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Be Yourself and No One Else: Leading with Authenticity

Be Yourself. Everyone else is taken. ~ Oscar Wilde



This past year, a colleague and I launched a program entitled “Leading with Authenticity.” Somewhat to our surprise, authenticity was identified as the most pressing issue among executive leaders during the mini-focus groups we conducted in advance. The demand was high, and our first two sessions quickly sold out.

Authenticity Rises to the Top

The importance of authenticity was echoed by CEOs and other leaders during the 2013 Wharton Leadership Conference. The topic bubbled up organically in panel discussions and conversations, and was singled out as key to both business success and, on a more personal level, overall health and well-being.

The flip side of that coin is the impact in authenticity can have on one’s health. The stress of being in an environment which does not embrace being genuine or align with one’s values can—not surprisingly—lead to a laundry list of health problems associated with stress:

- Headaches
- Gastrointestinal upset
- Muscle and joint aches and pains
- Weight and sleep issues
- Anxiety and depression
- Memory impairment

Authenticity and Stress

Authenticity can be defined as “acting and expressing oneself in ways consistent with one’s values, desires, and emotions.” So....ask yourself two questions about your current organization:

1. Does the work environment reflect a culture which encourages and supports authenticity?
2. Do *you* feel you *really* can be your authentic self at work?

If your answer to these questions is no, you may have a chronic stress trigger in your midst. But besides not feeling good, who cares? Consider some of the facts and consequences of stress in the workplace to discover some reasons why you should.

- A 2013 Harris Interactive study revealed 83% of Americans are stressed by at least one thing at work.¹
- The study also indicated Millennials and Gen-Xers report being more stressed than Boomers and Matures; and men are less likely than women to do something about stress.¹
- According to Northwestern National Life, 25% of employees view their jobs as the number one stressor in their lives.²
- Issues at work are more strongly associated with health complaints than any other life stressor, according to St. Paul Fire and Marine Insurance Company.²
- Employees under high levels of stress can cost employers up to 40% more than their less stressed colleagues.³
- A 2013 American Psychological Association study revealed stress-related healthcare and missed days at work cost U.S. employers an estimated \$300 billion.⁴



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- Perceived discrimination, such as sexism (which may lead to acting like someone else) produces significantly heightened stress responses and is related to both unhealthy behaviors and non-participation in healthy behaviors.⁵

Say It, Mean It, Do It. Don't Fake It.

So, as a leader, what steps can you take to make it okay to “be yourself and no one else?” **Cultivate an environment** for yourself and your workforce which is **conducive** to the following **behaviors**, which are prevalent in those who move through life authentically:

- Acting from a deep sense of purpose and meaning, and knowing why you are doing what you do.
- Connecting all of your actions to that “why.”
- Nurturing a high degree of self-awareness and a strong sense of self-determination. This constant connectedness is essential to staying focused and on track.
- Feeling satisfied with past decisions and having few regrets. If you're constantly connecting to that sense of purpose, you'll limit the number of moments you regret.
- Matching your public face with your private face.
- Having the courage to face your fears and find a deeper truth. Be open to an alternate path from the one you've always taken. If it's never explored, it can never be discovered.
- Expressing genuine thoughts and feelings, and encouraging others to express theirs.
- Cultivate what is true in others by setting an example yourself.

References

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