
Authentic Leadership: The 21st Century Imperative?

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Abstract

Globally, strategic leadership seems to be dominated by greed, competitiveness, testosterone, ego and power, combined with a lack of empathy and compassion. Our politicians, at least those who display a lack of transparency and ethical virtue, clearly cannot be trusted to do the right thing. So we now face such challenges as a world recession, corruption, having enough food on the planet yet still people starve, the constant commercial demand for ever lower costs whilst at the same time consumers demand ever higher quality goods and services, the rape of our planet and an inability to live peacefully and successfully with each other.

Locally, leaders have to achieve more with fewer people and fewer resources. Increasingly, they are suffering from stress, depression or burnout, and whilst some leaders recognise that employees increasingly want to be a part of something meaningful and worthwhile, many leaders feel impotent to provide that purpose, or worse, 'bad' leaders feel that vision, purpose and meaning are irrelevant compared to the day-to-day responsibilities of getting the job done.

There is a danger in these stressful times that 'good' leadership, by which I mean engaging, pro-social, collaborative, purposeful and compassionate leadership, is under-valued, and as such is being eroded rather than encouraged. 'Bad' leadership, by which I mean anti-social, task driven, competitive and bullying leadership, is valued because in the short term at least, it appears to deliver bottom line results.

In 2001 the UK government sponsored a major piece of research into the state of leadership in the UK. The resulting report by the Council for Excellence in Management and Leadership (CEML) suggested that there was a 'crisis in leadership' in the UK¹. Although CEML no longer exists, with corporate ethical malpractice still regularly hitting the media headlines and the recent politicians' expenses scandal, I cannot but conclude that this crisis remains.

In addition, business leaders face not only global challenges in a time of world recession, but also 'a perfect storm'² of failure of corporate governance, growing geopolitical uncertainty and environmental degradation, whilst locally leaders have to achieve more with fewer people and fewer resources. Although many leaders recognise that employees increasingly want to be a part of something meaningful and worthwhile, they often feel impotent to provide that purpose. And vision, purpose and meaning are sometimes irrelevant compared to the day-to-day responsibilities of getting the job done and delivering bottom line results.

But “*Leadership is not just about results... The obsession with results is a contemporary conceit and is partly responsible for eroding the moral dimension of leadership*”³.

Employees want to be able to trust their leaders; to be trusted, leaders have to be principled and honest, competent and fair. Research conducted in 2009 by Management Today and the Institute of Leadership and Management found that 31% of non-managers and 28% of managers had no trust or low trust in their management teams⁴.

Perhaps historically, the teaching on MBA courses—with its focus on finance and bottom line results at the expense of creating a meaningful and pro-social purpose—has in part contributed to the current crisis. Research conducted under the guise of a business simulation game by Reeves and Knell suggested that business school graduates are more likely than their non-business school peers to cheat. As they say, “*education corrupts; business education corrupts absolutely*”⁵. We cannot ignore the argument that the task-driven paradigm of competitiveness and profit with the associated ‘transactional leadership’ that so drove the 80s and 90s have led in part to the current financial crisis and to our disappointment with global and local leaders.

In more recent years, the best business schools have included elements of social responsibility on their MBA programmes. Cynically, I would suggest that commercially, corporate social responsibility programmes were often undertaken as more of a marketing exercise or for tax purposes than being driven by an inherent conviction of the benefits of pro-social values. Moreover, on its own, the inclusion of a social responsibility policy is not enough to meet the evident personal and professional development needs of current and future leaders.

What’s the solution?

We need more self-aware leaders, better quality thinking and a focus on transformative, pro-social, sustainable and collaborative leadership that is people-focused and values-led rather than simply profit driven.

The solution, I believe, is a much greater focus on personal leadership style in terms of a shift towards Authentic Leadership, with its emphasis on self-awareness, self-regulation and pro-social, ethical leadership. These thoughts are echoed by Sandler⁶ and Jeanette Purcell, former CEO of the Association of MBAs, as well as Reeves and Knell⁷, and Wylie⁸. Leaders in the field of MBA provision, such as Cranfield School of Management and Ashridge Business School, are already beginning to include a focus on Authentic Leadership. I wonder how many other MBA providers will have the strategic insight to go further than simply the current shift towards a focus on ethics, to look at what it really means to be authentic as a leader?

“A leader must be true to a core set of values which are clearly communicated. A naïve reading of this point would suggest that all a leader has to do is to be their authentic self. But that’s not enough... Being authentic is not about being the same all the time. The most effective leaders are authentic chameleons. The chameleon always adapts to context but remains a chameleon”⁹.

