

What, Exactly, is Authentic Leadership?

When I hear people talking about “authentic leadership”, I think about Jimmy Buffet, one of my favorite songwriters and singers, and his song “Fruitcakes”. In the song lyrics, he talks about relationships: “We all got ‘em, we all want ‘em, what do we do with them?” With authentic leadership, everybody talks about it, everybody wants it, but what does it mean to be an “authentic leader”?

Well, certainly not, in my opinion, what Lou Tice, CEO of the Pacific Institute, means when he talks about being authentic as one of his “Three Basic Principles”: According to Tice, “...Authentic is to always be who I am...I am who I am, win or lose...I’ve just got to be who I am”. (Does that remind me of another song, Buddy Holly’s “I’ve got to be me!”?) For my money, just “being who you are” sounds to me like a cop-out in personality growth, a crack in a broken phonograph record, and a developmental dead-end. I happen to think that we need to work at being authentic, and it’s not always an easy row-to-hoe.

Bill George, formerly the CEO of Medtronic and now a well-read author, seems to me to be more on the right track. George writes about “being your own person”, but also emphasizes “being aware of your weaknesses”. He identifies the qualities that leaders must develop (my emphasis) as the following:

- Understanding their purpose
- Practicing solid values
- Leading with heart
- Establishing connected relationships
- Demonstrating self-discipline

I personally think that these “qualities” must be turned into behaviors and behavior patterns, and George gives us some ideas about the above:

In “Understanding your purpose”, George talks about “passion for your purpose” and finding that purpose by seeking work where you believe in its intrinsic worth, and can use your abilities to the fullest in doing it. He cites the behaviors of Earl Bakken, the founder of Medtronic who, when he talks to employees or customers, describes the mission of the company (“to restore people to fuller lives”) and enlists them to his cause. “He carries in his pocket a supply of cards with the mission written on them, and gives these cards out to everyone he meets. He frequently shares stories of patients whose lives have been restored by Medtronic products. It is hard not to get caught up by his passion.”

This sounds to me like a corollary of Stephen Covey’s *8th Habit*, “.... finding your voice and helping others to find theirs”. When you understand and project your passion, and help others to find theirs in yours, or maybe in some other passion of their own particular choosing, you are helping people to develop these purposeful behaviors.

“Practicing sound values” : The essence of this quality is integrity – saying what you can be counted on for, and doing what you say you’ll do. I frequently attend services at Summit Christian Church in San Antonio. Rick Goldwin, the pastor at Summit, sums it up this way: “Tell the truth, keep your word, and say what you believe.” Rick says that a person who doesn’t keep his/her promise is like a “...cloud on the wind, with no rain”. He also preaches that the leader must above all serve others. Bill George gives an example of that kind of leader in Max DePree, former CEO of furniture maker Herman Miller. DePree writes in his book *Leadership Is an Art*: “The leader’s first job is to define reality. The last is to say thank you. In between, the leader must become a servant and a debtor.” DePree practiced what he was preaching. While he was CEO, his salary was capped at 20 times that of an hourly worker – contrast that with today’s CEOs who are earning – on average – 500 times their hourly workers’ wage.

“Leading with heart” means practicing compassion, with yourself and others – first of all, being in touch with our own heart (your inner being), and then being in close touch with others’. Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner wrote a seminal work on *The Leadership Challenge*, following it up with another book which focuses on one of the Five Practices they espouse: *Encouraging the Heart*. Among the specific behaviors recommended in this practice are: recognizing contributions and saying thank you! (You read this above from Max DePree and Pastor Rick, right?); and celebrating accomplishments. The first means personal recognition, in public as much as possible, and a memorable gift (perhaps, but not necessarily monetary). The second means making a public occasion out of a private victory. When I worked with Colgate-Palmolive in Panama some years ago, they had a public area in the back of the plant where workers went to relax and have refreshments together on a Friday afternoon. They called it affectionately “La Choza”, “The Hut” – with warm connotations of a beach cabaña or a personal cottage. The General Manager frequently used this time and place to congratulate some group or person for a special accomplishment – and his just being there and schmoozing with them was enough to encourage their hearts and their spirits!

