

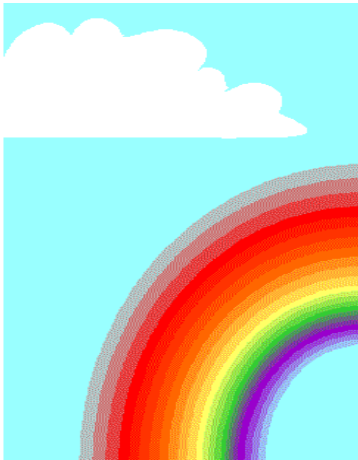


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Are You Showing the World Your True Colors?

By Cathy Dean



Integrity: moral soundness; "he expects to find in us the common honesty and integrity of men of business"; "they admired his scrupulous professional integrity"

Source: wordnetweb.princeton.edu/perl/webwn

Authenticity: The quality of being genuine or not corrupted from the original; Truthfulness of origins, attributions, commitments, sincerity, and intentions; The quality of being authentic (of established authority)

Source: en.wiktionary.org/wiki/authenticity

Introduction

Authenticity and Integrity in Leadership have come to be two of the things that people value the most. Expert after expert will tell you that people won't follow a leader that they don't trust, and that integrity and authenticity are the most important aspects of leadership. You only have to look at the fall-out from the banking collapse, and the UK Parliamentary expenses scandal, to see how important integrity in leadership is to people.

And yet still I see so many people in positions of power trying desperately hard to be something they're not – and usually it's not for any devious motive. The vast majority of people are genuinely trying to do a good job, but in too many cases they are causing themselves and those around them a great deal of stress because they're not being true to themselves. Instead, they're trying to live up to the assumptions they've made about how they are supposed to behave or what the prevailing culture of their organization appears to require of them.

There's an old Chinese proverb that says "*Tension is who you think you should be; relaxation is who you are*". I firmly believe that one of the causes of the continuing rise in stress and depression in the

Western world is this need that so many people have to conform to an unhelpful stereotype. The world of work would be a vastly different place if everyone felt confident enough to show their true colors – then we'd all be working with real people, having real conversations about the things that really matter, rather than drowning in corporate speak, having endless meetings about nothing and keeping up a facade to hide who we really are.

If you're in a leadership position, wouldn't you rather lead a team of people that are confident in themselves and their abilities, willing to listen and learn, and have the mental energy required to develop their own potential and that of the business? It is possible, and you can do it – but it all starts with you. If you are prepared to show the world your true colours and lead by example, you can change yourself and your company; this article aims to help you to get started, whether you're a newly appointed leader or have been a leader for many years.

They're All Looking At Me!

So what happens when someone steps up to a leadership role? A common reaction is the realization that suddenly everything you do is visible. *"I came to realize that people were taking everything I said seriously"* is a common reaction from new leaders. I know leaders who have encountered people working very hard on projects that have little value, and discovered that those projects began as a direct result of an off-hand remark they'd made in a meeting some weeks back. Suddenly, you find that you are on a pedestal and people are apparently hanging on your every word.

For some, this can be a huge ego-trip, but for many, possibly most, new leaders, this new celebrity can be alarming and even threatening: *"I have to watch what I say all the time now, I don't feel I can have a laugh with people any more"* is a typical comment. And if you're not careful, there goes one important facet of your ability to connect with people – if you're too frightened to show your sense of humor you're well on your way to becoming a stuffed shirt...

Once you become aware of your visibility, it then becomes all too easy to think that there are other bits of your personality you should be hiding, but you need to ask yourself whether that's really true. If you've always been someone that likes to stop for a chat and a bit of banter, why should you stop now? Obviously there will be topics that are off limits now (so no more gossiping about other people's private lives or the latest idiotic decision made by "the management") but there's no reason why you shouldn't still connect with people on a personal level. One of the most inspirational leaders I know is happy to stop and chat, and makes a point of getting out and about among his staff with a bag of jelly babies – it may seem trivial, but it's much appreciated as it shows he's human.

If you feel that you've been hiding the real you at work since you became a leader, ask yourself the following questions:

- In what ways am I behaving differently since I became a leader? Why is that?
- Which aspects of my personality would the people that work for me be surprised by? Why would they be surprised?
- What do my colleagues/family/friends tell me has changed about me? Are these changes for the better? If not, what impact are they having on me and those around me?
- What could I do to help people to get to know the real me?

One Day They're Going To Find Me Out...

Then there are the little voices – you know the ones, the voices in your head that are telling you that it was all a mistake, they didn't really mean to give you this job and it's only a matter of time before they realize that you really don't know what you're doing.

I've worked with many people new to leadership, and the relief when they realize that everyone (unless they're a psychopath) has these feelings is palpable. And it's true – it's so common it even has a name, Imposter Syndrome. But because so many of us believe that leaders shouldn't show anything that might be conceived of as weakness, many people spend years trying to dampen down those voices and never really succeeding, wasting valuable mental energy in the process. And all it leads to is loss of confidence and a waste of potential.