So what is Authentic Leadership and is just being yourself enough?

Your leadership style is intensely personal; no two people will ever lead in exactly the same way. Authentic Leadership links who you are as a person, i.e. your beliefs and values, with how you lead and manage, i.e. your thinking and behaviours.

“Real leadership starts with the subtle but effective knack of just being yourself”¹⁰, suggesting that being authentic is somehow enough. However, just being yourself is not quite as simple as it may at first appear. You cannot be yourself until you know who you are at your core and what has made you the leader and the person that you are today. Many of us spend a lifetime trying to understand who we ‘really’ are and what that means for us in our different personal and professional roles. What should we show and what should we keep hidden? How much of yourself do you feel comfortable sharing with colleagues whilst still maintaining those boundaries that enable you to remain professional?

So here we have already hit a stumbling block. What is personal and what is private? One of the difficulties that gay and lesbian professionals encounter when they are ‘out’ is that one’s personal sexuality, an otherwise private and professionally irrelevant aspect of one’s life, suddenly becomes new information that influences others’ behaviour. If all leaders were Authentic Leaders; professionally ethical and with the moral courage to stand up for what is right, everyone in every organisation would be treated fairly and equally. Therefore there would be no need for employment, age, disability, gender, race or sexual discrimination legislation.

I am often asked who I think is a modern authentic leader. The most well-known current leader who displays many of the characteristics of Authentic Leadership, such as transparency, compassion, a focus on ethics and the willingness to apologise when they feel that they have erred, is Barak Obama. For example, when it became evident that Tom Daschel and Nancy Killefer were ethically wanting, he was very quick to let them go from his administration team and his speech at the Tucson memorial service in January 2011 was truly inspirational¹¹. Matthew Taylor, the dynamic Chief Executive of the UK’s Royal Society of Arts (RSA) and the driving force behind its new, pro-social, 21st Century Enlightenment project¹², is always quick to publicly apologise via his blog. This unlike Dave Hartnett, HM Revenue and Customs Permanent Secretary, whose initial refusal to apologise over the tax calculation fiasco in September 2010 made him look arrogant and out-of-touch with the very tax payers who pay his wages. Doubtless he was just being himself.

So no, simply being yourself is not enough. As a leader, as a role model and as someone who influences all of those around them, you need to be not just yourself, you need to be your best possible self.

Why doesn't this solution work?

Not everyone wants to be an Authentic Leader! Authentic Leadership is an ideal; it's an on-going aspirational journey that is constantly challenging and rarely easy. In my experience, if you put your head above the parapet people will either follow you or try to shoot you! *"Not everyone can be a leader. Many executives do not have what it takes to develop the skilful authenticity necessary for effective leadership"*¹³. Moreover, not everyone has the capacity to become an Authentic Leader. This is why.

Clinical psychologist Oliver James¹⁴, author of *Affluenza* and *The Selfish Capitalist*, has stated that some of the most prevalent personality traits seen in leaders today are anti-social personality disorder, obsessive compulsive personality disorder and narcissism. Unfortunately, all three are 'bad' leadership styles. Leaders with anti-social personality disorder tend to be very task focused, have few friends and pay scant attention to developing successful relationships. People with obsessive compulsive personality disorder tend to be rule driven and derive great pleasure from working very hard, often becoming workaholic. Leaders with narcissistic personality disorder tend to have grandiose ideas and a sense of entitlement. They are often energetic and charming, however, they are also self-serving and, conspicuously, they lack empathy. All three personality traits engender a task-focused, bullying culture within organisations. These kinds of leaders—being predominantly task focused rather than people focused, and having such a high work ethic, often competitively—do get results but as I said before, these are short-term results rather than sustainable results, and are achieved in spite of the leader rather than because of them.

Anti-social personality disorder, obsessive compulsive personality disorder and narcissism are more about power than they are about good leadership and are the very opposite of the characteristics displayed by Authentic Leaders. However, their prevalence within many of today's senior leaders does mean that in organisations led by such people, the culture will be such that any Authentic Leaders will be unlikely to have their relationship focused, empathetic, pro-social leadership valued, which will not only limit the results they are able to achieve but may well prohibit them from reaching senior leadership positions at all.

Conclusion

With the focus on trust, transparency and ethics, more than ever before, leaders are having their thoughts and behaviours examined under a microscope. We now face a call to action regarding the immediate need for a new philosophy of leadership. We need an intelligent, compassionate leadership approach that is pro-social, purposeful and transformational; one that creates meaningful dialogue and meaningful relationships within and between organizations.

For themselves, their followers, their organisations, their communities and for society, Authentic Leaders aspire to be their best selves. Do you?

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