“Establishing connected relationships” follows from the above, since leading with your heart implies an emotional connection with others. In the final analysis, we listen to people we respect, but we follow people we like (and we think like us!) George writes: “The detached style of leadership will not be successful in the twenty-first century. Today’s employees demand more personal relationships with their leaders before they will give themselves fully to their jobs.” What are the behaviors? This one is a bit harder, since not everyone will be connected, or want to be connected in the same way in any given cultural context. But here are a couple of examples: a few years ago in one of our leadership development programs, a CEO participant was searching for ways to feel closer to his colleagues and they to him. What he hit on was to circulate around the different coffee spaces in the different areas of his building and say hello to whomever he found there. He also began to take his sack lunch to the snack room, instead of eating in his office. The idea was just to make himself visible to others, and to connect with them – no agenda, just being there. Another exec. wrote us that after his program, he went back to his organization and had pads of note paper made up with the company logo and the notation: “Here’s how you helped me today...Thanks! The system works for all of us!” And he signed the note at the bottom, next to a silly little “happy face”. He resolved to “catch people doing things right” and to send 3 or 4 notes per week. At first he never heard anything back; but pretty soon he began to catch sight of his little notes being pinned up in the cubicles around the office, and lots of little happy faces smiling back at him.

A divisional CEO I coached in Mexico began to do “town hall meetings”. He started the meetings traditionally enough, standing behind a podium and reading some comments about positive business results. But then he moved over to a large easy chair, sat down, and began to take questions from the audience. When people spoke, he repeated back their name, and in many cases was able to make some connection with their area’s accomplishments. But most of all, he just listened and thanked them for their comments and questions. And this was an audience of several hundred people. When he finished, there was a crowd of people around him, waiting to shake his hand as he made his way to the exit. And it was easy to observe the connection *they* felt with him.....Different strokes for different folks; but the point is to focus on how connected *they* feel to you, even more than on how you feel with them. Because of the latter, sometimes this effect of connection with others can even be accomplished by video. Jack Welch was a master at this video medium, as well as being absolutely connected to his managers through his physical presence at management meetings.

But most important, we must be connectors of people with each other. This means that leadership development addresses not just individual [leaders] but the links between individuals and the systems and cultures in which they work. Connected leaders enable or empower their colleagues and their followers to be better collaborators among themselves. So this comes full circle with the processes we have been working with in leadership development: self-knowledge, knowledge of and empathy with others, development of teams and team leaders, and shared values and goals. It all comes together around authentic – and shared – leadership.

The last of the elements of authentic leadership, “Demonstrating self-discipline”, is part and parcel of the others above. Several factors are of particular importance here:

- Stress management and the ability to stay cool and calm under pressure;
- Good physical condition and emphasis on healthy exercise routines, weight control, and sufficient rest;
- Self-control and the ability to maintain high ethical and moral standards.

The first two of these are closely related. High stress levels undermine any leader’s ability to respond adequately to emergencies. When we are knee-deep in ordinary stress, and who isn’t these days, we can still handle difficult situations that put us in up to our hips. But if we are already up to our chins in stress, we can easily drown with just a few cup-fulls more. Regular exercise and good physical condition help us keep our heads, hearts, and guts healthy. But more than that, good physical condition is one of the real requirements of leadership, particularly at higher levels. The Center for Creative Leadership emphasizes in its program for top executives, *Leadership at the Peak*, that executives at high rank must have higher-than-average levels of physical health to cope with the higher-than-average requirements of their jobs.

We at TEAM International® are putting more and more emphasis on health in our programs. We recently conducted a contract program with a sales team from an organization experiencing high levels of stress. Several of them were on stress and blood-pressure medication, and two of them had already had heart-attacks in their ‘40s! They had also lost colleagues to the ravages of cardio-vascular disease, and part of their goal-setting process had to do with how to help each other reduce stress on the team. Good health, and executives’ support of each other in this area is essential in organizations today. For some terrific ideas in this area, see *Younger Next Year*, by Chris Crowley and Henry S. Lodge. You will not be able to ignore the advice in this book!

Lastly, ethics and morals have become Topic A in the wake of Watergate, the peccadilloes of the Clinton administration, the Enron scandals, and now the housing meltdown. A new field of study has developed around "Moral Intelligence", although much of it proceeds from what we know about emotional intelligence and the self-control factor. Bill George's newest book is called *True North*, and it contains many stories about executives who have found ways to hold to their values and still be successful at high levels of their business practice. I believe that practicing moral and emotional intelligence will become a bedrock component of executive development in the years ahead.

Although there are daily appearing new authors and speakers on authentic leadership, I want to mention one other because of his connection with a thread of leadership study that has grown out of the discussion of authentic leadership: Bruce Avolio, with his co-author Fred Luthans, published in 2006 *The High Impact Leader*, which is his/their treatise on "ALD", authentic leadership development. I mention it also because his idea of "moments matter" coincides with Bill George's concept of "the crucible". The concept follows-up on Warren Bennis' "The Leader Within", a wonderful 1990 videotape about the leadership development process experienced by 3 outstanding leaders, Lt.Gen. Dave Palmer, formerly Superintendent and a change-leader at West Point; Frances Hesselbein, formerly president of the Girl Scouts, a winner of the Presidential Medal of Freedom, and now head of the Leader to Leader Institute; and Max DePree, who is referenced above. Of each of these outstanding examples of high-impact leaders, Bennis traces their development over a series of formative experiences in their lives. This is also what Avolio means by "moments matter", i.e. taking advantage of your experiences as a source of learning, and making these moments count in your own development. You can, as a corollary, set up these moments for yourself by putting yourself to the test with difficult experiences to then learn from.

