

The Journey to Authenticity by Bill George

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LEADERS are all very different people. Any prospective leader who buys into the necessity of attempting to emulate all the characteristics of a leader is doomed to fail. I know because I tried it early in my career. It simply doesn't work.

The one essential quality you must have to lead is to be your own person, authentic in every regard. The best leaders are autonomous and highly independent. Those who are too responsive to the desires of others are likely to be whipsawed by competing interests, too quick to deviate from their course or unwilling to make difficult decisions for fear of offending. My advice to the people I mentor is simply to be themselves.



Developing Your Unique Leadership Style

TO become authentic, each of us has to develop our own leadership style, consistent with our own personality and character.

Unfortunately, the pressures of an organization push us to adhere to its normative style. But if we conform to a style that is not consistent with who we are, we will never become authentic leaders.

Contrary to what much of the literature says, your type of leadership style is not what matters. Great world leaders—George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Winston Churchill, Franklin Roosevelt, Margaret Thatcher, Martin Luther King Jr., Mother Teresa, John F. Kennedy—all had very different styles. Yet each of them was an entirely authentic human being. There is no way you could ever attempt to emulate any of them without looking foolish.

The same is true for business leaders. Compare the last three CEOs of General Electric: the statesmanship of Reginald Jones, the dynamism of Jack Welch, and the empowering style of Jeff Immelt. All of them are highly successful leaders with entirely different leadership styles. Yet the GE organization has rallied around each of them, adapted to their styles, and flourished as a result. What counts is the authenticity of the leader, not the style.

Nonetheless, it is important that you develop a leadership style that works well for you and is consistent with your character and your personality. Over time you will have to hone your style to be effective in leading different types of people and to work in different types of environments. This is integral to your development as a leader.

Being true to the person you were created to be means accepting your faults as well as using your strengths. Accepting your shadow side is an essential part of being authentic. The problem comes when people are so eager to win the approval of others that they try to cover their shortcomings and sacrifice their authenticity to gain the respect and admiration of their associates.

In attempting to cover

I too have struggled in getting comfortable with my weaknesses—my tendency to intimidate others with an overly challenging style, my impatience, and my occasional lack of tact. Only recently have I realized that my strengths and weaknesses are two sides of the same coin. For years I felt I had to be perfect, or at least appear that I was on top of everything. I tried to hide my weaknesses from others, fearing they would reject me if they knew who I really was. Eventually, I realized that they could see my weaknesses more clearly than I could. In attempting to cover things up, I was only fooling myself. During my career I received lots of feedback to modify my leadership style so as to fit in with the organization's norms. Several supervisors and human resource specialists urged me to become a different kind of leader: less passionate, more laid back, less engaged, less challenging, less critical of others. I listened carefully to their advice but quietly rejected it. Had I followed this advice, I would have become a “plain vanilla” manager or even been seen as a phony.

It took me 20 years in business to find the right place to devote my energies—a mission-driven company named Medtronic. Had it not been for the frustrations of my previous job, I might never have accepted the opportunity. It turned out to be the most important step of my career.



Dimensions of Authentic Leaders

LET'S examine the essential dimensions of all authentic leaders, the qualities that true leaders must develop. I have determined through many experiences in leading others that authentic leaders demonstrate these five qualities:

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

Acquiring the five dimensions of an authentic leader is not a sequential process; rather, leaders are developing them continuously throughout their lives.



Understanding Your Purpose

TO become a leader, it is essential that you first answer the question, “Leadership for what purpose?” If you lack purpose and direction in leading, why would anyone want to follow you?

Many people want to become leaders without giving much thought to their purpose. They are attracted to the power and prestige of leading an organization and the financial rewards that go with it. But without a real sense of purpose, leaders are at the mercy of their egos and are vulnerable to narcissistic impulses. There is no way you can adopt someone else's purpose and still be an authentic leader. You can study the purposes others pursue and you can work

with them in common purposes, but in the end the purpose for your leadership must be uniquely yours.

