



Co-creation

Wisdom from wherever

Authentic Leadership

Over the past decade or so, the notion of “authentic leadership” has captured the imagination of managers, consultants and executives. Many books and articles (like this one) have been written on the subject of authentic leadership, and training programs which claim to cultivate authentic leadership abound. There are institutes and centres completely focused on authentic leadership.

So what is authentic leadership? And why is there such a buzz about it?

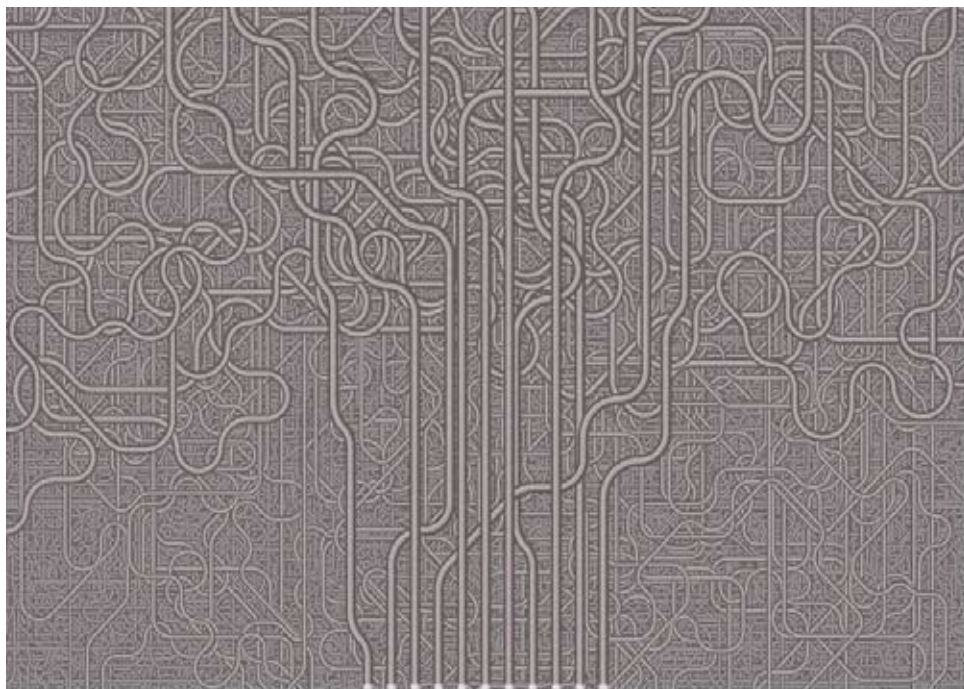
Let's start with a simple definition of an authentic leader: someone who is decent, modest and exerts herself or himself fully. Decent leaders can be counted on to treat their coworkers fairly and consistently. They operate from a clear and tested set of values. Modest leaders are open to the ideas, contributions and concerns of those around them. They are not so wrapped up in themselves and their own ideas to the exclusion of others. Finally, the authentic leader works hard with passion, commitment and concern for fellow human beings. This kind of exertion is less about personal ambition and more about commitment to a larger purpose.

There is an interesting assumption that underlies authentic leadership. Bill George, author of *Authentic Leadership*, puts it this way:

Plastic Cups, 2008

Depicts one million plastic cups, the number used on airline flights in the US every six hours

See following pages for detail





“Leadership is authenticity, not style.” In other words, cultivating leadership is not so much a matter of adopting characteristics or trying to emulate someone else, but rather of bringing out, refining and strengthening the capacities and character we were born with. Many leadership styles are possible and effective, and it is a trap to think that only a certain style will succeed.

Another key premise about authentic leadership is that it doesn't appear overnight. It takes time to cultivate authenticity – for example, one must have one's decency challenged to know that it will hold under pressure. One's modesty is usually born from painful experience, times when one's lack of modesty hits a wall of some kind. And it may take time to find the deeper passion and commitment that motivates you through the ups and downs of a challenging journey. Working for a virtuous organization with virtuous goals may not be enough to elicit our deepest commitment – there has to be some resonance and alignment between the organization's commitments and your commitments and passions. Also there needs to be a way for you to express your passion.

Authentic leadership does not appear overnight

Cultivating authentic leadership

It is paradoxical to talk about a kind of leadership that is both inherent and cultivated. But living one's authenticity does take time, practice and persistence. How do we cultivate our own authentic leadership and the authentic leadership of others? Here are some suggestions that may serve as a starting point.

Decency: It is good to regularly reflect on your values and examine how well your behaviour measures up to them. This can be an individual exercise, something facilitated by a coach or mentor, or something done in a workshop setting. Related to decency are self-discipline and consistency – are we decent with ourselves, friends and family? It is very helpful to rest and reconnect with ourselves in order to lead from a calm and clear state of mind, i.e. a mind that exercises good judgment consistently.

