Authenticity - "being ourselves"

Introduction

People are more effective when they are themselves! When we bring ourselves to situations we come across as 'real' and are able to draw on all our talents and experiences. This applies in all roles, whether leading, following or any other role. Being authentic is not an act - it comes from inside us.

So the lack of authenticity we see in organisations is paradoxical because when we form teams, empower employees, begin quality programs, involve people in decisions and try to become learning organizations, an essential requirement for the success of these approaches is the trust that comes from authentic relationships. And yet managers and leaders - in fact people in all roles - often behave very differently. They behave defensively, they say one thing and do another, they demand political correctness, jump frenetically from change programme to change programme - and at the same time, ask employees to trust, cooperate, and take risks. What is going on?

You are you.
No help for that.
Why not sit up, smile and enjoy the ride?
Being you is tough?
Being what you are not will be far worse.
Let go.

- We live in a doing world and are often encouraged to 'get into action' regardless of our personal preferences.
- We are sometimes burdened by expectations.
- We try to 'act a role' without the credibility to carry it off.
- Making or admitting mistakes is sometimes seen as 'bad' and we do anything to avoid being seen to have made a mistake
- We find it difficult or scary to be ourselves - there can be consequences!

Being ourselves - whilst challenging - is a much better route to effectiveness in any role. So the challenge is "how to **be** in a **doing** world". Being ourselves works in all roles and usually brings greater satisfaction and results. This paper outlines some of the benefits, the challenges and barriers and ends with a list of references and further reading.

Benefits

Jackie Orme - CEO of The CIPD- has written " Are we too wedded to a model of heroic leadership - a leader who leads from the front, knows all the answers, who doesn't typically look for much dissent from the organisation and is typically driven by a strong ego?"

If you do not know the kind of person I am and I do not know the kind of person you are, a pattern that others made may prevail in the world and following the wrong god home we may miss our star.

The age of the 'hero' in organisations is being challenged and seems to be coming to an end. This is because the risk is that the 'hero' does not really know all the answers, eventually 'falls over', and even whilst acting the hero is unintentionally encouraging others to think "go on then, you know all the answers - I don't need to think!!"

By learning to be ourselves - be authentic - we can avoid this trap. We can achieve the benefits shown below and these are valuable when operating in any role.

- Flexibility - by being more open, listening and being courageous we can be more flexible ourselves and to be more tolerant of others' styles.
- Inherent capability - by being ourselves we are able to access all of our skills and capabilities and to call on all our experience.
- Open - coming alive in the moment and being present.
- Less likely to trip up - being ourselves makes us more self aware and more aware of others, so we are less likely to trip up or to trip others up.
- More convincing - the more we are ourselves the more convincing, passionate and assertive we will be.
- More effectively powerful - with all of the above in operation we will be more powerful, effective and engaging.

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Being authentic - "What makes it so?"

What are the key ingredients to being authentic and being ourselves? No list can be fully inclusive. What follows are the key elements, from our experiences in coaching and consulting and drawn from many articles and books on being authentic. All of these ideas have been written in the first person - because being authentic has to start with me.

The successful man is himself. To be successful you have to be honest with yourself.

Vince Lombardi

Understanding ourselves

- Our purpose - at the core of being authentic is having a deep understanding of our own purpose or objective and being passionate about it. This sense of purpose needs to be uniquely our own and provide the motivation for our actions.
- Our skills, capabilities and experiences - what can I do, and not do? What experiences have I had? How can I bring all my skills, capabilities and experience into play?
- Our preferences? How well do I know and value my motivation and way of being?

Self-awareness

Knowing what I am doing and how I am behaving increases the choices that I have. Giving myself the chance to notice my own behaviour helps with self-awareness. Slowing down and keeping my eyes and ears open is very valuable for increasing my self-awareness.

Self-discipline

Integrity and strong values are generally heralded as essential traits of good leaders. I need to be able to manage myself so that I demonstrate I am worthy of respect and that my values remain consistent once they are translated into actions. I also need to act as a role model for employees and be trustworthy. Being consistent in word and deed - "congruent"- is essential. This operates at all levels. I need to be congruent with everyone - i.e. staff, bosses and customers.

Courage

Courage and authenticity are intrinsically linked, so I need to be daring and honest, and able to speak out to right wrongs, admit to personal weaknesses and own up to my mistakes. I also need to face challenges and unfamiliar situations head on and have the ability to make tough decisions.

"Authentic leaders are prepared to ask difficult questions, really listen to the answers and act accordingly," says Natalie Carolan. "This means being able to go far outside my comfort zone." [quoted in Personnel Today]

Relationships

It is important to recognise that the best teams include a balance of people with varying styles and skill sets. I need to build lasting and meaningful relationships and empower employees to make a difference, rather than simply delegating tasks to them. Avoid detaching myself from my people; be open and let them know they can approach me at any time. Show empathy and compassion. Such actions will build trust and commitment on both sides.

There are times when a man should be content with what he has, but never with what he is.

William George

Passion

Doing things with obvious and genuine passion and enthusiasm makes a huge difference. People respond to passion. It encourages, stimulates and helps to create an environment where people are able to motivate themselves.

Self confidence in one's self

Self-confidence comes from being comfortable with 'who I am'. This helps me to be assertive, a powerful way of influencing others without the damage of being aggressive. Self confidence helps me to be tolerant of others because it makes it easier to recognise differences and to look for win-win outcomes.

