



Pulse Coaching Article: Authentic Leadership

The idea of a leader usually prompts us to think in terms of ideal qualities that we might like to see in them. Typically, we might say that they are engaging, visionary, inspiring, courageous, resourceful, knowledgeable, intelligent, persuasive, decisive and motivating. Of course, the list is not exhaustive. Even if it were possible to complete it, one element would be left out. A leader also needs to demonstrate a particular aspect of his being that is crucial for being a true leader: his authenticity. Unlike the qualities above, it is more difficult to pinpoint what being authentic means, or amounts to. Commonly, we say that someone is authentic when he or she is sincere, apt to speak truthfully and honestly, with a sense of integrity and genuineness. But describing authenticity in terms of certain qualities does not really capture our understanding of it, since it signifies something beyond this. Indeed, to do so would itself be inauthentic.

The first thing to say about authenticity is that it is a relational way of being; it underpins the way in which we engage with others. In the workplace, for instance, the manager or leader is always in contact with, and relating to, his environment, whether this be with things or with people. When with others, he can choose the way that he relates to them in his position as a leader. He can adopt a more directive approach, providing all the necessary details that ensure that the tasks will be completed in a particular way and to his satisfaction. However, a more non-directive way to be a leader is to effectively act as a coach to them, allowing them to take ownership of the manner in which they complete the task. Asking questions and encouraging them to seek the answers for themselves becomes a more empowering way for others to engage with the task. It is also an authentic way for the leader to relate to the person, because the former relates to the latter as an end and not as a means, or only as a means.

Secondly, being an authentic leader is not a static way of being: once authentic, always so. Rather, we can easily lose this way of being seen by others as we can in our gaining it or, with more difficulty, regaining it. However, it should also be noted that authenticity need not be viewed in moral terms, such that not having it means that we fall short in an accepted code of behaviour in some way. This cycle of gaining and losing our authenticity may just as easily be understood in terms of being (non-morally) resolute about a course of action in one moment and then being swayed by the expected way of doing things in another. The decision is deflected from one of self-ownership on the part of the leader to what a leader should do in these circumstances. We might also say that being passive or tentative, disengaged from others, is to be in an inauthentic mode of being.

Third, a leader is also authentic in the way that he relates to himself, and he is authentically engaged with his role when he relates to himself temporally. When he sees himself as resolutely moving towards an anticipated future outcome in his work that also has a finite ending to it, and can also maintain a sense of choice in how he sees himself in having taken up the role that he is in, he affirms his current situation and understands how it informs part of his life. His role and identity as a leader take on a significance that is informed by his past experience and choices and the anticipated results of his leading others towards some point of completion of certain projects and aims. We should also recognise that the idea of a role in this context is not one of pretending to be someone that we are not; it actually refers to the part that one plays within an organisation, or team, just as a father plays the role of male parent within a family unit.

Leaders become authentically so by relating to themselves as continually developing in their role in their team and organisation. Authenticity demands that individuals engage with themselves in a spirit of active self-awareness, and this requires them to take responsibility for developing themselves. Whilst being clear about their values and principles, they are also able to reflect on their actual experiences in a way that allows them to be open to the tensions that show up between the former and the latter. This may be very challenging at times, though such challenges furnish the opportunity for leaders to further develop their sense of integrity with themselves and also with others as they demonstrate their ability to make decisions and changes with regard to themselves as well as others and their environment.