



Am I AUTHENTIC Yet?

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I sat down to peruse the *WSJ* at 6:05 AM with a strong cup of java.

The headline, “Xerox Chief Defends Split, but Her Future Role is Unclear,” grabbed my attention. Xerox had just announced that it would split into two public companies. One company would sell the traditional Xerox office machines and the other would provide back office services. The CEO, Ursula Burns, made it clear in her comments that her future role was secondary to the larger strategic decision of whether to keep the existing company together.

To add insult to injury, the split would ultimately unwind the acquisition of Affiliated Computer Services, Inc. Acquiring ACS, a provider of back-office services, and had been one of Burns’ first and boldest moves as the new Xerox CEO in 2008. Burns had articulated a vision of a new Xerox, which was a broader, bigger company in 2008. Now she expressed certainty that this break up was the right move for the enterprise given the current marketplace dynamics. To be sure, a lot of things had changed in the macro environment between 2008 and early 2016. That being said, it’s hard not to look at the acquisition as an error with the benefit of hindsight.

Burns was clear about two things in her comments. She, in partnership with her team, initiated the strategic review in 2015 to look at all of the options, including breaking up the company. Second, she did not want the strategic decision to be influenced by who would be the CEO. Hence, her future is unclear. To be sure, Ursula Burns is wealthy and lives a life of privilege. She is paid handsomely to sit in the big chair and make such strategic decisions. And I am sure that she, like all of us, has both towering strengths and towering flaws as a human being. However, I was struck by her straightforward approach to dealing with the grim economic realities that the enterprise faces, and her willingness to step up and make a judgment call that required her to put her ego on the shelf.

Hanging out at Xerox cannot be an ego boost for her at this moment. Xerox shares are currently trading at under 10 dollars. When the kitchen is this hot, surely it would be easier for her to just resign and take a vacation in Fiji. But she's chosen to stick around and take the heat.

Why would Burns stay to see it through? Is it possible that this fat-cat CEO is demonstrating authentic leadership?

From Platitudes to the Practical World

Authentic leadership is discussed a lot. Lots of leaders and consultants extol the virtues and importance of authentic leadership on a philosophical level. In fact, just last week, one of my clients lauded the importance of authentic leadership during one of our morning coaching sessions. So I asked him the following question: “What are you doing this afternoon to become a more authentic leader?”

His first comment was that he usually thought of authenticity in rather black and white terms, but he knew that I wasn't going to allow him to be that conceptually lazy. Over the years, I had constantly pushed him to be as disciplined in his thinking about the human side of business as he was about the financial side. Finally, he said with a smile, “Okay, Karissa, that is a really good question. I am sure you have some thoughts.” He and I concurred that we know authentic leadership when we see it—and when we don't—and that a clearer view of the term would be helpful.

We humans love some words because we don't really know what they mean. Therefore, we can throw them around and project whatever we feel is important onto them. Two such ambiguous words that possess an aura of gravitas and perceived importance are authentic and leadership. I am hard-pressed to say one is thrown around more frequently or with more fervor than the other.

Put the two words together and you have the term authentic leadership, which is then vague to the second power. If you listen carefully to the election chatter and everyday conversations, the only thing we know for sure about authentic leadership is that it is a good thing. This presidential election cycle we even have a new vague diagnosis: he or she has an authenticity problem.

This lack of clarity does not serve aspiring authentic leaders. We need a pragmatic definition of authentic leadership that we can work with. That is my goal with this manifesto.

First, authentic leadership is a psychological state, not a trait. In psychology, we discriminate between states and traits. Traits are more enduring, like extroversion or conscientiousness. When we use terms like “good leader” or “bad leader,” most of us are thinking of specific traits that have been demonstrated through behaviors consistently over a period of time. Psychological states, in contrast, are temporary, and constantly changing. Being angry or being in a great mood are examples of psychological states. States are more like the weather today and traits are more like the climate.

I used to have a senior-level client whose direct reports would shoot each other emails to let each other know what kind of mood he was in by 9 am every day. Whoever saw my client first had the responsibility to inform the rest of the team. After a while, they included me on the email chain.

In the subject line of the email, it said “the daily mood report.” They would use terms like stormy, very cold, or bright and sunny outlook.

Are your moods that obvious? Don’t just say no. You would really have to ask someone else for the answer to be valid. To be fair, the vast majority of us are not that obvious. However, our mental states are constantly changing inside our own minds, even if we do not act out the changes in dramatic ways. Subtle and not-so-subtle changes in our internal psychological state impact the way we perceive the world and interact with others every day.

It is helpful to think of authentic leadership as a state not a trait. That allows us to ask a powerful question. How do we cultivate the state of authentic leadership? It also allows us to understand that no human being can be in a continual state of authentic leadership. It also leaves room for all of us flawed humans to be in a state of authentic leadership for periods of time. But let’s not get ahead of ourselves.

