

You can't have authentic leadership without this one crucial thing...



Everyone's looking for authentic leadership.

Authentic leaders are effective, self-aware and inspiring. They behave in a way that engenders trust, defend their people, challenge the *status quo* and take ownership and responsibility for mistakes.

They don't attempt to emulate other leaders, but find their own path since, as Dr Meredith Belbin says:

“Individuals do not make good carbon copies of one another but only pale shadows whenever they attempt to imitate.”¹

Once that leader is in situ, living those leadership behaviours and values every day, everything else falls into place. Managers are more engaged and the effect trickles down through the company, boosting profits, wellbeing and every other *feel-good* factor under the sun.

So why is it so difficult to find?

With fewer than 1 in 6 employees engaged at work, it's no secret that leadership has a huge role to play in that figure. The *Wall Street Journal* reports that about half of employees surveyed had left a job to get away from their manager.²

Authenticity is about much more than just being yourself.

So where is it all going wrong?

Let's take a step back and re-examine what we mean, because...

Authenticity is about much more than just being yourself.

'Being yourself' requires very little effort – it doesn't need much preparation. But authenticity is something quite different – something you have to work for. It's active, a choice – it means being committed to learning about yourself and making changes to the way you think and behave, based on what you find.

It comes from taking the time to get to know yourself.

With the best of intentions, leaders can be focused on direction and vision, rather than getting to grips with matters closer to home. As a leader, perhaps you don't consider you have time for navel-gazing. But it's a false economy.

Understanding your lens on the world is a leadership duty you owe to everyone who follows you, because it influences what you say and do, often without you realising it. As Anaïs Nin famously said:

"We don't see the world as it is, we see it as we are."

The data only tells us one thing...

We know leaders need to get to get to know themselves before they can have a chance of improving relationships and building engaged, high-performing teams. And that their failure to do so materially damages businesses.

IBM's 2014 study suggested that many leaders overestimated how well they were connecting with their staff. The recommendation? "Introspection is hard – and sometimes painful – but all leaders need an honest assessment of their own strengths and weaknesses."³

Leaders, it's about connecting with those around you.

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“To be authentic is to be the same person to others as you are to yourself. In part that entails paying attention to what others think of you, particularly people whose opinions you esteem and who will be candid in their feedback.”

– Harvard Business Review, *The Focused Leader*, December 2013

There's no point reflecting in a vacuum. Self-reporting personality tests can reflect your own world view back at you, but this isn't good enough. If you want to be authentic, you need to grow. That means learning from others – asking others what they think, and being prepared to hear the truth.

As a leader, it can be difficult to understand where things are going wrong, and what others want from you, but it's a crucial learning opportunity. By asking for Team Role feedback, you can encourage employees to articulate an honest assessment of your strengths and weaknesses in leadership, in a safe, constructive framework.

Are you communicating well with senior managers, but failing to reach team leaders? Is there a clash between your leadership style and the organizational culture at large?

It's about acting on what you discover – and taking it to every level of your organization.

Once you're armed with knowledge, it all comes down to what you do with it. It's not enough for a few departments to toy with the idea, says Harvard Business Review.⁴ Leaders need to make the development of a strengths-based culture a strategic priority.

The most useful contribution someone can make is an authentic one.

But there's more. Real honesty and transparency means talking about weaknesses.

We know that focusing on strengths increases engagement, so why talk about weakness? Because authenticity means addressing weakness – in yourself and others. How honest can any relationship be if you're only talking about the good and not the bad?

Bill George, the creator of the 'authentic leadership' fielded criticism that leaders "are often locked into a rigid sense of themselves, much like their immature teenage selves", saying: "This is the antithesis of authentic leaders [...] They don't hide behind their flaws; instead, they seek to understand them."⁵

Dr Belbin tells us that, in Belbin terms, the most useful contribution someone can make is an authentic one:

"That means discovering your best Team Role and then acting in a way that makes it easy for others to understand what to expect from you. Some people model themselves as a paragon of virtue. While sounding fine, is that person fully credible? Team Roles have both typical strengths and allowable weaknesses. Weaknesses become 'allowable' only where the associated strength makes a recognised and valued contribution. Someone claiming no weaknesses becomes suspect. That person may equally have no strengths."

