



Authentic leadership: the key to Building trust

Personal integrity in leaders is one of the foundations for building trust. Research with RAF officers has helped to define the behaviours associated with 'authentic leadership' – and points to the need for a different emphasis in management and leadership development

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o anyone who cares to look, whether they are HR professionals or not, it's obvious that there is a crisis in leadership. The Ipsos MORI survey on trust in 2011 showed that only 29 per cent of people believe business leaders can be trusted to tell the truth, while the most recent DDI Global Leadership Forecast has found that UK HR practitioners are sorely disappointed with the people who lead them. Only 18 per cent report high quality leadership within their organisations, identifying a staggering 39 per cent failure rate of external leadership appointments and a 28 per cent failure rate of internal appointments. Boards and the HR function need to do something differently, and to begin to do it now, if they are to address this crisis within their own organisations.

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AUTHENTIC LEADERSHIP IS NOT a new concept, but several factors have contributed to an upsurge of interest. First, there is the global problem of a perceived lack of ethical decision-making from political and business leaders, which has led to a breakdown in trust. This is a serious matter because trust is the primary virtue that followers say that they want in their leaders. Recent CIPD research into trust and why trust matters suggests that, in order to build effective organisations, we need leaders who display personal integrity and humanity, who allow followers to get to know them, and who are fundamentally trustworthy. The CIPD report further suggests that organisations, in the private and public sectors alike, now need to redesign their leadership development processes to identify, select and develop this new kind of leader – one who is self-aware, compassionate, honourable, ethical and authentic.

A second, longer-term driver is the essentially western desire for self-fulfilment while being personally authentic as a leader. With Harvard, Cranfield, Ashridge and Henley business schools all offering development programmes in "authentic leadership", we could be forgiven for thinking that it is the latest in a long list of approaches that promise to be the holy grail of leadership. So, what is "authenticity" and how is it relevant to HR practitioners?

The ABC of authentic leadership is A for authenticity: being true to your values and to yourself. B is for bravery: having the courage to lead and to do the right thing, especially in the face of danger or dissent, and C is for compassion: leading with empathy and a concern for the physical and emotional well-being of others. Authentic leadership links together who you are as a person, your beliefs and values, how you lead and manage, your personality, thinking and behaviours. To be authentic is to be true to your own ethical standards of conduct, to live a life where what you say matches what you do, and importantly, both are consistent with what you believe, your principles and how you feel.

Personal authenticity, however, can be egocentric and self-centred. It can ignore everything to do with other people, including followers, who are obviously crucial to leadership. Being authentic as a leader oneself is therefore not the same as being an authentic leader, which involves much more than simply being true to yourself.

Previously, the only empirical research into authentic leadership has been carried out in the US, using students. They, crucially, lacked any significant leadership experience, thereby limiting its validity and reliability. My research in the UK, undertaken for a PhD thesis, began with an extensive academic and applied literature review into leadership, authenticity and authentic leadership, resulting in

