

The Authentic Executive: The Truth About Behavior Change

Author: Kevin Klinvex

Introduction

For years, executives have been coached to improve their behavior. Many participate in comprehensive leadership training. While books and training can be helpful, they rarely result in long-term behavior change because the underlying “drivers” of behavior are not addressed.

Overview

What are the drivers of our behavior? The quick answer is that they are hidden deep in a place that many people choose not to visit – *the secret self*. To get there, it is helpful to become aware of your *public self* and your *private self*. The journey to understanding these personas is challenging, but the result can be powerful.

In the end, the goal of this journey is lifelong behavior change through *authenticity*. Authentic executives understand what is driving their behavior and the affect their behavior has on others. They are free to dispel irrational beliefs and worries and can embrace new and improved paths. Some of the characteristics of authentic leaders include:

- **Other focused:** It is not about them. They are focused on the success of others and the organization.
- **Integrity:** They have a “True North” and do not change their values to suit the situation.
- **Aware:** They understand their drivers, strengths and imperfections.
- **Inspired by others:** They are inspired, not intimidated, by others’ success.
- **Invite ideas:** People at all levels feel comfortable sharing ideas with them.

Authentic executives are the most believable, credible, influential and productive leaders in any organization. Many become transformational leaders, inspiring others. The first step in the journey toward authenticity is to explore the three parts of “self.”

The Public Self

This is the self that your neighbors and co-workers see. The public self tries to be pragmatic. It is constantly changing as it monitors the environment and presents an image it deems “appropriate.” When you interact with someone at a party, you are seeing their public self. When you talk to your neighbor at the mailbox, you are presenting your public self. While some people don’t care what public image they present, most people simply want to be seen as likable, friendly and competent.

The Private Self

The private self is much closer to one’s actual personality. Our family members know all about our private self. The private self can be moody, irritable and act in ways that the public self would not want revealed. We all have those moments where we would be uncomfortable if our “coworkers could see us now.” Most of these behaviors are innocent and fun, but for some people, these behaviors are extreme and can be destructive.

The Secret Self

Finally, there is the secret self. The secret self holds the keys that drive our behavior because it contains the “truth” about our values, beliefs, needs and fears. The foundation of our secret self was built when we were children through a combination of genes and environment. For some of us, it is a familiar friend. It is the house we grew up in and we know every room. We visit it daily and keep it in order. We know what is there and we don’t allow unwelcomed guests to stay. For others, it is a locked door with a “do not enter” sign. For these people, self-awareness is blurry and change is difficult. These individuals do not know what drives them. If their secret self is unhealthy, it is likely going to stay that way.

As you read through the three unhealthy profiles below, observe how one's drivers affect their behavior.

The Intimidator: This is a domineering executive who suffers from a poor self-concept, high levels of worry and feelings of paranoia. He demands respect from his staff and does not easily tolerate being questioned by others. This person worries about perception and tries to control others. He is intimidated by people he perceives as more competent and interprets symbolic acts, such as how he is addressed, where he sits, who he is seen with, as highly important. He rarely says the words, "I don't know" for fear that he will look incompetent and he has a need to control every situation so he is never caught off-guard. This leader is often much more concerned about controlling his success than about the success of the organization.

The Workaholic: This is an exhausted executive who has an insatiable need to work and achieve. Many executives like this have been highly achievement driven since they were kids. All their lives they have had the bar set high and received recognition and feelings of satisfaction based on making the grade, hitting the homerun, being the "go to" person. It is now all they know. They have lost balance and need perspective.

The Competent Dictator: This executive is intelligent, truly confident and full of passion for his own ideas. There is no doubt in his mind that he is smarter, more creative and more capable than everyone else. He doesn't particularly care what others think of him, and he hates to be questioned because it's annoying and a waste of time. He believes that his exceptional ability gives him license to be intolerant of other people. He has little ability to empathize with or listen to people who are not like him and has little patience for people who "don't get it."

The point of the above descriptions is not to describe every dysfunctional executive trait, but rather to show a few examples of how behaviors are driven from our core values, beliefs, fears and needs.

