

Bringing All of You to Work

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Have you ever known someone who had a meteoric rise up the corporate ladder, but seemed to lose himself along the way? Sadly, there are many who fit that bill. Quite possibly, you may even see yourself this way. How did it happen? Was the career success worth the price? Is it a necessary step in becoming successful?

Fortunately, the answer is no. But first, what do we mean by losing one's self? We define this as leaving behind or masking who you really are in order to further your career. Losing the courage to stand up for what is right. Forgetting where you came from or what—or who—got you there. Denying your internal moral compass, shutting off your emotions and not sharing your candid thoughts are examples of the critical pieces leaders often lose or hide in an effort to get ahead. Bringing *all of who you are* to work is the focus of this article, because it's where so many leaders get off track.

Isn't it refreshing to encounter a leader willing to take a stand on a controversial issue? Someone who speaks her mind and puts the interest of others before her own? There are exceptions of course, but many of our leaders have lost touch with—or are scared to show—their “true selves.” We live in a society that increasingly rewards image over substance. Conforming to the expectations of others, looking the “part” and speaking articulately are often the unspoken benchmarks for career success. This image-oriented focus requires a compromise that necessitates a submerging of your true self.

The loss of self in a professional environment is often a misunderstanding of what “leadership presence” really means. In his article, “How Leaders Move Up” (Harvard Business Review, 1/05), Peter Ciampa wrote that the really great leaders excel at management savvy, political intelligence and personal style. A top line review of the number of professional services firms addressing executive presence reveals the growing popularity of sharpening a leader's communication skills and fine-tuning individual appeal.

“What can we gain by sailing to the moon if we are not able to cross the abyss that separates us from ourselves? This is the most important of all voyages of discovery, and without it, all the others are not only useless, but disastrous.” – Thomas Merton

Far too many business leaders and professionals in general, lose their way on the journey to the top. They are seduced into focusing on career achievement and forgetting the values and character qualities that led them to their current level of success. There is a numbing of our authenticity and ability to be transparent as we approach higher and higher leadership roles. The leadership presence we are asked to maintain in today's business climate almost precludes our ability to be true to ourselves.

Author Bill George shared this in a 2007 Harvard University address titled, Finding Your True North: The Spirituality of Authentic Leaders: *“We are choosing the wrong leaders for the wrong reasons. All too often business and political leaders are chosen for their charisma instead of their character, for their style rather than their substance, and for the image rather than their integrity. If we choose leaders for charisma, style and image, why should we be surprised when these same leaders turn out to lack character, substance and integrity?”*

In other words, approaching leadership is not so much a matter of adopting characteristics or trying to emulate someone else, but rather of rediscovering, refining and strengthening the character and abilities inherent specifically to you. Many leadership styles are proven and effective, and it is a mistake to think that only one prevailing style will succeed.

Adding the Layers

When did we lose sight of the fact that being ourselves is a real source of strength? The outer wall and protective layers we build as a corporate and societal necessity may allow us to survive, even thrive in business. But these same layers interfere with our ability to connect with others and vice versa. Our personal and professional relationships suffer as a result of this self-imposed body armor. But how do we shed something that has been built up oftentimes for years?

Remember wanting to be part of the “in crowd” as a young person? Perhaps making subtle—and not so subtle—changes in your demeanor to fit in. If so, then it started there. In our professional experience of meeting, interviewing and counseling thousands of people, a common thread among the vast majority is the fear of exposing who they really are. The inclination is to say what the other person wants to hear in order to achieve a desired result or acceptance.

Self-awareness and appropriate personal choices allow us to shed layers of conditioning that are no longer beneficial. Philosopher and psychologist William James once said: *“There is but one cause of human failure and that is a man’s lack of faith in his true self.”*

The Journey to Reclaiming Yourself

The road to becoming a whole person again is not easy. It will likely take time and commitment. The true self is revealed when the layers of fabricated identity, the layers of negative conditioned response, and the veils of ignorance are gradually removed. Genuine character and personality are simply suppressed, ready to be discovered again. We share here four key areas of responsibility we must own in order to achieve the ultimate goal of being true:

- **Self-awareness** – We all require a starting point, and that place of beginning is having a clear understanding of who you are. There are personality assessments available ranging from the simple and inexpensive DiSC and Myers-Briggs tests to the more involved Birkman assessment. However, your own self-discovery through some deep thinking about your life can also be effective. Call on friends and colleagues who will be candid in sharing their perception on your true self. This may be uncomfortable, but it’s critically important to recovering your true self.