To find your purpose, you must first understand yourself, your passions, and your underlying motivations. Then you must seek an environment that offers a fit between the organization's purpose and your own. Your search may take experience in several organizations before you can find the one that is right for you.

The late Robert Greenleaf, a former AT&T executive, is well known for his concept of leaders as servants of the people. In *Servant Leadership*, he advocates service to others as the leader's primary purpose. If people feel you are genuinely interested in serving others, then they will be prepared not just to follow you but to dedicate themselves to the common cause.

One of the best examples of a leader with purpose was the late David Packard, co-founder of Hewlett-Packard. I met him in early 1969 when he was the new Deputy Secretary of Defense and I was the special assistant to the Secretary of Navy. Packard had taken a leave from HP to serve his country. A big, powerful, yet modest man, he immediately impressed me with his openness, his sincerity, and his commitment to make a difference through his work.

He returned to HP a few years later to build it into one of the great companies of its time through his dedication to the company's mission, known as "The HP Way," and to excellence in R&D and customer service. He inspired HP's employees to incredible levels of commitment. At his death he was one of the wealthiest people in the world, yet no one would ever have known it by his personal spending. Most of his money went into funding philanthropic projects. Dave Packard was a truly authentic leader, a role model for me and for many in my generation.

Many leaders search for years, even decades, to find the purpose for their leadership. It is relatively easy to state your purpose early in life, but much harder to develop passion for it. Passion for your purpose comes when you are highly motivated by your work because you believe in its intrinsic worth, and you can use your abilities to maximum effect. If your early career experiences do not inspire you, then it is wise to continue your search in a different venue, job, or company where you can find passion for your work. After all, life goes by quickly and you don't want to spend your time sleep-walking through life.



Practicing Solid Values

LEADERS are defined by their values and their character. The values of the authentic leader are shaped by personal beliefs, developed through study, introspection, and consultation with others—and a lifetime of experience. These values define their holder's moral compass. Such leaders know the "true north" of their compass, the deep sense of the right thing to do. Without a moral compass, any leader can wind up like the executives who are facing possible prison sentences today because they lacked a sense of right and wrong.

While the development of fundamental values is crucial, integrity is the one value that is required in every authentic leader. Integrity is not just the absence of lying, but telling the whole truth, as painful as it may be. If you don't

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exercise complete integrity in your interactions, no one can trust you. If they cannot trust you, why would they ever follow you?

I once had a colleague who would never lie to me, but often he shared only positive parts of the story, sheltering me from the ugly side. Finally, I told him that real integrity meant giving me the whole story so that together we could make sound decisions. Rather than thinking less of him if he did so, I assured him, I would have a higher opinion of his courage and integrity.

One of my role models of values-centered leadership is Max De Pree, the former CEO of furniture maker Herman Miller. De Pree is a modest man guided by a deep concern for serving others; he is true to his values in every aspect of his life. His humanity and values can be seen through the exemplary way in which his company conducts itself. De Pree describes his philosophy of values-centered leadership in his classic book, *Leadership Is an Art*. De Pree also subscribes to Greenleaf's ideas on servant leadership, and expands them by offering his own advice, "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."

De Pree believes that a corporation should be "a community of people," all of whom have value and share in the fruits of their collective labor. De Pree practices what he preaches. While he was CEO, his salary was capped at 20 times that of an hourly worker. In his view, tying the CEO's salary to that of the workers helps cement trust in leadership. Contrast that with today's CEOs, who are earning—on average—500 times their hourly workers' wage. As De Pree said recently, "When leaders indulge themselves with lavish perks and the trappings of power, they are damaging their standing as leaders."

Having found the purpose that ignites your passions, you then have to test your values in the crucible of life's experiences. This doesn't just happen by listing your values. Only in the crucible will you learn how to cope with pressures to compromise your values and deal with potential conflicts between them. You have to put yourself in situations in which your values are challenged and then make difficult decisions in the context of your values. This is not easy when the outcome is uncertain and there is a lot at stake. Nonetheless, it is in these situations and not the easy ones that you find the "true north" of your moral compass.

