

To be an authentic leader, first be true to yourself

Margaret Beaton 01 December 2013

A brilliant paper in The Leadership Quarterly* shows that to be an authentic leader, you must first be true to yourself.

Authentic leaders are the most influential and find their role near effortless. Here's why. And why it's important to become an authentic leader.

By the dictionary, authentic means 'not a fake' and 'genuine'. And this is the best way to understand authentic leadership. Authentic leaders do not fake their leadership. They do not pretend to be leaders just because they occupy a position that requires them to lead. They lead in a genuinely self-expressed way – they are being themselves and not trying to conform to others' expectations. First and foremost they are being true to themselves.

They lead from conviction, not for status or honour or monetary reward. Their behaviour is deeply rooted in their values, so they are motivated to succeed by a particular cause or mission. Authentic leaders strive to self-actualise – and to make a difference in their organisation, family or community. Thus they are found in all walks of life.

How to recognise an authentic leader

The current Australian Broadcasting Corporation television series on **Paul Keating** by Kerry O'Brien demonstrates authentic leadership.

In telling his story Paul Keating, like all authentic leaders, displays these four characteristics:

Being a leader is central to their self-identity.

Putting this in another way, the person and their role are merged as they see themselves swaying others in pursuit of a cause. In Keating's political career it was the economic modernisation of Australian society by the exercise of power through his intellect and oratory that reflected his merged person-role.

Their self-beliefs are confidently defined and deeply internalised.

Their values and beliefs provide a framework for interpreting the world around them and for guiding their behaviour. For Keating his self-beliefs started in childhood with the devotion of his family, particularly his grandmother, and continued to form as he left school early and started work at 15.

They are driven to achieve goals that stem from passions.

Elected to Federal parliament at the age of 25, Keating achieved massive macro-economic reform as a member of the Australian Labor Party in public life as Treasurer from 1983 to 1991. And in his private life, he prized beauty and from an early age has admired the music of Mahler and collected French antique timepieces.

Their behaviour is a manifestation of their values and beliefs, rather than motivated by externally-sourced benefits.

Authentic leaders do not seek admiring followers, but rather those that confirm their self-concept. Keating was able to gather the support of rivals (Bob Hawke, except at the end of their relationship), apparent opponents (the business community) and supporters.

Benefits of authentic leadership



Authentic leadership is important because it maximises trust. In other words authentic leaders are most likely to be regarded as trustworthy and by therefore be followed.

The strength of their beliefs inspires others to give of their discretionary effort and contribute to the cause and pursue the leader's vision.

Finally, authentic leaders find the work of leadership relatively easy. They are resilient and have the stamina to constantly drive their organisations to higher levels.

Authentic leadership can be learned

Research shows authentic leadership can be developed. You do not have to be born with the traits of a leader. You do not have to wait to be promoted to a leadership position. And you do not have to be at the top of your organisation to lead. Authentic leadership can be learned by anyone developing their self-knowledge through reflecting on their successes and failures. Everyone can learn to be more authentic by knowing what is important to them.

To be a truly effective leader, you need to be an authentic leader. And to be true to yourself.

* Reference: Shamir, B and Gailit Eilam (2005). "What's your story?" A life-stories approach to authentic leadership development. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 16, 395-417

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This post was written by Dr [Margaret Beaton](#), a director of [Beaton Executive Coaching](#) and [Beaton Research + Consulting](#). You can also find Margaret on [LinkedIn](#).