In fact, enlightened leaders keep a number of candid, straight-talking “counselors” in their lives to frequently seek guidance. In Primal Leadership: Learning to Lead with Emotional Intelligence, Daniel Goleman, with co-authors, Richard Boyatzis and Annie McKee, writes: *“A leader’s self-awareness and ability to accurately perceive his performance is as important as the feedback he receives from others.”*

- **Courage** – It takes courage to be true to yourself, avoid the trap of hiding behind those layers, stand up for your beliefs, and speak up when the truth is being ignored. Courage has consequences and you must be willing to face them.
- **Honesty** – Always telling the truth can be supremely challenging, especially when it is not the popular message. But, you will unleash a chain reaction of positive outcomes by being honest with yourself, your friends, co-workers and loved ones. Dishonesty only leads to more dishonesty.
- **Transparency** – The emotional intelligence competency of transparency is characterized by having the courage and honesty to live by your values. It is an authentic openness to others about your feelings, beliefs and actions. It is a cornerstone of integrity. Transparent individuals openly admit mistakes, and confront unethical behavior in others rather than turn a blind eye.

Why is this Important?

A critical aspect of effective leaders today is their ability to see reality clearly and objectively. But, it's a far more challenging task than most realize. A strong sense of self awareness is needed to understand that personal challenges and flaws actually help us better understand and relate to the world in which we live and work. Without this self awareness, leaders tend to be ineffective and unable to effectively connect even if they possess sound business acumen and a strong supporting team.

Jim Collins introduced the concept of “Level 5 Leaders” to the business world in 2001. His book, Good to Great, shared the results of a five-year study of more than 1,400 companies. Collins sought to understand why certain companies were able to achieve amazing results over time. His study revealed that the “great” companies averaged cumulative stock returns 6.9 times those of the rest of the market over at least a 15-year period. And the companies identified as great were led by executives who had the seemingly conflicting characteristics of true humility and fierce resolve.

Collins study concluded: *“All good-to-great companies began the process of finding a path to greatness by confronting the brutal facts of their current reality... Your leadership personality can deter people from bringing you the brutal facts.”* There was clearly a link between the authenticity of the leader, superior performance and transparent communication in these organizations.

Two examples of leaders who have consistently displayed moral courage and stayed true to themselves and their beliefs in the face of overwhelming adversity are Truett Cathy, founder and chairman of Chick-fil-A, and Ray C. Anderson, founder and chairman of Interface, Inc. Cathy, consistent with his Christian faith and lifelong commitment to families, made a controversial decision decades ago to keep his popular restaurants closed on Sundays. He faced enormous criticism that lingers to this day, but has kept his commitment. Under Cathy's leadership and vision, Chick-fil-A is one of the fastest-growing and most successful restaurant chains in the world.

Anderson of Interface had an epiphany 14 years ago while preparing to address a company task force on its environmental vision. He had just read Paul Hawken's The Ecology of Commerce and was inspired to lead his company to have zero negative impact on the environment by 2020. They are already half way there. Interface is the world's largest producer of commercial floor coverings with operations in 110 countries and four continents. He was harshly criticized for even the idea that a manufacturing company could be an environmental leader, but his courage has placed Interface on the leading edge of their industry while recognizing its role as a steward of Earth's resources.

It is critical that today's business leaders understand who they are and how their identity affects their capacity to communicate and collaborate across an organization. They must exemplify the behaviors they wish to see. The Naked Manager author, Eileen Dowse writes about the need for leaders to, well, "get naked." She maintains that rather than being honest with employees, sharing core values and exposing vulnerabilities, managers and companies clothe themselves in protective layers. Their workplace personas become so far removed from their true selves that workplace cohesion unravels. She continues saying, being naked means being authentic and dealing with core issues openly and honestly.

In conclusion, the need for a return to our "true selves" is needed in every aspect of our lives, not just work. We must be astute enough to realize that a lack of authenticity will ultimately impair our ability to be effective and create a disconnect among the people we are leading. Rob Goffee and Gareth Jones wrote in their *Harvard Business Review* article, "Managing Authenticity: The Paradox of Great Leadership": *"If a leader is playing a role that isn't a true expression of his authentic self, followers will sooner or later feel like they've been tricked."*

We have to challenge the fear that somehow being real is a bad thing. It may be uncomfortable and create some opposition in the short term with individuals not used to experiencing your true self. However, practicing transparency, engaging in honest and open dialogue, and always placing your principles and ethics before advancing your career will bring you greater success in every aspect of your life.

The journey to reveal your true self is not easy. It requires humility. Commit to yourself that you will begin today. Start where you are, use what you have and do what you can. We leave you with these tenets that describe the characteristics of the kind of leaders we need:

- They are courageous and do not hesitate to take chances.
- They cannot be bought.
- They put character above wealth.
- They possess honest opinions and a firm will.
- They will not lose their individuality and will speak up for what is right.
- They will be honest in small things as well as in great things.
- They will know their moral non-negotiables and never violate them.
- Their ambitions are not confined to their own selfish desires.
- They are true to their friends through adversity as well as in prosperity.
- They are not ashamed or afraid to stand for the truth even when it is unpopular.

About the Authors

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