

To Lead Authentically, Leaders Must First Know Themselves

1 September 2015 by David Grossman — 5 Comments

Early in my career, I was fortunate to work with some incredibly inspiring leaders who brought out the best in me. I gravitated toward them because of how they made me feel. I trusted them because they were genuine, authentic, and because they demonstrated much more confidence in me than I had in myself. They stood for my potential, which was incredibly motivating for me as a 20-something professional, and only spurred me on to be even better.

When it was my chance to lead, I was determined to lead in a similarly authentic way. I tried to take the best strategies from each of them. After all, imitation is the greatest form of flattery. Still, I made my share of mistakes as a new leader, and then I realized an important lesson: Leading authentically isn't about being like someone else. Instead, it's about knowing yourself and being who you are. Sure, you can "try on" strategies that work for others. Yet in the end, leading authentically is about finding what works best for you. And when you are genuine, you have "full power," which is what the Greek root of authentic—*authentico*—truly means.



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Finding the authentic voice

As communication professionals, part of our role is helping the talented leaders we work with find their own authentic voice, and thus build trust with their teams.

We need to show leaders how to avoid the trap I fell into as a younger leader, and one that I see many new leaders falling into today. Leaders need to know that they need don't need to be "like" someone else and/or lead in a certain way. There's no magic formula to authentic leadership or a certain "type" who's most effective.

Here are the three components I see as part of authentic leadership:

- **Know who you are.** This is about having an objective understanding of your personality, desires, motives, and strengths/weaknesses.
- **Act in ways that are consistent with who you are.** This means behaving in ways that are in sync with your values instead of simply trying to please others or get something from others.

- **Be genuine.** Qualities here include sincerity, openness and truth, along with a willingness to allow others to see the real you. This is also about having an orientation toward others and demonstrating great respect and understanding of your audience.

Where communication professionals can add value

Communication professionals can help leaders find their authentic voice and express it in their communications. This authenticity is as much about words as it is about actions, as we help them be more of who they are in how they communicate.

Learn more about the importance of leadership authenticity in David Grossman's session at the 2016 IABC World Conference.

For many of the leaders we support, the first need is to help them understand the importance of authenticity, and how it builds trust. "This isn't about me," many leaders will say. True. My response: It's not about you in an egotistical way; it is about you to the extent that you're demonstrating who you are, your values, and the higher purpose you serve. All of that will benefit your audience—the very people who are working to achieve your organizational goals.

Employees want a leader who is real and is aware of (and honest about) his or her strengths and weaknesses. They don't want a leader who's like a Hollywood movie set—well-packaged on the outside with nothing behind it on the inside.

What does authenticity look like?

I saw this play out recently in my work with John Greisch, CEO of Hill-Rom, a medical technology provider. Greisch admitted to me that he used to "intensely dislike" public speaking. Yet as his career progressed, he understood the value of communication and recognized he needed to be authentic and the one out front, regardless of how uncomfortable he may have been. The tall, imposing CEO also needed to be cognizant of his large, possibly intimidating stature, and work hard to be as approachable as possible.

By the numbers

BlessingWhite has found that trust in executives can have **more than twice** the impact on engagement as trust in immediate managers. However, employees are more likely to trust their immediate managers than the executives in the organization.

"Pushing me out of my comfort zone, while at the same time maintaining my personal style and credibility, has allowed me to constantly improve my effectiveness as a communicator," Greisch says.

His approach and constant hard work have paid off. Greisch has received one of the top communication effectiveness scores by his employees recorded on the **Internal Communication Climate Index**. The Index measures overall communication system health, including assessing the CEO and other senior leaders. He received high marks for explaining the company's mission, vision, values, strategies and cultural

commitments, and for being an effective communicator. He is also recognized by employees for regularly sharing his perspective in his own blog (which he writes himself) and town halls, and bringing a sense of fun to the workplace.

Ron Childress, vice president of the Federal Employee Program (FEP) at the health insurance company Anthem, makes a point to send handwritten notes to employees who go the extra mile for members and teammates. “I’m a competitive person and I want us to be the best so I’m always challenging the team to find ways to be even better,” he says. “When I see people doing great things, I want them to know I notice it and appreciate them for making a difference.”

