

Getting Real

How to Lead Authentically

Managers aren't always true to themselves. Sometimes, in a vain attempt to live up to organizational norms and expectations, their behaviors go against the grain of their own values. Without authenticity, leaders are less effective. By aligning your actions and your beliefs, you can reenergize yourself in both your work and your personal life.

It's not easy being a phony. Think of how much energy it takes to behave in ways that are out of sync with one's true values, priorities, hopes, characteristics, and style. This is an important consideration for both individuals and organizations because the energy expended on trying to come across as something you are not or on struggling with the feeling that you can't act like the real you is energy that is unavailable for work and other activities. The alternative to this predicament is authenticity—a state of healthy alignment between one's values and behaviors. Authenticity is a vital developmental goal for managers and executives, both in their roles as leaders and in their personal lives.

People who are authentic have a good understanding of themselves and their priorities. They know what is important to them as opposed to what might be important to other people,

the organization, and society as a whole. They are clear about how they feel and what they need and prefer. Authenticity is best thought of as a condition or dynamic balance rather than as a personality characteristic. As a goal it is not like, for example, earning an MBA. It is not clearly defined, and achieving it doesn't necessarily mean it's yours to keep. You have to work to remain authentic, reviewing your priorities and choosing behaviors that match those priorities as circumstances change.

Feeling authentic, living a life that is strongly connected to one's belief system, is energizing and promotes growth, learning, and psychological well-being. It is difficult for people to develop when they are hiding or suppressing their true values, desires, and style or when they are distracted by inner conflict. At work, people learn best when they



by **Marian N. Ruderman and Sharon Rogolsky**

feel they can be themselves in their work setting. Further, authenticity allows for greater satisfaction with and pleasure in work and life in general. Consequently, authenticity is an important factor in leadership development.

Individual authenticity is important for organizations because people who are authentic bring their whole selves to their jobs and participate fully and honestly in the workplace. Managers who put on a false front or who struggle with feelings of inauthenticity sap so much of their energy doing so that they often find themselves depleted and losing interest in their work. In addition, inauthenticity can often be recognized by others and become a disruptive, negative force in the organization. Organizations that place a premium on conformity at the expense of authenticity may be incurring hidden costs such as a demoralized staff, whereas organizations that foster authentic behavior are more likely to have employees who are engaged and enthusiastic and workplaces that are open and promote trust.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Marian N. Ruderman is a research scientist at CCL in Greensboro. She holds a Ph.D. degree from the University of Michigan.



Sharon Rogolsky, a visiting scholar at Harvard Business School, previously was a research analyst at CCL in Greensboro. She holds several master's degrees from Yale University.



A study that CCL conducted on the choices and trade-offs facing high-achieving women managers and executives (see sidebar) sheds a great deal of light on authenticity—what it is, its role in various aspects of people's lives, and how to develop it. In this article we look at some of the findings from that study and how they can help managers and executives become better leaders by being more authentic. Although the study focused exclusively on women, many of the resulting insights into the relationship between authenticity and effective leadership are applicable to men.

IN TOUCH AND IN TUNE

The study found that authenticity has five defining characteristics, some of which are interrelated:

- Clarity about one's values, priorities, and preferences
- Acceptance of the necessity for choices and trade-offs in life
- A strong sense of self-determination
- A willingness to work toward aligning one's values and behaviors
- A high degree of comfort and satisfaction with decisions made earlier in life

Women who were highest in authenticity were in touch with what was most important to them and in tune with their instincts. They could articulate the choices and trade-offs they had made about leaving jobs and taking new ones, balancing work and personal life, having children, getting out of bad work or personal situations, switching careers and managing dual careers, setting financial goals, and a range of other issues. Highly authentic women consciously designed their lives in accordance with their top priorities. For example, one woman said she had decided to spend more time with her two young children even though she knew it

would slow her rise through the ranks of management, whereas another woman was willing to sacrifice being on top of every detail as a mother in order to put in the time to advance rapidly in her organization. In each case, the trade-off was one the woman was willing to make.

