AUTHENTICITY: Lifestyles for Managing Yours

In the last few months, I have had occasion to rethink and re-research the literature on Authenticity, as part of a project to translate the article on our website into Spanish and Portuguese. At the same time, although the concepts were clear, and some specific examples of leaders who I thought demonstrated Authentic behaviors came to mind, it seemed there was a gap in some "leadership lifestyles" that we could use and expect to build into behavioral patterns in our practice of Authentic Leadership.

I found some interesting pathways toward authentic leadership lifestyles in a 2005 article in *HBR* called "Managing Authenticity", by Rob Goffee and Gareth Jones. These authors happen to be from the London Business School, and the latter was visiting at INSEAD. So, in addition to their intrinsic value, their article provides a Continental view (not only a U.S. one) of behavioral patterns from the authors' collective experience and research.

Goffee and Jones begin with the principle that managing <u>our</u> authenticity proceeds from the management of its perception by <u>others</u> – "No leader can look into a mirror and say, ' I am authentic.' A person cannot be authentic on his or her own." However, since perceptions can be managed in some way, what people perceive in us can be influenced by the behaviors and lifestyles that we choose to project for ourselves.

Here are some conscious steps that we can use to "manage" our authenticity, according to Goffee and Jones. I have added some modifications and comments around my own personal observations of leaders' behaviors and lifestyles.

1. Get to know ourselves and our origins better by --
   - Exploring our autobiographies: Familiarize ourselves with our own "identity anchors" – the people, places, and events that shaped us. [Also called "defining moments". See below. *]
   - Return to our roots: Take a holiday with old friends; spend time away from the trappings our jobs have surrounded us with.
   - Avoid our customary comfort zones: Step out of routine, seek new adventures, take some risks. [A GM of a Latin American subsidiary of one of our customers was, in his vacation time, a competitive auto-racing driver!]
   - Get honest feedback: Ask regularly for feedback from people who will tell us the truth about perceptions others hold – and why!

2. Get to know others better by –
   - Building a rich picture of our people and their environment: Without invading their privacy boundaries, find out about people's backgrounds, biographies, families and aspirations.
   - Removing barriers between ourselves and others: Show our approachability to our direct reports, assistants, etc. [We are vulnerable to their performance, of course, so we need to connect with them in order to understand their drivers and limitations.]

- Empathizing with our people and their work: People need to know that we car about them, and that we are passionate about <u>our</u> work and the work <u>they</u> do.
- Letting others know what's unique (and authentic) about them: Give people feedback that acknowledges and validates their origins and background.

3. Connect to the organizational context by –
   - "Getting the distance right" : Use our sense of self and our understanding of others to make the appropriate connection – on their terms as well as ours. Close enough to matter, far enough away to be comfortable.
   - Sharpening our social receptors: Seek out experiences that help us detect the sometimes-subtle clues and cues that will help us connect with and attract followers. [One CEO I know, while he was growing with his logistics company, went on the road for a week with one of his truckers as a way of better learning the business and the people who worked for the company. That act created a legend in his company!]
   - Honoring deeply held values and social mores: We will connect with others better if we understand clearly their culture(s) and their approaches to life. [This is especially true when we're working outside our home/country culture.]
   - Developing our resilience: There will be setbacks when we expose ourselves to less-well known contexts and cultures. We need to be ready to back off, reflect, find out more, and try, try again!

Not all of these "lifestyle steps" will suit everyone, and not all will be universally appropriate. But the more we can do to connect with ourselves and with others, wherever we are and they are in our lives and in our world, the better we will be able to enhance the perception of being authentic leaders, true to ourselves and to others!

[* I have written previously about the very first bullet point above in an article called "What, Exactly, is Authentic Leadership?" (See TEAM International's website www.teaminternational.net.) Referring to his videotape, "The Leader Within", I mention Warren Bennis' track of leader profiles and the "defining moments" that shaped them. In one particular case, that of Lt.Gen. Dave R. Palmer, former Superintendent at West Point, the events that shaped him came out of his humble upbringing in Oklahoma and Texas. When I met Gen. Palmer, he was a new Brigadier and my co-participant in the same Leadership Development Program. "I never expected to become a General Officer," Dave told us, "I'm just a country boy from Texas." Yet during one of his 2 tours of Viet Nam service, Dave was an aide to General William Westmoreland, the Commander of all troops in Viet Nam from 1964 – 68, at the peak of the war. These and other experiences developed Palmer's belief in character as the principal force for shaping good leaders. And that belief led him to a distinguished tenure at the U.S. Military Academy, where he championed a program that provided leadership experiences to mold strong character performance in his cadets. Confer also Bennis' *Geeks and Geezers* for more on the concept of "defining moments".]

<u>REFERENCES</u>

Warren Bennis, "The Leader Within", (videotape), Business Training Media, 1990.

_____ & Robert Thomas, *Geeks and Geezers: How Era, Values, and Defining Moments Shape Leaders*, Harvard Business School Press, Cambridge, MA 2002.

Rob Goffee and Gareth Jones, "Managing Authenticity: The Paradox of Great Leadership", *Harvard Business Review*, Boston, MA, December 2005.

~T. Noel Osborn, Ph.D.