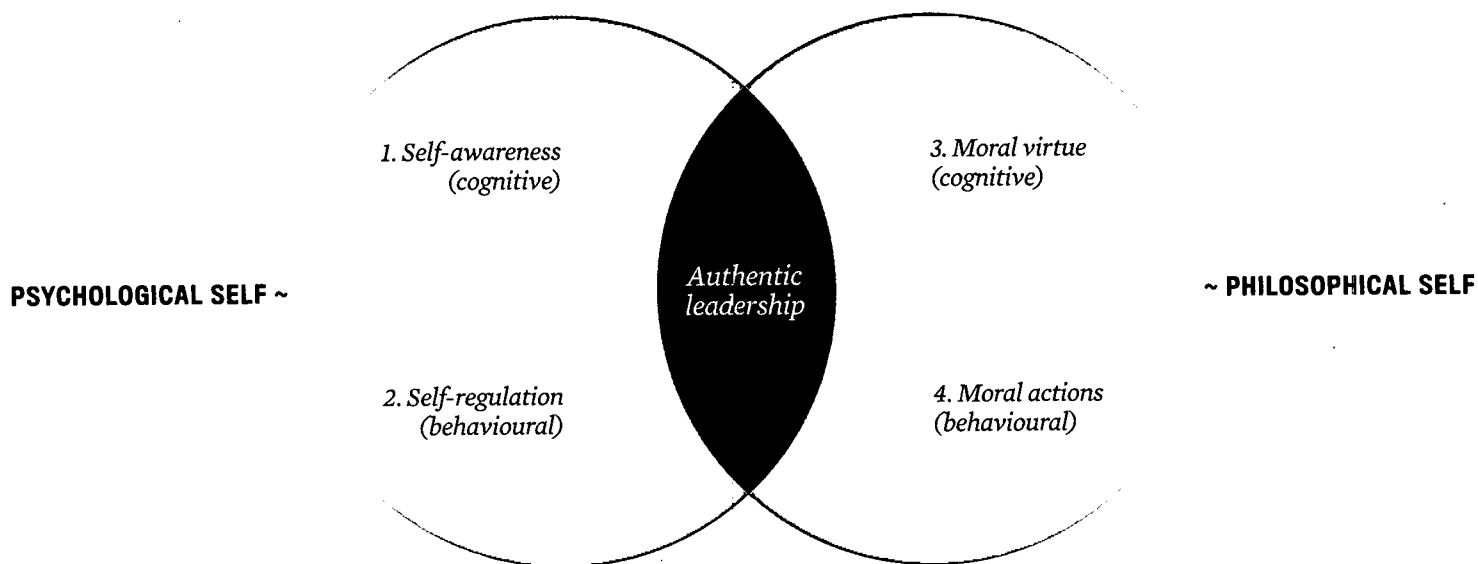


CHART 1

② The cognitive and behavioural aspects of authentic leadership – a new model

the development of a new model of authentic leadership (see Chart 1, above). This theoretical model has four factors, linking the cognitive elements of self-awareness with the behavioural elements of self-regulation, and a leader's ethical thinking (which I call moral virtue) with actual behaviours (moral actions). It therefore links the psychological aspects of leadership with its philosophical ones; a useful distinction that many leadership development initiatives fail to make.

Three pillars of authentic leadership

TO TEST THIS FOUR-FACTOR MODEL empirically, 150 item statements were generated and reviewed by an expert panel of psychologists, leaders, leadership development consultants and academics. As a result, some items were deleted and others added, resulting in a final item bank of 100 questions; 25 for each factor. These were piloted, in a self-report format, on a business leader population sample of 140 people who were either CIPD professionals or members of the UK Institute of Directors. In the final study – using a 360-degree feedback design, which mitigates the tendency for leaders to over-estimate their performance and capabilities – 54 senior RAF officers, with a mean average of 19 years' service, were rated by their superior officers, subordinates and peers, making an RAF research population sample of 380 in total.

'LOOK FOR LEADERS WITH AN ETHICAL, PRO-SOCIAL, PEOPLE-FOCUSED PERSPECTIVE, RATHER THAN AN OVERLY NUMBERS-DRIVEN, TASK FOCUSED, GOAL ACHIEVEMENT ORIENTATION'

In both the pilot business sample and the RAF officer research, an identical factor structure emerged, suggesting that the model and the 360-degree questionnaire could be generalised across leadership populations. Empirically, three components of authentic leadership – not four – became evident: self-awareness, self-regulation and ethics. It seems that, statistically at least, followers don't make a distinction between the ethical and moral thinking that drives a leader's ethical decision-making (their rhetoric) and what they do in practice. In other words, a leader is judged equally by what they say and what they do. Crucially, these must match, or a leader will not be trusted. Qualitative, written feedback from colleagues and subordinates found that followers evaluate a leader on their levels of consistency.

Each of the three "pillars" of authentic leadership comprises a number of cognitive, behavioural and emotional elements, which are displayed to a greater or lesser extent by all leaders (see below, and Chart 2, overleaf). Leaders who are more authentic display more of these pro-social, appropriate attributes of "good" leadership, more of the time; and have better quality relationships with colleagues and followers than less authentic leaders do. In this sense, authentic leadership is "relational" rather than transactional, transformational or driven by an underpinning philosophy of power or control as some other leadership approaches are.

Self-awareness includes an understanding of our own beliefs, values, thinking processes, emotions, bounda- ➡➡➡