Women high in authenticity had clear understandings of what it would take for them to be successful in life according to their own definitions of success. They lived by their own standards and rules. This is not to say that they overtly and purposely defied societal or organizational conventions, although they did sometimes swim against the tide. Rather, they carefully selected the aspects of those societal and organizational values they would follow, while finding ways to maintain their individuality in their organizations.

Related to this sense of self-determination was a willingness to take the steps necessary to align one's values and behaviors. Women who had fought through feelings of inauthenticity had often faced a situation that called their authenticity into question, whether it was working for a boss whom they considered unethical or working in a field that didn't interest them.

One woman made a career change at age forty to better align her work with her values and priorities. Christine had been a well-paid information technology manager for a large industrial company, but helping the company make more and better widgets held little meaning for her. She wanted to pursue a career more closely related to helping people and had always dreamed of working in an educational setting, so she accepted a pay cut to take an IT job at a university. Christine felt her new work was meaningful and the school's mission was in line with her set of values. She accepted the lower pay as a trade-off necessary to regaining her sense of authenticity. That feeling of authenticity was bol-

About the Study

The study on which this article draws was part of a larger CCL project examining the choices and trade-offs facing high-achieving women managers and executives. Authenticity was one of five themes identified as influencing the careers and life choices of such women.

CCL worked with sixty-one attendees of The Women's Leadership Program, who ranged in age from twenty-six to fifty-eight, with an average age of forty. Ninety-two percent were white, 71 percent were

married or in a committed relationship, and about half had children. Seventeen percent classified themselves as executives, 31 percent as upper-middle managers, and 45 percent as middle managers. (The rest did not specify their level.) The participants were well educated: 91 percent had a bachelor's degree and 45 percent had a graduate degree. Most indicated that their careers were extremely important to them, and many had been with their organizations for a number of years.

The participants stayed in contact with CCL for a year after the leadership program. They were asked to fill out a questionnaire, to allow researchers access to their assessment data from the program, and to participate in three interviews (shortly after the program, six months after, and a year after). In the interviews they were asked about the personal and career choices they had made in the past, the current issues they were confronting, and their hopes for and fears about the future.

stered by her comfort with the decision she had made. Most of the women who were high in authenticity said they had no regrets about how they had lived their lives or the choices they had made.

One of the most interesting observations from the research on authenticity is that it is possible to be authentic in one aspect of your life and not in another. For instance, a person who has a job that is aligned with her values and in which she can act on her likes and dislikes might feel that she can't behave fully like herself in her relationships outside of work. One young executive was in an authentic situation at work but had a growing resentment of her new husband because he was dissatisfied with his job and wanted to find a new one in a different area of the country. She felt bound by tradition to say she would go with him, but at a deeper level she was having difficulty adjusting from a "me" to a "we" framework and figuring out how they could learn to make such major decisions together. She kept finding ways to block the move.

In contrast, other women who took part in the research were true to themselves in their personal relationships but had hit a brick wall of

inauthenticity at work. This usually happened because they felt disconnected from and no longer cared about their jobs. Still other study participants were authentic at work and in their relationships but not in how they treated themselves—they made time for everyone and everything except their own needs and desires. All these findings show that authenticity is complex and can be present in some realms of one's life yet not in others.

GETTING TO WORK

The degree of focus that people place on their authenticity ranges from strong and persistent to a fine-tuning or maintenance of existing authenticity. In what situations do people work on authenticity? The study pinpointed four main ones. Managers and executives tended to focus on issues of authenticity when they were

- attending to long-ignored goals and passions;
- addressing an inconsistency in their lives;
- suppressing personal style—for instance, to fit in with a male-oriented organization; or
- responding to a major life event.

Unlived Dreams

Many people have goals that they have long dreamed of pursuing but for one reason or another—usually related to societal, financial, or family pressures—have not. They may have wanted to be entrepreneurs, novelists, artists, or athletes, but the practicalities of life forced them to restrain those desires or set them aside for later. As people get further along in their careers, these dreams may take on more prominence and need to be addressed before a sense of authenticity can be achieved.