There's little point in taking ownership for individual mistakes if you don't acknowledge the fault-line underneath. That you're more capable at some things than others, and that you might need support from colleagues to cover the gaps. You're stronger if you know where those fault-lines are, and how you're going to tackle them. **So are your people.**

Weakness is not a dirty word.

“When you can truly understand how others experience your behavior, without defending or judging, you then have the ability to produce a breakthrough in your leadership and team. Everything starts with your self-awareness. You cannot take charge without taking accountability, and you cannot take accountability without understanding how you avoid it.”

– Loretta Malandro, *Fearless Leadership: How To Overcome Behavioral Blind Spots and Transform Your Organization*

You see, ‘weakness’ is not a dirty word.

It’s how we use the concept that counts.

Competencies make the assumption that one person has to be able to do everything to a required standard, so in a competency-based culture, discussing shortcomings is tantamount to a character assassination, which will surely demotivate and disengage. But when addressed effectively, it can be a path to authenticity. It's being able to focus your efforts and work to your strengths, to multiply engagement levels. It's keeping responsibility for the rest, too – valuing the skills others have and collaborating to get the best result for everyone.

Did you know?

99% of customers we surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that Belbin increased individuals’ self-understanding.

87% of our accredited customers make use of Observer Assessments (Team Role feedback from colleagues).

52% of them use Belbin with senior management and 29%, at CEO or executive level, because they trust Belbin to tell the truth at every level of the organization.

You can focus exclusively on strengths, or you can be truly authentic.

Weaknesses don't turn into strengths.

The research shows that weaknesses never develop into strengths, while strengths have the potential to develop indefinitely. The advice is not to ignore weaknesses, but to minimize weaknesses and maximize strengths.

And if weaknesses are a learning opportunity for leaders, it's no different for those you lead. If you admit weakness in yourself, denying it in others for fear of hurting feelings or causing offence, is dishonest. It's inauthentic.

At Belbin, we've always said that it's okay not to be all things to all people. We've always said that with strengths come associated weaknesses – they're part of the package.

We address weaknesses sensitively and constructively, but we do insist on bringing them into the conversation, because we know they have the power to make or break individual and team success.

When it comes to yourself and those around you, you can focus exclusively on strengths, or you can be truly authentic. But you can't do both.

A bit about our authors:

With 11 years at Belbin and an MPhil in English from the University of Cambridge under her belt, Victoria heads up the Research & Development team. On the research side, her role includes writing articles, web content and literature reviews, and commissioning and overseeing research projects. On the development side, Victoria oversees the design, development and maintenance of the Belbin web application and report delivery system, and project manages the development of new products. We keep her busy.

At 91, Dr Meredith Belbin keeps an active interest in all our R&D here at Belbin and is always ready with an opinion, thought or idea (or several).

References.

¹ “Team Roles at Work”, Dr R. Meredith Belbin, 1993

² <https://blogs.wsj.com/atwork/2015/04/02/what-do-workers-want-from-the-boss/>

³ “Myths, exaggerations and uncomfortable truths: The real story behind Millennials in the workplace”, IBM, 2014

⁴ “Developing Employees’ Strengths Boosts Sales, Profit, and Engagement”, Harvard Business Review, September 2016

⁵ The Truth About Authentic Leaders,”, Bill George, Harvard Business School Working Knowledge, July 2016

Belbin Team Roles is the language of teams, enabling individuals to be able to project and talk about their behavioural strengths in a productive, safe and non-confrontational way.

By using Belbin, individuals have a greater self-understanding of their strengths, which leads to more effective communication between colleagues and managers. Great teams can be put together, existing teams can be understood and improved, and everyone can feel that they are making a difference in the workplace.

Contact us to discuss how we can help you, your teams and organisation.

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