

Leaders Must Get Real



Five ways to unlock authentic leadership.

By Margie Warrell

Leadership is far less about what you are *doing*, than about who you are *being*. If you think about the people who have influenced you most over your career and life, it's likely that what impacted you most was not *what they did*, but about *who they were being* while doing it: *genuine, honest, courageous, resilient, real*.

Engaging authentically with people is the first task of genuine leadership—daring people to work, live and lead more courageously. In today's culture, where so much emphasis is placed on the superficial, people crave authenticity. They are hungry for real what-you-see-is-what-you-get leadership. The most inspiring and influential leaders don't lead because of *what* they do (although they do plenty), but because of *who* they are. Too often leaders—and those who aspire to be leaders—forget that fact.

When you connect authentically with people, you become more approachable, trusted, and influential. Here are **five ways** leaders can unlock the power of authenticity:

1. Share authentically—Unlock the power of vulnerability. Sharing ourselves authentically often goes against our instincts for self-preservation. It explains why, when we anticipate finding ourselves in a vulnerable predicament, our automatic reaction is to protect ourselves: pull out of the launch, cancel the meeting, step back from the relationship, or retreat from centre stage. Yet it's through becoming vulnerable that we can connect most deeply. While researching *Stop Playing Safe*, James Strong, former CEO of Qantas, shared with me, "You have to put yourself at risk in the way you communicate and interact with employees." We trust people who don't need to prove their superiority, success, or significance—who can connect from a place of being *human* a bit better than the rest of us. When people can relate to you as a fellow human being—rather than as someone with the power to cut your budget or outsource your job—you can build engagement and lift performance beyond anything *unreal* leaders ever can. As Shawn Achor wrote in *The Happiness Advantage*, "The more genuinely expressive someone is, the more their mindset and feelings spread."

2. Express EXPR +3.01% authentically—Unlock the power of individuality. Margaret Thatcher once said, "You cannot lead from the crowd." While sometimes leadership entails confronting powerful forces of opposition, as Thatcher did with single-minded determination, more often it requires standing firm against the powerful inner forces that drive us to conform and vanilla down that which makes us different. When all we do is try to fit in, we negate the difference our difference makes. Owning what makes you different enables you to differentiate yourself and build a unique brand in your work and career marketplace. Yes, you need to be mindful about how others perceive you, but when you allow what you think that they *might* think determine who you will be, you sell out to conformity and deprive them of the unique contribution you have to make.

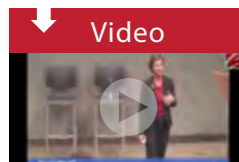
3. Listen authentically—Unlock the power of presence. Listening is the most powerful yet poorly practiced of all leadership skills. Authentic listening is done with the intention to see the world through another's eyes, not to have them see it through yours. Listening authentically enables you to break down the barriers that cause people to withhold

trust, and it fosters collaboration. Unlocking the profound power of presence takes not more than putting your agenda aside and allowing yourself to be fully present to the person you are being with—opening yourself to see what they see and feel what they feel. If you haven't tried it for a while, do so today. The impact you can make—both on yourself and the other person—can be profound.

4. Acknowledge authentically—Unlock the power of appreciation. It's easy to criticize. Many people are exceptionally good at it. But while constructive criticism—delivered in the *right* way at the *right* time—is crucial to strong leadership, its effectiveness increases when balanced with praise, appreciation, and acknowledgement. Since, according to Gallup, two-thirds of employees worldwide feel that their efforts aren't fully recognized, and only one-third are engaged in their jobs, one of the best ways a leader can boost engagement is to *help employees know their strengths*—and that starts by acknowledging them. Don't be limited to a result achieved. Focus on the virtues they brought to the task at hand: perseverance, collaboration, humor, tenacity, resilience, creativity, assertiveness, flexibility, a strong work ethic. Often we assume that others don't need our affirmation to know they've done a good job, but I've yet to see a word of gratitude go unappreciated.

5. Serve authentically—Unlock the power of other-centeredness. Ultimately leaders aren't judged so much by how well they lead, but by how well they serve. No carrot or stick of any size will ever trump the effect you have on those around you when you engage with them from a place of genuine service. As Bill Treasurer points out in *Leaders Open Doors*, people will move mountains for you if they know that you genuinely care about *them*, not just the results you want them to achieve. Leadership isn't about *the leader*—it's about *those being led*. Treasurer writes, "When you care about people, you take an interest in their career aspirations. You seek and value their opinion and treat people as more important than results." Serving authentically is about focusing on what you can *contribute* to the longer-term prosperity of many people versus what you can *gain* in the short-term for yourself. The more you engage with people from a place of service, the more effective you'll be at harnessing their talents—and the stronger the results you will achieve through them.

When you engage in each of these five practices, you will grow into a leader others will connect to more easily, follow more readily, and put themselves on the line for again and again. In the end, there is no greater test of leadership than to inspire greater authenticity and courage in those you lead. **LE**



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Margie Warrell is the bestselling author of *Stop Playing Safe* (Wiley) and *Find Your Courage* (McGraw-Hill), leadership coach, and keynote speaker. Visit www.margiewarrell.com



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