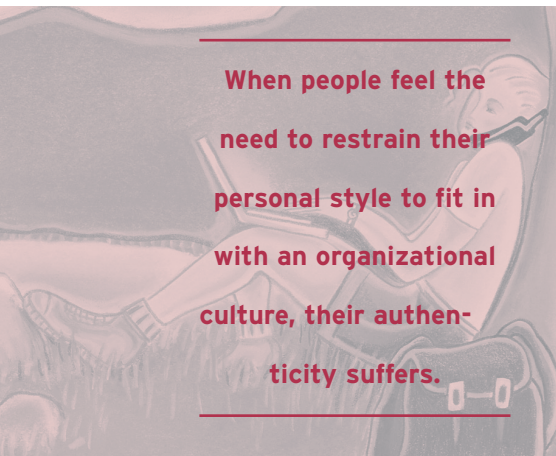
When the participants in the study turned their attention to these desires, however, they generally did not abandon everything they had built in order to pursue their dreams. Instead they worked on making small, incremental changes that put them on the path to achieving their dreams without upending their current lives and careers.

The Big Switch

Today's organizations often experience perpetual and rapid change, as structures, hierarchies, and even tasks, goals, and strategies shift. This often creates situations in which managers and executives must confront issues of authenticity.

They may be sailing along smoothly when their world is turned upside down by a changed organizational environment—a new boss, assignment, or reward system, for instance. The job in which they felt comfortable and authentic suddenly makes them feel awkward and inauthentic. Sometimes they aren't even sure exactly why, and they must figure out what is wrong in order to remedy the situation and regain their authenticity.

One participant in the study had worked for the same company for more than fifteen years. Sophie had steadily advanced in the organization and truly liked her job. When her



When people feel the need to restrain their personal style to fit in with an organizational culture, their authenticity suffers.

department got a new boss, however, everything changed. His approach was completely different from that of her previous bosses, and it made Sophie uncomfortable. At first she told herself that her new boss simply had a distinctive style, but it soon became evident to her that his tactics and ways of handling business issues lacked integrity, ethics, and even morals. He had no qualms about misleading people and pursuing hidden agendas. Sophie could no longer reconcile her job with her values. She felt dishonest and without control over her own life, and her performance and well-being declined. Sophie decided that the only way to fix the situation was to leave it, but she

wanted to stay with the company she had been with for so long. When a company job opened up in a different city, she jumped at it. Now she is thriving as a manager in the new location because the business practices reinforced there are in line with her values and allow her to work with integrity.

Living a Lie

When people feel the need to restrain their personal style to fit in with an organizational culture, their authenticity suffers. There are numerous examples of this phenomenon among both men and women, but in the study of high-achieving female managers the most common was the suppression of behaviors generally perceived to be feminine. The managers did this to conform to the strong and long-established norms that exist in some predominantly male organizations, often believing that they needed to do so to advance up the corporate ladder. Yet these women walked a fine line between keeping their feminine side in check and coming across as *too* masculine, which ran an equal risk of marking them as “different” and “not part of the team.” In any case, complying with male norms while restraining femininity became a handicap for these managers and their organizations.

Wake-Up Calls

The fourth situation that prompted managers and executives to place a higher priority on developing authenticity was the occurrence of some key event in their lives. Typically this event was a change in health. Diagnosis of a serious illness in themselves or the death or illness of a loved one triggered a review and reassessment of their values vis-à-vis their behaviors and choices. This frequently led to what study participants described as a profound learning experience as they worked to reestablish authenticity. Confronting the fragility of life after years of taking

good health for granted brings into focus the values and desires that are truly important and the ways they are compromised by one's behaviors.

DEVELOPING AUTHENTICITY

It is clear that authenticity is important for managers and executives and that there are situations in which they feel compelled to work on increasing their authenticity. But what can people do to develop authenticity, to align their inner and outer selves so that their work behavior becomes comfortable and natural to them, allowing them to be better leaders? The study pinpointed a number of specific ways, some of which we outline in the rest of this article. One important finding is that development of authenticity is best accomplished in stages, starting with self-awareness and continuing on to assessment of alignment between behaviors and values, taking action, and getting support. The study results also indicated that developing authenticity is not easy. It requires continuous effort and overcoming hurdles ranging from societal norms to organizational cultures. But the rewards can be great for individual leaders and, by extension, their organizations.