It's perfectly natural to feel lost and swamped when you take on a new role, particularly if you're not getting the support you need. Many people find themselves expected to hit the ground running and be visible and effective as a leader from the moment they take up their appointment – *"after all"*, they're told, *"we wouldn't have given you the job if we didn't know you could do it!"*

How much pressure is that? That kind of thinking leads to people being unable to ask for help or to admit that they don't know what they're doing – and that's the kind of thing that can lead to ulcers, heart attacks and other symptoms of stress.

Wouldn't it be kinder (and more productive) to ensure that every newly appointed leader had a coach or mentor to support them in their early days, and knew that asking for help would be seen as sign of strength not weakness?

If you're suffering from Imposter Syndrome, ask yourself the following questions:

- Who do I trust enough in the company to ask for help?

- What actual feedback have I had that tells me how well I'm doing?
- What am I valued for?
- If I were to write an objective appraisal of myself, what would I put down?
- What's the worst that could happen if I were to ask for help?

I Didn't Get Where I Am Today Without Conforming To A Stereotype

Anyone old enough to remember the original Fall and Rise of Reginald Perrin will also recognize the catchphrase of his boss, CJ, a stereotypical Managing Director if ever there was one, and funny because he was so recognizable as a type.

So many of us sadly still seem to believe that, in order to be a leader we have to behave like CJ and conform to some kind of stereotype. This is particularly prevalent in organizations where senior management is promoting in its own image. So if you work in a company that appears to value table-thumping alpha behavior above all else, then it will be clear to you that, in order to get on, you'll need to become a table-thumper yourself. But what if you are a quiet, thoughtful individual whose people value your ability to listen and encourage? Well, you might decide that the company's not for you and go elsewhere. You might decide to stay with the company but not seek advancement. Or you might decide that you have no choice but to turn yourself into a table-thumper and become the most alpha of them all. In doing so you may well advance up the company hierarchy, but at what cost to you and those around you? You'll be operating from a position of severe stress and will no doubt be causing a fair amount of stress to your people, especially the ones that will have seen a radical change in your behavior. And what about the effect on the ones that have seen you as a role model, and are maybe now thinking that they have to change to get on, just like you did?

If you've stepped into a role that has a formal, widely recognized title like CEO or Finance Director, you may already have a stereotype in your head of what someone with that title should be like and, therefore, what *you* should be like now that you are one. Stereotypes are all well and good, and they exist because there is some truth to them, but that doesn't mean that you should turn yourself into one.

If you think you're conforming to a stereotype, rather than leading as yourself, ask yourself these questions:

- Am I behaving at all times in ways that are true to my values? If not, why not?
- What unhelpful assumptions am I making about how I should be behaving in this role?
- What helpful assumptions could I choose to make instead, and how will that affect my behaviour?
- If I were operating in a way that showed the world my true colours, how would I be different from how I am today?
- What makes me feel saddest about who I am at work? What can I do to change that?

And Finally

If any or all of these examples have rung true for you, please promise not to beat yourself up about it. You are only human, after all, and if you haven't been given the kind of support you need to help you develop, it's no wonder if things have gotten a bit sticky. Leadership is a difficult job but one that, all too often, people are expected to undertake without training or support, so be kind to yourself.

Once you've made that promise, take some time to sit quietly on your own and really think about the questions I've asked (I'm assuming here that you've skimmed over them and not given them that much thought – it's what I do when I'm reading articles). You may want to ask friends, colleagues and/or family for their opinions but it's not essential if you think you can predict what their answers would be. Be honest with yourself – you don't need to show your answers to anyone else if you don't want to, but you do need to answer as fully and as thoughtfully as you can.

You don't have to answer them all at once, and you may find that, if you take the time to reflect on both questions and answers over a period of a couple of weeks, your thinking will deepen and lead you into new areas.

The questions are designed to help you to really consider what's going on for you as you go about your leadership role. It's so easy to get caught up in the day-to-day tasks that many of us switch into auto-pilot for years, until one day we wake up to find that we've become a shadow of our former selves, leading grey lives and not really knowing who we are any more.

If you take the time to work through these questions, I guarantee that you will at least have made a start on getting back in touch with your true colors, and you'll be able to harness the power of your own authenticity for your own good, and that of your company.

About the author:

Cathy Dean has 25 years experience in the Public Sector, over 15 of those being spent in Learning and Development-related roles. Cathy is now Managing Director of [Colourful Coaching Ltd](#), which focuses on Coaching individuals and Leadership Teams to realize their potential and become the kind of truly authentic leaders that people want to follow. If you're looking to put values and authenticity at the heart of what you do, contact Cathy at colourfulcoaching@ymail.com

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