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Leadership Is a Psychological State

Before we get to work on cultivating the state of authentic leadership, let's delve into this notion of looking at leadership as a psychological state. In particular, take a look at the work of Dr. Robert Quinn from the University of Michigan, who has articulated a way of looking at the leadership word as a fundamental state as opposed to a trait. Quinn is a pioneer in the emerging field of positive leadership and positive organizational science, which focuses on the human potential inherent in organizations and within all of us at the individual level. The positive organizational scholarship movement is an attempt to balance out the predominant focus on dysfunction that has dominated organizational thought throughout much of the latter half of the 20th century.

Quinn's model contrasts a state of leadership with our "normal" state of mind, or our "default mode" as humans. The state of an undisciplined human mind is constantly changing and preoccupied with a small range of concerns about ourselves and our current fascinations. Our default mode provides evidence of Darwin's model of survival of the fittest. Our minds are literally wired to help us survive in the wild. When we operate at our default setting we are narrowly looking out for ourselves and for our own.

Quinn has articulated a very specific and useful model of leadership as a state in *Lift: The Fundamental State of Leadership*. In our normal/default state, we are comfort seeking, externally directed, self-focused, and internally closed. In contrast, the fundamental state of leadership is purpose centered, internally directed, other focused, and externally open. Using this model, we look at the state of leadership through the lens of four contrasts.

The contrast between comfort seeking and purpose centered takes us back to the story of Ursula Burns and the current dynamics at Xerox. Her comment that doing the right thing for the company was more important at this moment than her future role is an example of being purpose centered. Escaping and taking a long vacation would have to be more comfortable than taking the lead in this complex, difficult situation where the stakes are high and in which Xerox as an enterprise could literally fail and be gone within a few years.

Second, the contrast between being externally and internally directed is about how you respond to pressures from the environment. Situational pressures are real and if we totally ignore them, we will not be leaders for long. Handling the pressure and producing results under pressure is part of a leader's job description.

A person in the state of leadership, however, is also looking for ways to express key values in the midst of pursuing goals. In the state of leadership, one feels the pressure and also looks for small, medium, and large ways to express key values while leading a team or entire organization toward an important outcome.

Other focused versus self focused is pretty obvious to most of us. The key here is to be curious about how situations and decisions affect stakeholder groups and individuals. Leaders must also take those impacts into account once they are perceived. Simple things like including a specific person in a meeting or not can have negative or positive impacts. I am continually amazed in my day-to-day coaching at how often the obstacle for leaders in being other focused is slowing down enough to actually perceive and understand potential impacts on others. Very few leaders ignore impacts in decision-making once they fully perceive this. However, the pressure is so intense that taking the time to think and feel your way through the potential impacts on others requires commitment and frequent reminders.

The fourth contrast, being externally open versus internally closed is about agility. Are you willing to notice what is happening and continually adjust your way of thinking and behaving? Or are you staying in your comfort zone and doing what comes easily for you? I coach my clients to be in a constant state of experimentation. A constant state of experimentation is the opposite of

autopilot. Ask yourself and others what might work given current situational dynamics every day. If you have not done three things that felt outside your comfort zone within the last week, you are not experimenting.

By constant state of experimentation, I am not talking about doing something wild or crazy. I am talking about practical things, like sharing information about how your project is going with a peer who could choose to use that information against you. Or taking the time to reach out and get to know someone without having an obvious agenda. Another example would be to listen for three minutes before talking in every conversation for a half a day. (Most of my clients hate that listening assignment the first time they try it, but ultimately get a lot out of it.)

With the backdrop of positive leadership as a state of mind, what happens when we throw the word authentic into the mix? How do we make sense of authentic leadership as a state of mind?

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Authentic Leadership Is a Mindset

Building on the research of Dr. Quinn and tackling the question of what to do if you want to be a more authentic leader this afternoon, let's define authentic leadership as a mindset. This is practical because just as a person can cultivate a winning mindset, they can cultivate the mindset of authentic leadership. What are the components of an authentic leadership mindset?

Authenticity is typically defined as being true to yourself. Just be genuine or real as a human being, and it will all work out. Some of the questions I hear often in my discussions with clients include the following: "Why can't my boss just be authentic?" "Why can't my peer, who is my competition for the next level, just be authentic?" But I don't let my clients off the hook with throwing the word authentic around, even in regard to their boss or peers. I often present them with another question: "What would your boss need to do in order for you to perceive him as more authentic?" One recent client's response was that her boss would need a personality transplant. We laughed at the very idea.

Personality transplants and indictments of bosses are wonderfully simple if we look at the self or personality as a solid, fixed, and steady state. We tend to look at the selves of others as solid and fixed. If we are looking in the mirror and analyzing ourselves, however, we are much

more comfortable with terms like “it depends.” We know that we are influenced by situations and are more likely to give ourselves the benefit of the doubt than others.