Self-awareness. A key component of acting authentically is understanding what you care most about—your values, likes, and dislikes. This might sound simple, but in today's complex world people face such a wide array of choices, pressures, and distractions that selecting what is most important to them can be difficult.

Some of CCL's programs use an exercise called *value sort* as a way to prioritize values and increase the degree to which one's behaviors reflect those priorities. Participating managers are given a list of characteristics, actions, feelings, objects, and goals (see the box on page 7) and asked to arrange them according to how much they are valued. The man-

agers then examine whether their behaviors match their priorities—whether, for instance, they are spending too much time and energy on things that hold little value for them.

Assessment. Once you have established your priorities in values, likes, and dislikes, you can better understand how aligned your behaviors are with your values. You may need to review what you have already given up and what you are willing to give up to get what is most important to you. In the study, the managers and executives who were most authentic viewed trade-offs not as negative but as a way to get closer to what they wanted most. Ask yourself what you need to let go of to better align your behaviors with your beliefs. Perhaps you need to delegate some of your job duties so you can take on new responsibilities, sacrifice leisure activities so you can make the most of a career opportunity, or accept slower progress up the management ladder to spend more time with your family. There are no “right” trade-offs to make, and your choices will likely change at various points in your life. The crucial thing is to be clear on what is most important to you now and what you will and will not do to get there. This clarity will position you to establish authenticity.

Taking action. This is where the going gets really tough. It’s one thing to be aware of your priorities and decide which trade-offs you are willing to make and quite another to make real changes in your life. Taking action doesn’t have to be on a grand scale, however—achieving a series of small changes can gradually align your behaviors with your most important values. If, for example, the most important thing to you is to improve the relationships in your personal life, you could cut back on the number of weekend hours you spend in the office or on business travel, then use that time to be with your family and friends. Although at first glance it might seem that your decreased time at work would hurt your job performance, your increased sense of well-being during your working hours could make you more productive and a better leader.

Getting support. In any area of personal development, securing the support of others can help achieve goals. Sharing your authenticity aims with trusted colleagues and friends can create a source of feedback and reinforcement that will make it easier to stay on track. At the same time, it’s important to reinforce yourself by believing in the legitimacy of your values and trusting your instincts. Sometimes acting

authentically requires going against what your boss, colleagues, family members, or friends tell you to do. Developing authenticity often requires taking risks, and you need to have faith in your own judgment about what is right for you.

THE REAL SELF

The role of authenticity has not been given its due by many leaders and organizations. When they get caught up in the details of day-to-day operations, less tangible issues such as authenticity don’t rank high on their priority lists. Yet struggles between beliefs and behaviors drain managers and executives of energy, and that hurts first their performance and then the organization’s performance. If leaders conclude that they have to leave their organizations to achieve authenticity, the loss of talent is a further blow to those organizations. To reach peak performance, managers and executives must be able to bring their real, whole selves to work. Organizations that are experiencing leadership problems should consider whether those problems can be traced at least in part to an organizational culture that stands in the way of managers’ and executives’ practicing their natural leadership styles. ✍

Choices, Choices . . .

One of the first steps in developing authenticity is becoming aware of the things that are most important to you and those that are not. One way to do this is to take a list of forty-three characteristics, actions, feelings, objects, and goals and rank them in order of their priority for you. Jot down each of the following words on a separate index card and place the cards in piles according to the following categories: Always Valued, Often Valued, Sometimes Valued, Seldom Valued, Never

Valued. (You can add to this list if your values aren’t included.) Try to limit to eight the number of words in the Always Valued category.

Achievement, Activity, Advancement, Adventure, Aesthetics, Affiliation, Affluence, Authority, Autonomy, Balance, Challenge, Collaboration, Community, Competence, Competition, Courage, Creativity, Economic Security, Enjoyment, Fame, Family, Friendship, Health,

Helping Others, Humor, Influence, Inner Harmony, Integrity, Justice, Knowledge, Location, Love, Loyalty, Order, Personal Development, Physical Fitness, Recognition, Responsibility, Self-Respect, Spirituality, Status, Variety, Wisdom

By asking yourself whether your behaviors are aligned with the things you value most, you can gain insight into how authentic your current choices are.