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Willingness to acknowledge weaknesses and mistakes

This is a very positive sign of both authenticity and self confidence. Being prepared to acknowledge weaknesses (or situations in which strengths are overplayed such that they are seen as weaknesses) and personal mistakes is important. It shows that I appreciate mistakes can happen - we all make them - and that by acknowledging them I and others are able to learn from the situation and develop new or additional choices to help us in the future.

Giving attention and making a 'safe space'

In 'Time to Think' Nancy Kline outlines the key criteria for creating Thinking Environments™. The most important of these criteria is giving people 'attention'. By giving excellent attention I can help others to think and come up with their own ideas and decisions. Giving excellent attention requires me to act authentically [see references below].

Do not think of your faults: look for what is good and strong and try to imitate it. Your faults will drop off like dead leaves, when the time comes.

John Ruskin

Alignment between own and organisational goals and objectives

When I have appropriate alignment between my personal and organisational goals it becomes possible for me to be authentic. When I am not aligned I am likely to become either:

Compliant - an over emphasis on organisational culture, goals and objectives with the consequent subordinating of my own purpose, goals and objectives

Defiant - an over emphasis on my own preferences, goals and objectives. This often results in a failure to give sufficient attention and recognition to the organisation's purpose, culture and objectives.

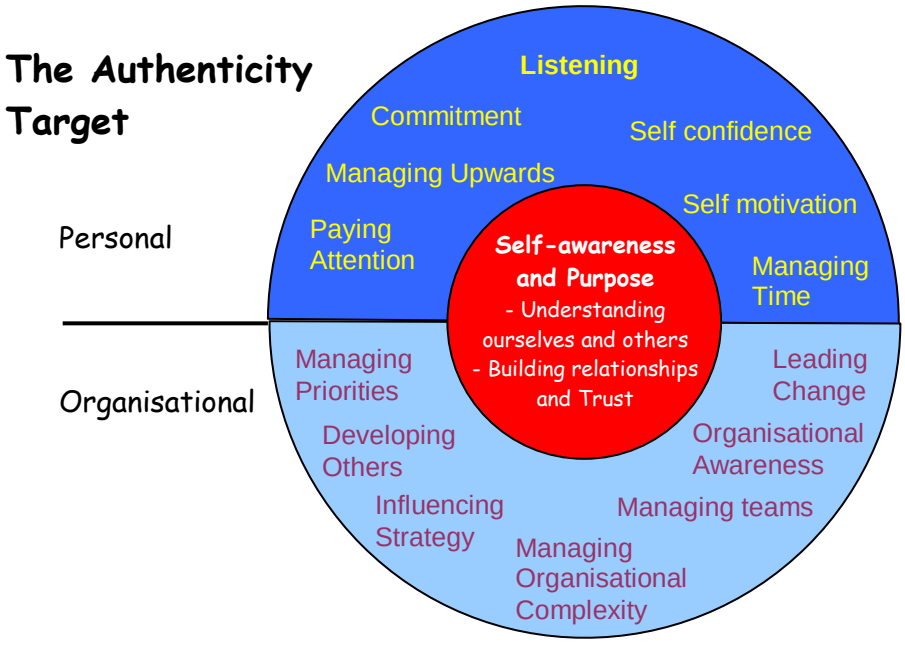
Neither of these positions is comfortable and will almost certainly have a limiting impact on my effectiveness.

Conclusion

All these characteristics work with each other building up a sense of harmony which results in authenticity - they help me to be myself: the most powerful and effective person that I can be.

Developing authenticity

Developing our authenticity means finding ways to be myself, to enjoy using my skills and experiences whilst allowing others to do the same. It also means continually seeking to build on my skills and capabilities - doing the work in my organisation in such a way that authenticity is seen as the norm.



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Being authentic - "What gets in the way?"

If you settle for nothing less than your best, you will be amazed at what you can accomplish in your life.

Vince Lombardi

- Feeling fear and doubt - how do I react when I find yourself in situations where I have underlying concerns or doubt?
  Building my self-confidence and assertiveness is the quickest way to overcome this barrier.
- Being self conscious – am I sometimes hesitant or unwilling to offer my opinions and ideas because I am self conscious about how I appear to others?
  Learning to assert my opinions and intentions whilst recognising others have the same rights is the most powerful means of overcoming self consciousness. Being selfish whilst allowing others to be similarly selfish helps to create an environment of openness.
- Trying to avoid bad experiences - making mistakes and getting things wrong is usually uncomfortable.
  Recognising that making mistakes is a 'normal reality'. Taking time to reflect and learn from all situations will help me to overcome bad experiences more quickly.
- Being overly deferential - it is often important to recognise positions within a hierarchy. The risk is when this is overplayed and results in 'blind obedience'.
  Learning to put forward my ideas with appropriate respect and good manners makes it possible for me to assert my ideas to anyone.

Summary

The challenge to being authentic begins with accepting myself as I am - the unique person that is me. It is vital to develop awareness and self awareness. It is important that my individual and my organisation's convictions and goals are congruent and I can choose to take steps to get sufficient alignment for me to be authentic. Being passionate and paying attention to others helps me to be authentic and draw others into being themselves.

People behaving authentically have achieved remarkable things in business and society. They are seen to be passionate, focused, committed, articulate, controversial, socially conscious and inspirational.

Combining all these factors creates a person who behaves in ways that exhibit that 'the collective sum of the parts is greater than the individual components'.

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