So how does all that apply to authentic leadership? The first component of the authentic leadership mindset is regular use of the mirror. True authentic leadership recognizes that judging the authenticity, or lack thereof, of others is a fool’s errand, and a distraction from our own development. How on earth could I know whether someone is being true to themselves or their motivations? It is hard enough for us as humans to know our own minds. Authentic leadership is about looking in the mirror and asking yourself three questions on a routine basis. What is driving me to do this now? What am I missing? If I were to be 10% more authentic in this situation, what would I do? It is easy to intellectually understand the wisdom of looking in the mirror first, but we all need regular reminders. One of my hardcore, football-watching, deer-hunting, Dockers-wearing clients (who likely shaves quickly and does not spend a lot of time contemplating his look) literally put a mirror on his desk as a reminder to examine himself first before diagnosing others.

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The second component of the authentic leadership mindset is a mindful bias toward action, which is more complex than looking in the mirror. When you throw the reality that our psychological states are constantly changing into the mix, being true to yourself is not that simple. Will you be true to the self that just wants to be comfortable and right, or the self that believes that the long-term value of the enterprise is more important than your ego? We all have both. There is a battle as is illustrated by the following well-known and widely circulated parable:

One evening, a grandfather told his grandson about a battle that goes on inside people. He said, “My son, the battle is between two wolves inside us all. One wolf is evil. It is anger, envy, jealousy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego. The other wolf is good. It is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith.”

The grandson thought about it for a moment and then asked his grandfather: “Which wolf wins?”

The grandfather replied, “The one that you feed.”

Cultivating mindfulness in the midst of your daily grind is necessary if you are to feed the good wolf and be on alert for the bad wolf. The idea of a bias toward action and getting things done as a key competency in leadership is well-documented. If you have looked at any valid leadership

competency model, you will see a bias for action, or the ability to get things done. Adding the word mindful to the bias toward action often proves more challenging than just getting lots of thing done for my gifted executive clients. Mindfulness is about having a broader mindset and a higher level of awareness.

A mindful bias toward action will not happen automatically. You will need to practice. The good news is if you are a successful executive, you likely have the bias toward action part nailed. But you are not quite halfway there either. It is the mindful part that likely needs work. A mindful bias toward action is being aware of what is happening in your own mind and in your environment AS you are making things happen. “As” is the key word. It takes practice.

Mindfulness is all the rage for a reason. It works, and you will likely be more effective and feel better if you practice it. If you want to be to be an authentic leader, you cannot be clueless about what is going on in your own mind. Find a mindfulness practice that works for you. There are a wide variety of ways to practice mindfulness that do not require ashrams, exotic cushions, or mysterious music. But get started. Harvard psychologist Ellen Langer is the thought leader in cognitive, or western, mindfulness. Langer’s take on mindfulness is to simply challenge yourself to notice the novel in any situation. This is much harder than it sounds. Regardless of the type of mindfulness that you explore, you will find that your automatic pilot, or what

Daniel Kahneman calls “system one,” in your brain is formidable. In other words, the good wolf is much quieter than the bad wolf.

The final component of the mindset of the authentic leader is a commitment to ongoing growth and development as a leader. It is the acceptance that the box is never checked. True authentic leaders realize that they can never relax and say, “I have arrived.” The task is to continue to become more authentic and effective. This third aspect of the mindset of an authentic leader is explicated quite clearly in a children’s book written in 1922 titled *The Velveteen Rabbit*. Margery Williams writes:

“Real isn’t how you are made,” said the Skin Horse. “It’s a thing that happens to you.”

“Does it hurt?” asked the Rabbit.

“Sometimes,” said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. “When you are Real, you don’t mind being hurt.

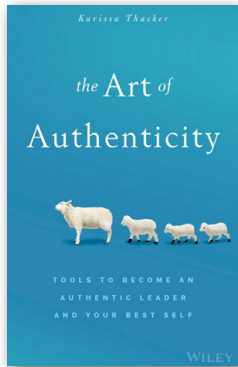
“Does it happen all at once, like being wound up,” he asked, “or bit by bit?”

“It doesn’t happen all at once,” said the Skin Horse. “You become. It takes a long time. That’s why it doesn’t happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept.”

The process of becoming an authentic leader is serious business and is not for amateurs. It is not about being carefully kept and staying in your comfort zone. You must continually have the courage to ask tough questions of yourselves and others. You are going to make mistakes that you choose not to rationalize away. You are also likely to take risks that do not work out as you had imagined. You are likely to fail outright on occasion, admit it, and accept consequences. You are also more likely to learn from your failures and create meaningful connections with other people. You may just slow down enough in all your doing to realize the meaning in your accomplishments.

If you do choose to do the work of becoming, you have a shot at having both success and meaning in your work. Having the mindset of an authentic leader is high-impact in this speedy digital era of freedom and fear. It is far from typical. Others will likely follow you. 📌

Info



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR | Karissa is founder and president of Strategic Performance Solutions Inc., a management training and consulting firm dedicated to elevating people to reach their highest potential and career satisfaction. Over the past two decades Karissa has done just that for countless individuals, working with nearly half of the Fortune 500® companies to drive performance and leadership growth. She specializes in executive coaching and development that balances on-the-job performance with the need for sustained personal fulfillment.

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