

How do I look?

Authenticity – or the way others see us

by Boudewijn Arts and Neeraj Sagar

Especially in uncertain times – in times of change and crisis – people look to leading figures to provide an anchor and a sense of direction. Can authentic leadership deliver on these expectations? We take a closer look.

“I’m actually quite different but I only get to be myself once in a while,” says the character Ada in a play by the Austro-Hungarian writer Ödön von Horváth. People presenting themselves differently from the way they really are – or feel themselves to be – is not just a contemporary phenomenon. Misrepresentation of personality – whether the person involved is playing power games or acting out of weakness – is a theme as old as humanity itself, the stuff of dramas from antiquity to the present day. In today’s Internet age anyone can use this virtual stage to present themselves in various guises at whim: they can entirely reinvent themselves as an imaginary person with the attributes of their choice – not just the external characteristics but the inner disposition, too. Yet at the same time the Internet’s unsparingly ubiquitous presence is what brings real or perceived human misdemeanors into the public arena. On the Web, the supposed failures of personalities in positions of responsibility – in politics, business or social institutions – create instant news, attracting global condemnation in a matter of seconds.

In many people these developments generate a feeling – and it is often just that, a subjective response – of no longer being able to trust the elite groups who lead our societies. This loss of trust has been compounded by numerous political and economic crises – and heightened by the sheer speed and intensity of the changes sweeping through almost every sphere of contemporary life. Uncertainty reigns, creating a growing desire for things that are genuine, predictable, reliable. In an ever more complex and confusing environment, people want rules and direction and in both their social and professional environments they are looking for reliable leadership – leadership that provides orientation, marking out a clear pathway through challenging times.

The quest for authenticity

The buzzword here is authentic leadership. Scarcely any other leadership attribute is currently more widely debated and regarded as so desirable. Yet opinions vary as to what precisely constitutes authenticity, truth or genuineness in a position of responsibility – whether this is the jovial politician, the senior executive who’s able to show emotions or even weaknesses now and then, or the blustering corporate patriarch. Because what is perceived as undisguised and genuine depends not only on the sender of such psychological messages but also on the receiver. Moreover, requiring of a leader that they should simply “be themselves” seems to us rather naïve. Who really knows, after all, exactly who they are? And in any case leadership roles in particular are bound up with certain expectations around image and behavior – expectations that are clearly different from those prevailing within, say, a family or a sports club.

As we see it, authentic leadership needs to fulfill three key parameters.

- It must be founded on the vision and values of a leading figure.
- It must be consistent with the identity of the leader in question.
- It must be sustainable and reliable.

“Authentic leadership renews and strengthens the ‘psychological contract’ between the company, its leaders and the employees.”

The ultimate example of leadership behavior of this kind – a role model that moved people everywhere and inspired global admiration – was Nelson Mandela. His vision of the multi-ethnic state of South Africa, the rainbow nation, was based on values such as equality, forgiveness between apartheid’s victims and perpetrators, and cooperation. This leadership inspired a renewed dynamism within Mandela’s own nation – and created an inspirational vision for other nations, too.

Authentic leadership inspires identification

Because authentic leadership inspires identification. In a business context it fosters team spirit, nurtures employees’ sense of pride in their company, and generates loyalty and a willingness to be involved. It renews and strengthens the “psychological contract” between the company and/or its leaders and the employees. This implicit contract is ultimately more important, in terms of impact, than any formal contract of employment. It contains the mutual unwritten expectations and obligations connecting employees, managers and the business itself. When sustained by relationships of mutual trust, this contract lays the foundations for a healthy and successful organization. A key leadership goal in this context is to inspire other people to take action. Nowadays successful business leadership no longer works via orders and obedience; instead it is based on the voluntary participation of those being led – which in the business environment means the employees. Any manager who does not operate persuasively and credibly in this setting, who comes across as weak or incompetent or fails to keep promises, will quickly run into problems. Because then the implicit contract is violated, weakening the motivation, loyalty and commitment of the team and ultimately leading to their resignation – be it internal or actual.

But what exactly does “authentic leadership” mean? Well, let’s start by pinning down what it isn’t. It isn’t a method. Particularly in a business environment, employees generally have a very sharp instinct for when a show of “authenticity” from a manager is mere posturing. And in crisis situations such artificial façades are the first to collapse. Real authenticity characterizes a person’s whole attitude to life, which of course has

a crucial impact on a successful leadership style. Or as a highly regarded family entrepreneur once put it: “Someone truly striving to work and live in a calm and self-guided way, drawing on their inner strength and insight, will come across as authentic.”

Consistency is a defining attribute of authentic behavior. Authenticity is all of a piece: the walk matches the talk. Authentic individuals are self-aware, but also remain true to themselves in difficult circumstances, sticking to their beliefs under pressure and acting accordingly. They are self-determined, with an intuitive feeling for what’s right and wrong – and they follow their intuition. A high degree of inner independence helps them in crisis situations – even when they have to take unpopular measures and see them through.