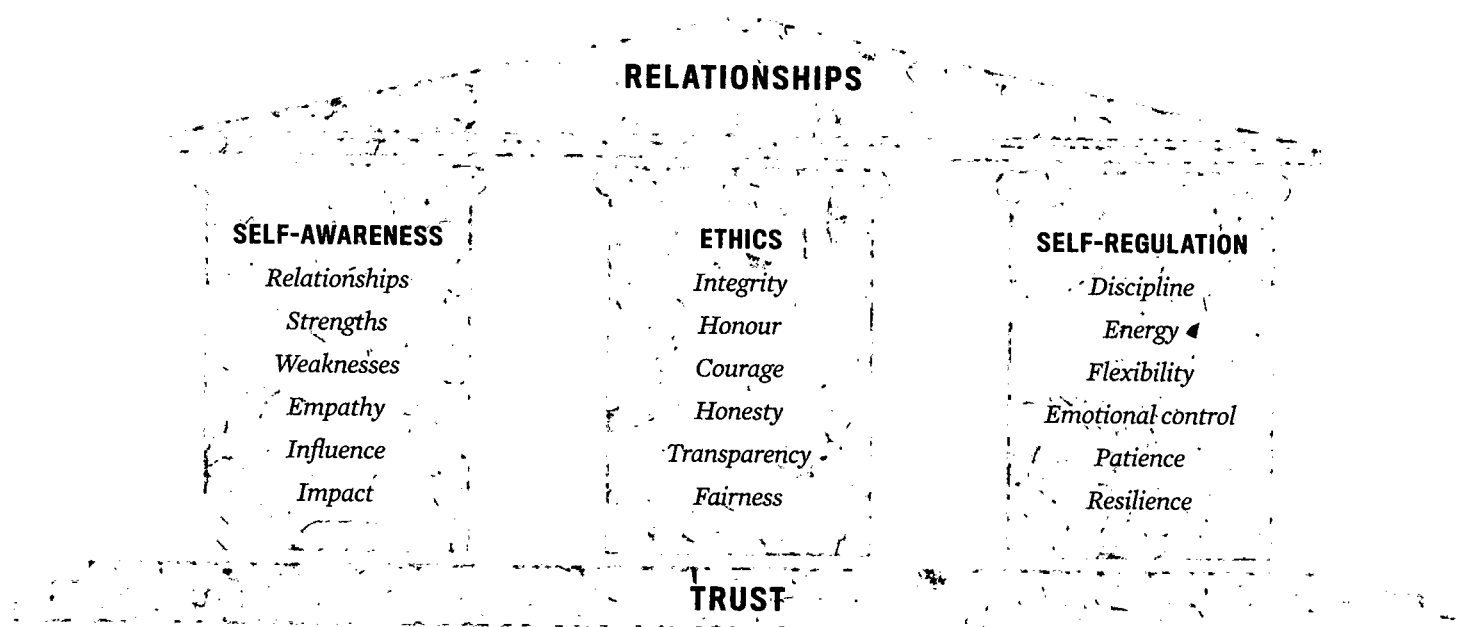


CHART 2

➊ Three pillars of authentic leadership

ries, strengths and weaknesses. It encompasses an appreciation of the influence that we have over others, such as the impact that our moods, behaviours, thoughts and language have on followers and colleagues. It also incorporates a leader's understanding of the motivations, emotions, thinking, beliefs, values and psychological make-up of others, at both an individual, personal level and also collectively at the strategic, organisational level. The degree of a leader's self-awareness seems to be a good predictor of the strength of their relationships with others.

Self-regulation embraces those elements of leadership concerned with self-management: a leader's focus, their self-discipline and their ability to be actively and deliberately in control of their thoughts, emotions and behaviours. It includes levels of tolerance and patience, how they manage their energy, and their physical, mental and emotional resilience. Unsurprisingly, perhaps because of the high levels of self-discipline and physical courage required from our military leaders, it was here that RAF officers scored most highly in the 360-degree feedback ratings from their superior officers, subordinates and peers.

Ethics incorporates ethical virtue (thinking) and ethical actions, which are the cognitive and behavioural elements of a leader's ethical orientation and are philosophical, rather than psychological, aspects of leadership. A leader's personal leadership philosophy, their professional integrity, honour, fairness and desire to do what's right, all reside here. Balanced by the necessary commercial concerns of the

sector they work within, authentic leaders have an ethos that is pro-social (geared to the good of the group as a whole) and people-focused. They have a desire to contribute. They also have the moral courage to speak up for what they believe in and to remain steadfast in the face of dissent or wrongdoing by others, to the extent that they will blow the whistle or leave an organisation that falls short of their high ethical standards.

The three pillars comprise many cognitive, emotional and behavioural elements that, taken together, make each leader authentic in his or her own way. Interestingly, authentic leadership is correlated with a number of positive organisational outcomes, of which trust is the most significant. The association between trust and authentic leadership is important because trustworthiness is the attribute that followers most seek in a leader. Moreover, high levels of trust also correlate with improved employee engagement and well-being, increased levels of creativity and problem solving, reduced employee turnover and greater productivity.

