

Authenticity

"Being yourself" as a leader



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Authenticity – ‘being yourself’ as a leader

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It seems to be generally agreed that leaders should be authentic. Yet, the definitions of this ‘tongue twister word’ are most diverse. I have identified three different understandings or uses of ‘authenticity’:

1. The ‘packaging artists’

Some managers only care about their effect, how their message is received by their employees and if they believe what they said.

Their central issue is, ‘Did I appear authentic?’ The ‘packaging’ of a piece of information, the perfect presentation seems to be more important than the content of the message itself. In an extreme version of this interpretation I am authentic when my message is believed even when I deliberately do not tell the truth. Authenticity is misunderstood as a means to an end, as a well-trained show to influence people.

2. Lack of inhibition

Others interpret authenticity in the way that it gives them the right to say everything without any inhibition, to complain, to grumble and unload all their frustration on the others, ‘I am super-angry – so I show how I feel. I am authentic so I can show myself as I really am’. This somehow reminds me of the typical group session dynamics of the seventies, a very immature attitude to deal with emotions. Misunderstanding authenticity in this way only leads to insults and irritations.

3. Real authenticity

‘Authentes’ is ancient Greek and means ‘done with your own hand’. Authenticity is a ‘feeling for oneself, for the real self in any situation. When you find coherence with yourself, you will see the reflexion of yourself in the mirror. ‘That is consistent for me, it is right for me, I really mean what I say, I can stand up for it and it matches my values.’

There is no other or more direct way than this inner consent to myself. Real authenticity is this alignment of my acting with myself and my essential values.

That is, admittedly, not always easy, 'Leaders should act in accordance to their position and task, they should function'. But their function is not to act according to the expectations of others. If I accept being led by the expectations of others, I give up the leadership of my life.

Not acting authentically means not being really myself. That causes physical and mental discomfort. The results are the typical symptoms of stress: tension, irritability, stomach or backache, even burnout. We only have a fulfilling job as a leader if we can act with inner consent. Therefore being authentic, as I understand it, means:

- being rooted in myself: conscious of my values, my beliefs, my attitudes
- believing my own perception in any situation
- connecting myself with my „inner leader”: the feeling of inner consent
- remaining true to myself: aligning my behaviour to this inner consent, realising what has importance in my view

A person who is authentic offers an invitation to his/her inner self. Like a musician who plays authentically and lets the audience participate in this process of self-discovery. That is fascinating and attractive, as revealing your real personality is extraordinary and unique. Charisma – that entirely intangible positive aura – shows a rooted way of leadership resting in itself. This has a positive impact on the organisation as well as on myself: authenticity brings along satisfaction and fulfilment.