves will never become authentic leaders. Great leaders understand that their reputation for authenticity needs to be painstakingly earned and carefully managed.

The comic George Burns once said of honesty, "If you can fake that, you've got it made." He could equally have been talking about authenticity. Of course, authentic leaders don't really fake it to make it, but Burns's joke resonates precisely because it acknowledges what we might be reluctant to admit—that the expression of one's authentic self is a complicated and contrived act. All authentic leaders are complicated and contrived. Many Americans revere the late Ronald Reagan for his authenticity as president—but he was also the first professional actor to make it to the White House.

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