'THE ASSOCIATION BETWEEN TRUST AND AUTHENTIC LEADERSHIP IS IMPORTANT BECAUSE TRUSTWORTHINESS IS THE ATTRIBUTE THAT FOLLOWERS MOST SEEK IN A LEADER'

Embedding the behaviours

SO WHAT MIGHT HR PROFESSIONALS do to encourage and support the strengthening of authentic leadership in their organisations? Here are some suggestions:

- Recruit for collaboration, not competitiveness. Look for leaders with an ethical, pro-social, people-focused perspective, rather than an overly numbers-driven, task focused, goal achievement orientation. Recruit too for empathy, a willingness to apologise, and a learning orientation. Everything that happens to a leader is an opportunity for them to develop their awareness about themselves and others – which is the fundamental starting point for all three pillars of authentic leadership. Without developing self-awareness and an accurate sense of self, a leader is not able to monitor, regulate and flex their energy, focus and behaviours. Without the self-awareness to understand the implications and impact of their decisions and subsequent actions, their ethical compass will lack a sense of right and wrong and they will blunder through leadership, ultimately failing.

- Encourage whistleblowing. Look carefully at those people who have found the courage to risk everything for something they profoundly believe in. Some of them may be exactly the right people to promote.

- Develop managers and leaders within a framework and philosophy of authentic leadership and the three pillars approach. When you create an organisational culture consistent with authentic leadership, then respect, trust and all of the positive organisational outcomes associated with trust will follow. This culture will ensure that authentic leadership behaviours are modelled by leaders and managers at all levels, thereby making the often difficult discussions and subsequent decisions about taking the right pro-social and ethical course of action much easier.

Turning specifically to management and leadership development programmes, some key aspects to look at are:

- 1. Get your philosophy right.** Every effective leadership development programme has a clear philosophy that underpins it. This is usually a reflection of the leadership philosophy of the programme sponsor and/or the board. This needs to be clear, transparent, and consistent with organisational objectives. It must be supported by senior management, as it creates your organisational culture, implicitly and explicitly.

- 2. Build the programme around the three pillars of authentic leadership.** Your approach and every activity must relate to one or more of the pillars. An example can be found on my organisation's website, 3peaksleadership.co.uk. Include a 360-degree measurement before and after the programme, so that participants can get real feedback from their teams, more senior managers and their colleagues. Suppliers and clients can also be invited to contribute feedback if appropriate.

- 3. Select the right people.** With its pro-social, collaborative orientation, not everyone is capable of becoming an authentic leader. As authentic leadership development is essentially a personal leadership journey, recognise that not everyone

LINKS & NOTES

► Ipsos MORI research: "Doctors are most trusted profession – politicians least trusted" bit.ly/IpsosTrust

► DDI Global Leadership Forecast 2011 ddiworld.com/glf2011

► Gallup 2009 research: "What followers want from leaders" bit.ly/Gallupfollow

► CIPD research report – "Where has all the trust gone?" bit.ly/CIPDtrust

► PM feature "Organisational effectiveness: how trust helps" bit.ly/PMtrusthelps

► Fiona Beddoes-Jones can be contacted at cognitivefitness.co.uk

ryone will want to invest the time, effort and personal introspection required to become an authentic leader – and if they do, understand that they will become an authentic leader in their own way. This may mean that ultimately, if they feel there is not a meaningful fit, they will decide to leave your organisation – or conversely, you may need to ask them to.

- 4. Make sure the programme is long enough.** Most leadership development programmes last five days or fewer. This is far too short a period to allow for deep thought, self-reflection and the practice of new behaviours that will lead to sustainable change. A programme that lasts a year allows for real, organisation-relevant, project-based, live case studies and the support of a coaching and mentoring programme where leaders become mentors as well as mentees. It will also give participants enough time to develop meaningful relationships with other leaders on the programme who they may work with across the organisation in the future.

- 5. Build in an ongoing review of the programme results and successes.** Tweak the programme as you go along to ensure it always achieves the desired personal, professional and organisational objectives. Making successes public, and celebrating the programme at the end, will support organisational culture and provide evidence of return on investment. Growing leaders from within an organisation is both more effective and less costly than external appointments. It also supports internal relationships and a more authentic organisational culture, so don't make the programme a one-off, but rather, make it an annual or biannual benchmark of success for your organisation.

CONCLUSION Why leaders fail

THE THREE PILLARS not only provide a route map for the development of authentic leaders, they also identify the three reasons that leaders fail. Historically, leadership failure may have involved a deficit in knowledge or expertise. Modern leadership failures, however, invariably seem to involve either a lack of self/other awareness, a lack of self-regulation/discipline or a moral/ethical deficit. In other words, a leader found wanting in any one of the three pillars of authentic leadership will not achieve their potential and is more likely, ultimately, to fail. Understanding the reasons for leadership failure is as important as understanding the components of leadership success.

This research into authentic leadership provides organisations with a potential blueprint and route map to identify, recruit and develop the leaders they now need to ensure a sustainable and viable future. 

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