The components of authenticity

An independent personality of this kind acts in ways that are determined less by external influences and trends than by their own identity. A few years back, American social psychologists Michael Kernis and Brian Goldman identified four key criteria for an authentic personality on the basis of their research:

Awareness – Authentic individuals have developed an in-depth understanding of how their own personalities work; they know their strengths and weaknesses, the feelings and motivations that drive particular modes of behavior. Self-scrutiny has brought them to a place where they can experience and influence their own actions and behaviors consciously.

Unbiased processing – Authentic people are honest with themselves and work to achieve a self-assessment that is as realistic as possible. This also includes taking on board and processing negative or unpleasant feedback from their environment.

Behavior – Authentic behavior reflects an awareness of the true self, including a willingness to accept and work with negative aspects of the personality, rather than denying their existence.

Relational orientation – Authentic individuals have a clearly defined core set of values and consistently operate in relation to these values. They set priorities for themselves and stick to them – even in situations where this might prove disadvantageous. In leadership terms this means that a leader stands by his or her decision, refusing to make compromises in order to secure short-term personal gains. It is through this aspect of authenticity that leaders can deliver on expectations that they should provide guidance to their teams.

The last of these attributes in particular stands out as crucially important in the business environment. Authentic behavior is often linked with personal identity (“Be yourself!”), yet in a management context this is far less important than the link with a personal system of values. On the one hand, how some-

one sees their own identity will change over the course of time and as a result of their experiences. On the other, by no means all facets of the individual personality are called into play in a professional context – indeed in some circumstances this might even prove a hindrance. Values, motivations and attitudes, by contrast, form the deeper foundation, the core of the individual personality, and are less subject to change. They provide the compass for personal and professional decisions; they form the basis of integrity and reliability. They make an individual predictable – in a positive way – and ensure that others will accept and value this individual’s leadership role.

A key leadership competency

The ability to act authentically and to be perceived as acting authentically by those around you therefore meets all the criteria of a key leadership competency on an ethical and emotional level. At Egon Zehnder we have been investigating and assessing these competencies for many years. In our experience, individuals with outstanding potential regularly score very highly on three key characteristics: they possess strategic vision, they are results-oriented and they proactively shape change processes. So where does the capacity for authentic leadership fit within this context? Our conclusion is that it clearly performs an overarching, integrative function. Because it is only when a high potential can convince his or her team, fire their enthusiasm for common goals and guide them to take the necessary action, that he or she will be able to develop his or her specific competencies to the full. And the more this individual is perceived not just as highly qualified but also as trustworthy, reliable and a person of integrity, the more successful he or she will be.

Here we have touched upon another key aspect of authentic leadership. Authenticity and authentic action also require from leaders in particular the ability to see themselves as others see them. After all, image and self-image do not necessarily always agree. Someone who perceives themselves as being and acting authentically might be perceived by those around them merely as disagreeable, or as an ineffective waverer who is not up to the job.

“The more genuine the better” is not a sure-fire recipe for success. Especially for someone in a leadership role, parading all their moods and doubts openly, or even indulging in public self-criticism – be it justified or not – is likely to make their colleagues and co-workers doubt their fitness for the role. The key principle here is not

that an executive has to say everything he or she thinks – but that what he or she does say should in every case be true.

Because every leadership role brings with it certain expectations. This, indeed, is one of the characteristics that define an effective manager: the ability to adapt to various environments without denying their own identity in the process. They present themselves differently to employees than to shareholders or clients or within the executive team. This has nothing to do with dissimulation. According to the specific environment and agenda they send out different signals: in the executive suite – confident, effective, powerful; among employees – understanding, encouraging, supportive. All of this remains authentic if every role contains elements of their true-self, founded on their personal core values. Situation-appropriate behavior is a sign not of self-compromise but of social competence.

Indeed Rob Goffee and Gareth Jones, organizational experts at the London Business School, emphatically urge leaders to keep their authenticity under control. They should build it up carefully, they say – and deploy it carefully, too. Authenticity in leadership, in their view, only works when it is first and foremost rationally driven.

Reconciling self-image and public image

A 360-degree feedback program, properly integrated within an organization’s management development system, offers an effective way of achieving optimum congruity between self-image and public image in a business context. Managers can use this feedback on how others perceive them to develop their understanding of their own personality. Frank discussions with friends and family can yield further assessments of an individual’s public image, helping them to ensure that their authentic personality and values are coming across effectively.

Any decision-maker in the public gaze must keep a watchful eye on the impression they make and the image they present, and think carefully about the messages they aim to send out – without abandoning the gold standard of authentic behavior that remains consistent and true to their personal principles. The key is for each individual to find the right role, to stand by their convictions, and to resist the imposition of any alien values.



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