

# Authentic Leadership:

## *What is it? Do I have it? How do I get it?*

The terms “authentic leader”, or “authentic conversations”, or “authentic manager” show up in much of the business media these days. The idea is, if you don’t have it, you’re missing out. So what does it really mean, being authentic?

It’s all about noticing what’s going on inside of ourselves, and acknowledging that instead of ignoring it, projecting it onto someone else, or blaming others for what we’re feeling. Sounds pretty mushy. Yet, leaders who do admit to not knowing, or not feeling comfortable, or feeling sad actually draw more people to them because they’re being real. That’s authenticity. When that happens, people don’t have to wonder if the feeling they’re picking up on in their boss is real or imagined. They know. When leaders own what they are dealing with inside themselves, they unknowingly give others permission to do the same. They make it safe to tell them the truth, and that’s worth its weight in gold. Think about how many times we hold back what we want to tell our managers because we don’t think they will understand, or we’ll be seen as weak, or they won’t listen because they already know.

When we walk on eggshells around our manager because we’re not sure what’s up—and something is—we make up our own story about what is going on and then make decisions and take action based on our perception of what we **think** is going on. Most of the time it’s far from the truth of what’s really happening. So our reactive decisions and actions about what needs to be done are often off base. Multiply that by each manager’s direct reports, and you can begin to imagine how much more effective our workplaces could be if our leaders actually took the lead in being authentic.

The problem is, our business leaders aren’t generally rewarded for their authenticity. They’re rewarded for results, which is not a bad thing. Here’s the pearl of wisdom: what many leaders don’t realize is that if they were more authentic in who they are being, they would actually get more and better results. Think what would happen if your boss told you how uncomfortable she was with how the two of you communicated and wanted to begin working on changing that. Think what would happen if your boss talked to you about the tension he felt and wanted to address because of something you said while drinking with your department at an after work get-together. When we don’t acknowledge how we’re affected, we still feel it, and that suppressed feeling oozes out in gossip or blaming, which also takes us away from getting results.

We think people don’t know what we’re feeling, but they do. The Arbinger Institute in their book, Leadership and Self Deception, says it this way: “When you have a problem, the people at work know it; your spouse knows it; your mother-in-law knows it. I bet even your neighbors know it. The problem is that **you** don’t know it.” And therein lies the key. The more you know about yourself, the more authentic you can be, even if it’s to say, “I don’t know yet what’s eating at me, but something feels off.”

Authenticity is about being willing to look at yourself before blaming someone else for poor results, no matter how right you think you are. Check in with your emotions to see what’s going on. If you are one of those people who finds yourself saying, “I don’t know what I’m feeling”, use your body as a source of your emotional information. I’ll give you an example. A client of mine came to me very



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upset with a manager on her staff. This manager had not discussed, let alone reprimanded, an employee who had struck another employee. My client was not at the same location as her manager, so her communication with her manager was over the telephone, and she had had one phone call with him regarding this incident. She was finding more and more fault with this manager, making him wrong and bad for not handling the situation immediately and letting her know. When I asked her how she was feeling about all of this, she replied that she didn't know. So I then asked her where in her body she was feeling anything as we talked. She stopped and said there was something in her throat. I asked her to go to her throat and see what thoughts or feelings came up. She did and heard herself say internally, "I can't talk, because I can only go so far or he won't listen to me." When she said it out loud, she realized she said this to herself a lot. It didn't just happen with this manager, but with other people as well. Realizing this years-old thought pattern and talking about it empowered her to start asking for what she really wanted, not only from this manager but others as well. She called her manager, and in discussing her concerns, discovered the manager did not know how to address the situation, so he had avoided it. Together they figured out what to do.

By looking at herself and understanding what she was bringing to the situation, she was able to talk to him from a different perspective. When she felt he was bad and wrong, he picked that up and avoided talking with her. Who wants to feel bad and wrong? No matter what we're doing on the outside, people respond primarily to how we're feeling about them on the inside. Her feelings about him had actually contributed to creating the very thing she didn't want—that he would avoid her and not listen to her. When she was able to approach him differently, she made it safe for him to tell the truth. She still held him accountable, but she didn't make him bad or wrong.

Authenticity is not about spewing our anger onto someone or holding hands and singing Kumbayah under the guise of saying this is who I am. It's about figuring out what's going on in us and then acknowledging that as we get into discussions. Those become discussions that matter, and people are pulled to those like magnets. When you're holding everything inside, people follow you, if at all, only through force or threat of force. But that's not leadership. That's coercion. The leaders people choose to follow are the leaders who acknowledge where they are so we don't have to wonder.



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