This is one of many ways Childress purposefully communicates what he values. Not surprisingly, his organization’s employee engagement scores are the highest in the company and his Internal Communication Climate Index scores rank among the highest for any of the senior leaders measured. Childress earned the highest marks for making sure employees know about changes, being trustworthy, and being open to feedback from employees.

Build a platform for authenticity

In addition to having leaders bring their authentic selves to their work, packing a leader’s narrative into a platform can also be extremely effective. A platform can help leaders codify who they are and what’s important. This is a management and communication tool for leaders and especially useful for those who are new in position, new to the company, and/or leading organizations through significant change. The platform helps leaders establish a line of sight to what they care about so employees know what’s expected and are in the best position to take action and deliver results.

A leader’s platform is the core set of messages and personalized stories that capture his or her business goals, case for change and overall narrative along with his or her personal strengths, style, and expectations. It’s used by leaders (and their communications teams) in formal and every day communications to drive alignment and accelerate performance.

The platform should address the most common questions employees have for leaders, including:

- How did you get to where you are?
- How do you want people to know you? What makes you tick?
- What people or experiences in your career have had the greatest impact on you?
- What are your expectations of employees?
- What should they expect of you?
- On what do you want to put a stake in the ground?
- What’s your vision? Why should various audiences believe in you and the vision?
- Who are we and what do we do?
- What are our business goals? Business strategies?
- What initiatives will drive the business today? In the future?
- What are the new behaviors you expect employees to perform successfully to achieve your results? How will we get the results needed?

By the numbers

High levels of trust in leaders correlate with higher employee engagement and positive business results. Research from the **Great Place to Work Institute** shows that organizations that invest in assessing the level of trust and developing a workplace that addresses trust and employee engagement have seen the following benefits:

- 87% less likely for employees to leave the organization
- 50% fewer sick days for employees
- 19% greater operating margin
- 18% greater productivity
- 16% greater profit margin
- 12% greater customer loyalty
- 2.6 times the earning-per-share growth

- What does success look like?
- How will we measure success?
- What needs to change to make this happen?

Authenticity means understanding yourself

For many leaders, the answers to these questions—especially the questions about their personal style, motivation and goals—require significant reflection. A leader who hasn't done much work understanding himself might struggle with answering some of these questions, or pay lip service to them, which is all the more reason the process of developing a platform can be hugely valuable and enlightening. Here's where this can't be a check-off-the-box activity, but rather an opportunity to reflect on how one uses his or her communication superpowers for good; to lead and to inspire others to greatness.

Purposeful actions lead to meaningful results

The answers to the above questions also should be coupled with purposeful actions that support these all-important messages and form the basis for what the leader talks about and communicates regularly – irrespective of the method. Words and actions need to be in sync for authentic communications that build trust.

By the numbers

When it comes to authenticity, just over 10% of employees believe their company's leaders are ethical and honest, according to Maritz Research. It's also been determined that only 7% of employees believe senior management's actions are completely consistent with their words.

The best platforms set the leader's narrative and actions for the year and allow flexibility to customize the messages as needed for specific business and communication situations. Once complete, the platform is then the centerpiece of a larger executive communication plan that helps the leader extend his or her visibility, reach and message in efficient and effective ways that make sense based on who they are.

For example, Steve Crawford, chief technology officer at Eastman Chemical, is especially comfortable and at his best in small group settings with front-line employees. This is where he's most effective at creating meaningful dialogue and gaining valuable insights that help guide

the direction of the department. "It's a significant time investment compared to a town hall, for example," Crawford says. "But the dialogue created and value for the employees and me far outweighs the time investment." In recent feedback on his leadership and communication skills, Crawford was lauded for these dialogue-rich meetings, which employees found extremely useful. They also commented on his approachability and strong level of trust in his leadership.

For the communication professional, a framework like a platform—executed as part of a larger communication plan—will help drive efficiencies and save time. Most important, it will improve the leader's ability to be authentic and highly effective. This sets the stage to help them achieve things they never thought possible. In the end, the goal should always be to uncover the leader's best and true self—no imitations needed.

David Grossman

David Grossman, ABC, APR, Fellow PRSA, continues to work on the life-long task of leading



authentically. As CEO of The Grossman Group, he helps leaders and the smart communication professionals who support them get the results they want through authentic and courageous leadership communication. He recently launched his third book: *No Cape Needed: The Simplest, Smartest, Fastest Steps To Improve How You Communicate By Leaps and Bounds*.

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