

What Does An Authentic Leader Look Like?



Authentic leaders are themselves instead of “portraying” themselves.

The most effective leaders lead from a platform of expertise. Not necessarily “subject matter experts,” effective leaders have sufficient familiarity with the functions they lead which allows them to serve as a consultant to their followers. They can, and do, serve as a sounding board when different methods of achieving the same objective or goal are developed within their team.

Authentic leaders seek out their own “blind spots.”

No leader is perfect. While that might sound self evident, the most effective leaders recognize that they can, do, and will make mistakes. These mistakes are not deliberate. More importantly, they’re willing to admit and “own” their mistakes and to learn from them. They’re willing to use their mistakes as teaching tools when coaching, training, and seeking to develop the talent of the people on their team.

Less effective leaders are often lacking the personal sense of identity and security that might allow them to accept, admit, own, and seek to learn from their missteps. They often appear to be experts at rationalizing their mistakes and can be prone to blaming others within their organizations for their own shortcomings and errors. An insidious side effect in these situations is that people who attempt to follow such leaders often adopt a similar approach to dealing with mistakes and errors. As a result, mistakes get “passed along” in the hope that either no one will notice or that responsibility can be laid at another’s doorstep. Consequently, learning does NOT take place and the same errors are made on a continual basis, to the detriment of the overall organization’s success.

Many, if not all, of us have experienced more than one leader in our careers. The effectiveness of our leaders can be influenced by a myriad of factors. Did they have too many direct reports in their span of control making it difficult for them to have time to interact with the individuals on their team? Did they actually have too few direct reports and find themselves “micromanaging” for lack of having better ways to invest their time?

Did they know how to delegate or were they prone to “dumping” assignments that were unclear, didn’t allow sufficient time for completion, or perhaps they forgot to delegate the authority necessary to match the responsibility of the task being delegated? Did they recognize that the richest communication takes place on a face-to-face basis or did they prefer to attempt leading complex initiatives via e-mail?

These are all competencies that can be learned and skills that can be developed. Of at least equal importance, however, are leadership behaviors that are more a function of the internal decisions and thought processes that differentiate above average leaders from others who occupy similar positions and hold similar titles.

Authentic leaders sincerely care about their team members.

They care about their team members as living, breathing human beings who have a life which includes, but is by no means limited to, what occurs in the workplace.

Authentic leaders remember and recognize, and sometimes help to celebrate, things that are important to the members of their team. Whether birthdays, anniversaries, weddings, or funerals, the most effective leaders acknowledge and embrace issues that revolve around work/life balance issues for their employees.

We lead by example. Few leaders I've ever met would take issue with that statement. As leaders it is important to realize and conduct themselves with the idea, "I'll get back what I give out." Asking employees to accommodate the needs of the organization works best in those situations where the leader has demonstrated a willingness to accommodate some of the important life events of their employees.

Authentic leaders abhor fear.

People who feel good about themselves do higher quality work and are more productive. People who are afraid do lower quality work and less of it. People who are afraid are by definition risk averse and not likely to attempt anything remotely innovative or to willingly think "outside the box". Innovation and creativity WILL result in failure at times. When failure is an opportunity for learning to take place, good things happen. When, however, failure is an opportunity to assign blame and determine punishment, not much progress occurs.

On a more personal level, the most effective leaders themselves are not controlled by fear— meaning, simply, that they understand the mission of their organization and embrace it, they identify with the vision and values of the organization they represent, they have a clear understanding of their role, responsibilities, levels of decision making authority, and work professionally not only within their own area, but with those parts of the organization that they serve as well as those areas that serve them.

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The most effective leaders are also not afraid to challenge the way they or their team currently do business or, when the opportunity arises, to challenge the processes of the larger organization—not in the sense of "grandstanding" or advancing a hidden, personal agenda, but to challenge in the sense of not being overly susceptible to "groupthink" when their knowledge, skills, abilities, and judgment suggest to them that change would be beneficial.

In the final analysis, each leader is left to answer the question individually: "How authentic is my leadership?" The answer might lead to "what's next?" in the personal development of leadership effectiveness.

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