This returns us to George's term the "crucible", the metaphor referring to the test of fire that a metal goes through at high temperature to remove alloys and produce a purified product. It is a similar metaphor to the one that Warren Bennis again uses in his book (with Robert Thomas), *Geeks to Geezers: How Era, Values and Defining Moments Shape Leaders*. (My emphasis.) The point is this: authentic leadership is a development phenomenon. It arises out of the creative leader's use of his/her experiences which become defining moments in helping to shape the behaviors and attitudes that lead to the authentic practices mentioned above by George. We are all in our own "crucibles" that forge our strength and purity, or that melt us down into formless shapes over time. Our job is to pay attention along the way as to what our experiences can teach us, make the most of these experiences as learning sources, and mine them for the pure gold they can provide us. At the same time, we should be helping our colleagues and our family members to be searching for their own experiences and forming their own life crucibles.

Somehow along the way we find our own authentic selves, and we influence others to find theirs as well. Authentic leadership makes its own loop, providing the leadership for others to find their own authenticity, and in the process setting in motion a process of growth and development of a "culture of authenticity".

You'll find in the cites above a number of stories about authentic leaders, and I'll end this article with an account about the most authentic, proven leader that I personally know. Some of you who have taken programs with TEAM International® will recognize

the name of our colleague, Bernard "Burn" Loeffke, and you will, without question, remember your contact with him as memorable.

Burn retired as a Major General in the U.S. Army, after a long and distinguished career as a military officer. He was a paratrooper with more than 250 jumps to his credit; served 3 combat tours in VietNam; won 4 Silver Stars, 5 Bronze Stars, and a Purple Heart. He speaks 5 languages, including Spanish and Portuguese – the latter makes him very valuable to us in our programs in Latin America. After retiring from the military, Burn went back to school to become a Physician's Assistant, and he now does medical missions to many parts of the underdeveloped world. He and his partner and co-author, Carmen Queral, are in charge of the executive wellness/fitness element in our leadership program.

A simple story from Burn's book will give vivid testimony to his own qualities of authenticity, along the lines laid out above by Bill George. Although just a Major, Burn was given command of a battalion of troops in VietNam. He was chosen over several Lt. Colonels because of low morale and a high casualty rate in the battalion, on a recommendation by his former commander that he could turn a bad combat unit around:

"To increase the morale of our soldiers, we devised the Foxhole Exchange Program. A company commander would identify the best soldier in his unit, and I would send him back to sleep in my tent, while I replaced him in his unit. This allowed me to observe and feel what our soldiers were experiencing. The Exchange Program was a great morale booster, as all the soldiers wanted to sleep in my tent and eat hot meals in the rear...."

Now re-read the above paragraph to fully grasp what is understated above: The Commander (CEO) goes out on the line and sleeps in the foxhole of his soldier, and the soldier goes to the CEO's tent and has a hot meal. This happened, as Burn tells it, several times a week over his entire command tour....Can you imagine what that means in an active war zone, in terms of both the relative danger and the relative comfort of each of these physical locations? To me, this is authentic leadership – putting oneself "on the line" for his troops, connecting with his soldiers, and sharing their danger, and the self-discipline and moral stamina to continue doing it over time!

Because of this "simple deed", as Burn called it, morale increased tremendously. Of course, Burn was also out on patrol with his troops, and that inspired his Captains and their Lieutenants to start going out, as well.

One of Burn's soldiers wrote him the following letter:

"Dear Colonel: I thank you for letting me exchange places with you. The men also appreciate what you are doing. However, I still don't like the Army, and I still don't like officers. As a matter of fact, my favorite prayer goes this way: 'O Lord, distribute bullets as you do the pay; let the officers get most of them.' Respectfully, Citizen Jenkins."

I will add, finally, that on the citation for one of his Silver Stars, Burn was credited with carrying on his shoulders a wounded soldier out of a firefight, himself sustaining wounds in the process. I hope Mr. Jenkins took note of who was sharing bullets that day.

In TEAM International®, I am the titular leader in the programs that Burn and I do together. In every one of these programs, and everywhere we work, Burn routinely outscores me as a facilitator in every measure we take. I am very proud of that fact, and I count myself very fortunate to be on the same team as he. His authenticity inspires me and all the rest of us on our team to give the very best we can to our “troops” in the classroom.

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