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Leading with Heart

SOMETIMES we refer to people as being *bighearted*. What we really mean is that they are open and willing to share themselves fully with us, and are genuinely interested in us. Leaders who do that, like Sam Walton, founder of Wal-Mart, and Earl Bakken, founder of Medtronic, have the ability to ignite the souls of their employees to achieve greatness far beyond what anyone imagined possible.

One of the most bighearted leaders I know is Marilyn Nelson, chair and CEO of the Carlson Companies, the privately held hospitality and travel services giant. When she became CEO several years ago, she inherited a hard-nosed organization that was driven for growth but not known for empathy for its employees. Shortly after joining the company, Nelson had what she refers to as her "epiphany." She was meeting with a group of MBA students who had

been studying the company's culture. When she asked the students for feedback, Nelson got a stony silence from the group. Finally, a young woman raised her hand and said, "We hear from employees that Carlson is a sweatshop that doesn't care."

That incident sent Nelson into high gear. She created a motivational program called "Carlson Cares." As the company was preparing for its launch, Nelson's staff told her they needed more time to change the culture before introducing the program. Nelson decided that she could not wait and decided to become the company's role model for caring and empathy. She immediately set out to change the environment, using her passion, motivational skills, and sincere interest in her employees and her customers. She took the lead on customer sales calls and interacted every day with employees in Carlson operations. Her positive energy has transformed the company's culture, built its customer relationships, accelerated its growth, and strengthened its bottom line.

Some leaders behave as though they have no compassion for anyone. It is your life experiences that open up your heart to have compassion for the most difficult challenges that people face along life's journey. Far too many leaders wall themselves off from people who are experiencing the full range of life's challenges, hardships, and difficulties. They often avoid intimate relationships, even with their friends and loved ones.

Developing your heart means following your own path and being open to all of life's experiences. It means being in touch with the depths of your inner being and being true to your-self. It requires that you know who you are, your weaknesses as well as your strengths. It is in developing compassion that we become authentic human beings.



Establishing Enduring Relationships

THE capacity to develop close and enduring relationships is one mark of a leader. As Krishnamurti says, "Relationship is the mirror in which we see ourselves as we are." Unfortunately, many leaders of major companies believe their job is to create the strategy, organization structure, and organizational processes. Then they just delegate the work to be done, remaining aloof from the people doing the work.

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The detached style of leadership will not be successful in the 21st century. Today's employees demand more personal relationships with their leaders before they will give themselves fully to their jobs. They insist on having access to their leaders, knowing that it is in the openness and the depth of the relationship with the leader that trust and commitment are built. Bill Gates, Michael Dell, and Jack Welch are so successful because they connect directly with their employees and realize from them a deeper commitment to their work and greater loyalty to the company. Authentic leaders establish trusting relationships with people throughout the organization as well as in their personal lives. The rewards of these relationships, both tangible and intangible, are long lasting.

I always tried to establish close relationships with my colleagues, looking to them as a closely knit team whose collective knowledge and wisdom about the business vastly exceeds my own. Many corporate leaders fear these kinds of relationships. As another CEO said to me, "Bill, I don't want to get too close to my subordinates because someday I may have to

terminate them.” Actually, the real reason goes much deeper than that. Many leaders—men in particular—fear having their weaknesses and vulnerabilities exposed. So they create distance from employees and a sense of aloofness. Instead of being authentic, they are creating a persona for themselves.

Enduring relationships are built on connectedness and a shared purpose of working together toward a common goal. Every person has a life story and wants to share it with you, if you are open to hearing the story and sharing in return. It is in sharing our life stories that we develop trust and intimacy with our colleagues.



Demonstrating Self-Discipline

SELF-DISCIPLINE is an essential quality of an authentic leader. Without it, you cannot gain the respect of your followers. It is easy to say that someone has good values but lacks the discipline to convert those values into consistent actions. This is a hollow excuse. None of us is perfect, of course, but authentic leaders must have the self-discipline to do everything they can to demonstrate their values through their actions. When we fall short, it is equally important to admit our mistakes.