Signs of an Unhealthy Secret Self

One of the telltale signs that a person's secret self is in an unhealthy state is that they drain your energy and diminish

your passion or enthusiasm. In other words, you feel worse after you talk to them. You may feel emotionally tired, manipulated, put-down, intimidated, less excited and less positive. In essence, they are sucking energy from you rather than motivating you to achieve something great.

I recall meeting with a particular senior executive in a Fortune 100 company. After waiting outside his door for 30 minutes, his assistant walked me into his office. He motioned for me to sit down at a beautiful mahogany conference table. He sat down across from me and impatiently, asked me what I wanted. I reminded him of the purpose for our meeting. He looked at me disapprovingly and proceeded to test my knowledge about obscure civil war generals. He went on to review his bio with me including a recount of his days at Harvard. I came to learn that most people thought of this executive as arrogant, pompous, demeaning and generally unpleasant. He didn't know how to be authentic. He was lost. He had no idea how he was being perceived. It was sad to watch. Eventually, he was dismissed but how much damage had already been done?

The Effect of a Healthy Secret Self

On the other hand, people with healthy secret selves are fully believable. They can fill you up and make you feel valuable and inspired because their focus is on you and not themselves.

I'll never forget my first week of college. Knowing almost no one, I was standing in a long lunch line filled with groups of students laughing and talking. A man who appeared to be in his early 50's approached me and struck up a conversation. The entire time I waited in line, he talked with me about the school and possible groups, activities and associations that I might want to join. He asked me questions and made me feel good about my future. As he left me and wished me well, a student came over asked me if I knew the man who had just spent 15 minutes talking to me. I said, "no." He then explained that he was one of the top physicists in the world. His work was recognized around the globe and was a staple in many textbooks and journals. Interestingly, he felt no need to demonstrate his clear intellectual superiority or his importance. He simply

introduced himself as Anthony, one of the faculty members and then focused on helping me. In 15 minutes he taught me a lesson I have kept with me all my life.

Authenticity Doesn't Mean Nice

Don't assume that having a healthy secret self, means that you are always positive, friendly and inspiring. Being a successful executive is extremely difficult. If it were easy, everyone would be one. The workload and pressure to make good decisions is significant.

There are clearly times when executives must take a tough stand, state a course of action and make it clear that "the hill will be taken." During these times, they are not necessarily trying to be "nice." There is a defined objective and it must be accomplished. But that is okay and even expected. The authentic executive has earned the trust of their peers and subordinates. They understand that their actions are not about selfish ego but rather about doing what is needed and right.

The Real Power of Authenticity

People like the physicist generally have a secret self, private self and public self that are healthy, congruent and grounded – they are *authentic*. From a practical business perspective they have a natural power to be believable, to influence others, to be respected and to last longer in high-pressure situations. From a personal perspective, they make better spouses, parents and friends because of their honesty and transparent nature. They have such a strong sense of self that they are free to be in the moment and focused on what is important. They are not imprisoned and manipulated by those gnawing voices asking, "How does this make me look? What will others say?" Most importantly, they are free to give themselves fully to others because, "it is not about them." In striving to be authentic rather than impressive, they become fully believable. They read like an open book, with no need to spin their words or shade the truth. They are free to build others up, ask for help, admit they are wrong, take a lesser position, give credit where credit is due, admire other's accomplishments and even laugh at themselves. As a leader, they can become inspiring and influential, not because of their position, but because of their ideas and authenticity.

Leadership and Executive Assessment

In-depth leadership and executive assessment is a key that unlocks the door to the Secret Self. The room is open and the assessor is permitted to look around. The drivers of behavior are there. The assessor observes them and observes how they interact with other parts of the personality. This is a great privilege and not something to be taken lightly.

Feeding this information back to the leader can be inspiring. For some executives, they have the first glimpse at their drivers. They have the foundational information to make positive changes.

From a hiring/selection perspective, the assessment process is invaluable in identifying the drivers in one's makeup that will likely positively and negatively affect future job performance.