

Construct your life story: Develop as an authentic leader

Margaret Beaton 27 January 2014

In December last year my post *'To be an authentic leader, first be true to yourself'* caused many to write and call. How to become an authentic leader was a common theme in these conversations.

This post, *Construct your life story and develop as an authentic leader*, shows how by constructing your life story you can develop as an authentic leader. Let me explain.

Being authentic means leading in a genuinely self-expressed way. Being an authentic leader is not about your style and skills. Rather, it's about your self-concept and the relationships between your self-concept and your actions as a leader.

How constructing your life story develops the three hallmarks of an authentic leader

There are three hallmarks of authentic leadership as an excellent article in *The Leadership Quarterly* sets out*. You develop these hallmarks and move towards becoming an authentic leader as you consciously reflect on the meaning in the events of your life experience that form the narrative of your life story.

- + *Self-knowledge*. Authentic leaders know themselves. They are aware of their strengths and weaknesses. They know their style and how it affects their interactions and relationships with others.
- + *Clarity of self-concept*. Authentic leaders know who they are and what they stand for. They do not have to pretend to lead or fake in their role. Clarity of self-concept provides the context for all activities and is a source of stability and coherence. Authentic leaders play their roles from positions of conviction, not status or power. They are pursuing a cause, a mission in which they believe deeply.
- + *Person-role merger*. Their personal values are strongly aligned with the values required to enact their role as a leader. In other words, for authentic leaders what they want for themselves is what's needed to do their job. The two are completely aligned. Person-role merger enables authentic leaders to lead from within, knowing what they are doing is what they believe.

How to develop as an authentic leader

You can learn to be an authentic leader. Research shows this learning takes place through the way you construct your 'life story' around your life experiences.

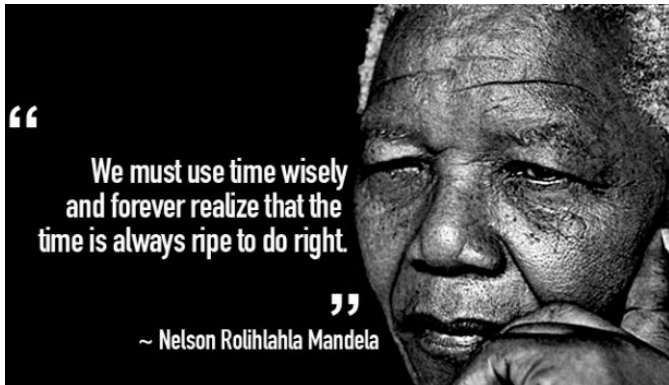
Your life story is your narrative about yourself and the events in your life that have shaped who you are. But your story only comes to life when you reflect on the meaning of these events and how they inform your values and beliefs. Your story informs answers to 'Who I am?', 'Why I am here?' and 'How have I got to where I am now?'.

Your life story gives rise to the degree of your self-awareness, the clarity of your concept of yourself and the strength of your values and beliefs. Thus the more you work on constructing your life story and reflecting on the deep meaning of its events to you, the more you move towards developing yourself as an authentic leader.

Life experiences shape you

Life experiences come in at least four guises.

One. For some, they are the natural opportunities afforded in school (class captain) or socially (club chairperson). It is often said these are born leaders where their authenticity has been evident from an early age. Others blossom late when their leadership comes to the fore when the situation calls for it.



Two. Others become leaders as a result of struggle, in the crucibles of ordeals like childhood financial hardship or unexpectedly losing a prized job or being persecuted. These hardships transform you. They often have a moral component relating to making hard choices and eschewing the easy path, as Nelson Mandela did. The story more often than not is one of succeeding in spite of the odds and overcoming great adversity. Reflecting on these experiences enables you to recognise and reinforce your independence, resilience and self-confidence.

Three. Yet other experiences relate to discovering a cause to champion and to which you can unreservedly commit yourself. Again, just as Nelson Mandela did in his devotion to the achievement of democracy by peaceful means. Having a deeply meaningful life goal provides you with self-identity and a driving life purpose.

Four. Specific experiences, whether relating to success or failure or based on role models, can also form the basis of your life story. As a leader you base your self-knowledge and convictions on direct such lessons and observations.

Remember, it's not just your life experiences that shape you, it's how you reflect on them and construct your story from them that makes you authentic. And enables you to say 'I am who I am because I know who I am and why I am this way'.

Advantages of being an authentic leader

Becoming an authentic leader has two major advantages.

Loyal followers. Authentic leaders are consistent in their behaviour and in their communication about vision and the means of getting there. This consistency and the conviction with which it is portrayed engender trust — she means what she says and she does what she says. Followers trust the integrity and the judgement of the authentic leader; it's hard not to. And as a result authentic leaders attract followers who are genuine in their allegiance to the leader.

Inner strength. The authentic leader has resolve, energy and persistence. Dealing with resistance and effecting change requires the inner strength to cope with frustration and overcome obstacles and setbacks. Like Mandela, all authentic leaders fall back on their inner strength when they are isolated, stressed or not certain of the right course of action. Being authentic means expressing your true self in the way you enact your role as a leader. It means following your own compass, your way.

In conclusion

Authentic leadership is the most powerful form of leadership, the most influential. It is the source of a high performing culture and a sustainable organisation.

Constructing and continuously revising your life story – and its deepest meaning – by reflection is the surest route to becoming an authentic leader. Start today.

* 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.