Modesty: Cultivating an open mind and an open heart can be both individual/professional development and organizational development. My experience shows that lots of openness can be uncovered just by asking the right questions and creating the conditions for open dialogue. Choose strategic times when the agenda can be scrapped and people can be invited to articulate their deeper concerns. Related to modesty is the status of your relationships. Sometimes work obscures the fact that we are working with real people with real lives. Consider

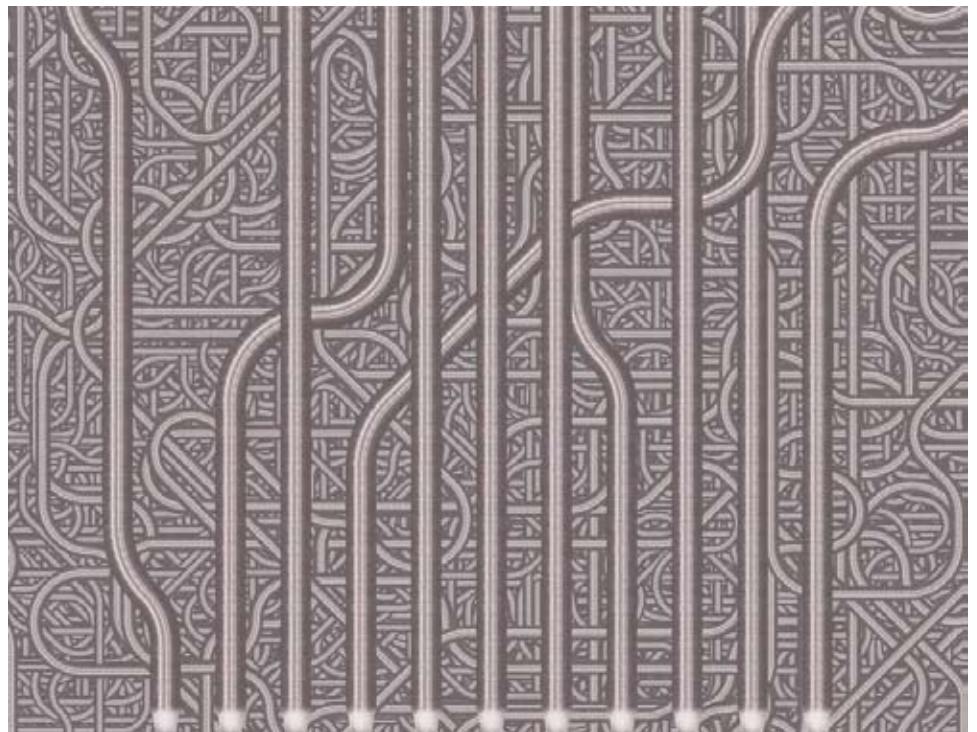
reviewing how connected you are to those around you – coworkers, spouse, friends, and community – and how you might strengthen those connections authentically.

Exertion: My sense is that everyone has passion to make a contribution, but some situations thwart or downright shut down those passions. It may be helpful to articulate and refine the articulation of your higher sense of purpose – i.e. your purpose beyond “me.” If you are in a thwarting environment, try looking for the positive exceptions and build on those. If you feel shut down and see no possible alignment, move on.

Is authenticity measurable?

So much leadership development is based on measurable competencies and skills– analytic, strategic, influential, social, communicative, etc. These are of course important, but authenticity is devilishly difficult to measure. We do it all the time, of course, in deciding who we will follow and who we would rather not follow. Nonetheless, there may be some serious pitfalls if one were to try to institutionalize authenticity.

It’s more effective to notice and appreciate people at their best. For example, when someone offers a divergent view in a meeting, it may



be best to pause and appreciate the courage and integrity that may lie behind the comment. Do we show respect for a balanced approach to life and work? Do we refer to our individual and organizational values when difficult decisions arise? These are the signs of an authentic organization.

A useful checklist

If authenticity is so hard to get a handle on, how will we know if we are progressing in our leadership?

There are telltale signs when someone is consistently decent, modest and exertive. Below is a list of such signs. You could use this as a barometer of sorts. If you discover any shortcomings, my suggestion is to ask yourself: “Which of the three fundamentals (decency, modesty or exertion) do I need to strengthen in order for this symptom to arise more fully in my life and work?” In short, remember that the fundamentals are the causes, and the signs are the symptoms.

Intimates. A leader needs to have one or a few people with whom he or she can open up to completely. Having such a relationship helps with all the others.

Unpredictable friends. It is necessary for a leader to have friends who give good, direct advice. This means that they don’t try to appease or flatter, nor do they operate from predictable formulae. They are fresh, in the moment. They can be coaches, mentors or simply knowledgeable friends.

Protectors. Authentic leaders need people who care for them and will therefore protect them.

Exertion. Authentic leaders are inspired enough to persevere through challenges.

Steadiness. Authentic leaders have peace of mind and a sense of earthiness, cultivated through self-discipline.

Generosity. Authentic leaders are hospitable, humorous, and open.

Command of one’s life. Authentic leaders have a sense that their lives and careers are workable with all their ups and downs. They rarely feel victimized or resentful.

Again, these hallmarks arise in the authentic leader because of their decency, modesty, and exertion.

Ask yourself: “Which of the three fundamentals do I need to strengthen?”

So why all the buzz about authentic leadership?

In my coaching and consulting, I often see individuals and organizations struggling with how to have a larger, more beneficial impact. Many times organizational norms seem to thwart the best in people. Sometimes, individuals are not able to coalesce around organizational goals. With some alarm, I have seen many younger leaders leave mainstream institutions in search of a more genuine contribution albeit on a smaller scale. In many ways, therefore, people are seeking to find their best, most authentic contribution.

My theory is that we are entering an era where the very big, very complex challenges are totally in our face – global warming, child malnutrition, and system failures of many kinds. The positive upshot is that there is an urgency rising in many of us, an urgency that punctures our complacency. An urgency that calls forth all our skills, our capacities – and, yes -- our authenticity.



All photos courtesy of
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