

## **The downside of authenticity**

by **Todd Dewett - Thursday, December 18, 2014**

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### **Authenticity**

One the most important topics in the leadership space is authenticity. It's been popular for decades, though it gained a huge bump several years ago thanks to the success of the book True North by Bill George. Thousands of writers since then, including me, have chimed in with articles, tweets, blog posts, and books to offer our spin on the topic.

Here's why so many of us love to talk about authenticity. We observe that everyday good men and women go to work and proceed to offer a very unrealistic version of themselves to others. They project an image of themselves they feel that others will accept, understand, condone, expect, and support. They provide a "professional" image appropriate for the workplace.

This is somewhat logical. The work context is different than non-work contexts. We should show interpersonal respect, for example, through proper hygiene and grooming when go to work. We should speak with more formality and respect than we would at home.

However, our tendencies here very often go too far. We sometimes build massive walls between our home life and our work life. We talk to our colleagues only about work matters. We do not inquire about their personal lives. We do not offer up stories or details from our personal lives. In the end, we show them a small slice of ourselves, one that does not seem terribly human or interesting. The results include colder than necessary relationships and a lack of focus on fun family and life issues, which ultimately explain why we're at work in the first place.

People believe they should cling to this truncated professional image for several reasons. They feel it is expected of them. Indeed, some work cultures are very focused on work and work alone. They also feel it is safe. Many people feel that to share personal facts and stories is to be vulnerable. Why expose yourself to additional scrutiny or judgment based on your personal life if you don't have to?

Here is what they are missing: most people want to connect, relate, feel understood, and belong to a group that matters. These are outcomes associated with productive and healthy relationships. You have a much higher chance of creating them when you allow yourself to be authentic: a little raw, less filtered, open, honest, and even a bit personal too.

It turns out people really love it when they sense that others are "being real." Stated differently, they feel they know the person, not just the professional. They see a human, not just a boss. Authenticity creates huge benefits. Colleagues and employees who know and respect the authentic you will work harder, persevere longer, and will remain more positively engaged with their work.

Sounds great right? Yes and no. In general, it is a vital idea. However, if we're to be honest, there is a downside. Humans are not perfect. We are all flawed. We all have personality quirks and behavioral tendencies that others don't enjoy. We're too blunt, too loud, too personal, we love salty language – who knows! To be authentic is to be unrestrained and real, unfiltered, and open. On the other hand, no one enjoys an authentic jerk, complainer, or narcissistic and needy self-promoter. That's the downside of authenticity. Our task then becomes being reasonably authentic without causing problems.

I would like to offer two important and related thoughts in response to this conundrum. First, I encourage you to realize that when you say you wish to be authentic you are not saying, "I need to be me." Instead, the more productive approach is to say, "I need to be the best possible version of myself." This implies a few things.

For example: start slow. You don't turn on the "authentic" switch one day and start sharing everything with no filters. A rapid change from heavy censoring to heavy authenticity might feel good but is very likely to confuse or offend others. Make a conscious effort, at the right time and place, to share just a few simple things you normally would not share. That might include a lesson learned early in your career, an anecdote about your children, or a simple comment about a book you enjoyed.

It's also vital to remember to begin embracing authenticity by focusing on clearly acceptable objects. It is okay to tell the team you love sneakers and have collected over fifty pairs of Air Jordans. It is not acceptable to tell them you support capital punishment and mandatory gun training for all citizens. Please use good judgment and begin sharing simple, positive, and uncontroversial facts.

The second related idea concerns feedback. You don't see yourself as others see you. We all have perceptual blind spots that make it difficult to fully understand how others view us. That, of course, can make authenticity difficult. What you feel is authentic might seem too extreme to others. This is why thoughtful professionals value quality informal feedback.

I encourage you to identify and develop one or two solid confidants. These are people you strongly respect and with whom you are comfortable having frank and candid conversations. Empower them to share with you the one or two tendencies you might have that feel normal to you, but that might be problematic in the eyes of others. This is a classic example of short-term pain, long-term gain. Most of us don't enjoy receiving difficult feedback, but it is often essential for our continued progress.

In the end, authenticity and "being real" matter a great deal. However, we do have to understand that being authentic does not imply sharing everything! If you wish to maximize your impact, start slow, be positive, and be sure you find ways to better understand how others feel about your behavior. When others see you being thoughtful in this manner, they too will begin to embrace a little more authenticity.

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