Leaders are highly competitive people. They are driven to succeed in whatever they take on. Authentic leaders know that competing requires a consistently high level of self-discipline to be successful. Being very competitive is not a bad thing; in fact, it is an essential quality of successful leaders, but it needs to be channeled through purpose and discipline. Sometimes we mistake competitive people—those who generate near-term results by improving operational effectiveness—for genuine leaders. Achieving operational effectiveness is an essential result for any leader, but it alone does not ensure authenticity or long-term success.

Being very competitive is not a bad thing; in fact, it is an essential quality of successful leaders, but it needs to be channeled through purpose and discipline.

The most consistent leader I know is Art Collins, my successor as CEO of Medtronic. His self-discipline is evident every day and in every interaction. His subordinates never have to worry about what kind of mood Art is in or where he stands on an important issue. Nor does he deviate in his behavior or vacillate in his decisions. He never lets his ego or his emotions get in the way of taking the appropriate action. These qualities make working with Art easy and predictable, enabling Medtronic employees to do their jobs effectively.

Leaders are always being examined under the microscope. Their behaviors are observed, discussed, and dissected by their employees as well as by a myriad of outsiders. Are they having a good day? How will they respond to my proposal? Will they issue pink slips today? Do I dare share these problems with my boss?

To be authentic, leaders must behave with consistency and self-discipline, not letting stress get in the way of their judgment. They must learn to handle any kind of pressure and stay cool and calm. Handling unexpected challenges requires being in peak condition. Like professional athletes, they need consistent habits to keep their minds sharp and their bodies in shape.

Several years ago my wife, Penny, and I were at a conference in San Francisco and decided to walk the labyrinth in the nave of Grace Cathedral. In the labyrinth you start in the outer circle, but the path takes you quickly toward the center, which appears to be the purpose of your walk. As you are about to reach the center, the path turns away and you walk toward the outside. Around the perimeter, sometimes closer, sometimes farther away. Just as you are about to give up on ever reaching the center, the path turns toward the center and suddenly you are there!

The labyrinth is exhilarating, and also highly instructive. The journey itself is the message. Often the most important things you learn in life come when you seem to be going nowhere, or actually backward. This is the way it has been on my leadership journey.

Becoming an authentic leader involves many years of hard work, some pain and suffering, and the wisdom that comes from experiencing life at its fullest. It is only in the labyrinth and crucible of life that we develop into authentic leaders.

Mother Teresa is a compelling example of an authentic leader. Many think of her as simply a nun who reached out to the poor, yet by 1990 she had created an organization of 4,000 missionaries operating in a hundred countries. Her organization, Missionaries of Charity, began in Calcutta and spread to 450 centers around the world. Its mission was “to reach out to the destitute on the streets, offering wholehearted service to the poorest of the poor.” Not only did she have a purpose, clear values, and a heart filled with compassion, she also created intimate relationships with people and exercised self-discipline, all the dimensions of an authentic leader. I doubt that any of us will ever be like Mother Teresa, but her life is indeed an inspiration.



This journey is not so much about finding yourself back but rather it is about reconnecting with who you truly are. But how do you reconnect with someone you have spent most of your life repressing? First, in order to reconnect with your authentic self, we need to define what "authenticity" means. Authenticity [ˌɒtəˈnɛtɪsɪti]. Not false or copied; genuine; real. Authenticity is about representing your true nature. Who you are at your core. Who you have always been. But the only way you can truly know who you are, at your core, is by asking the One who created you to reveal who that is. The truth is that we were all fearfully and wonderfully made (Psalm 139:14). Which means that you were created in a very particular way, with a very particular purpose that only you have been entrusted to fulfill. What counts is the authenticity of the leader, not the style. Nonetheless, it is important that you develop a leadership style that works well for you and is consistent with your character and your personality. Over time you will have to hone your style to be effective in leading different types of people and to work in different types of environments. The journey itself is the message. Often the most important things you learn in life come when you seem to be going nowhere, or actually backward. This is the way it has been on my leadership journey. Leaders are always being examined under the microscope. Their behaviors are observed, discussed, and dissected by their employees as well as by a myriad of outsiders.