

Authentic Influence

Lead from who you are.



by Kevin Cashman

YEARS AGO, I COACHED a senior leadership team that reacted to a crisis situation. Caught up in what the situation meant externally, the VP of Operations put a hard spin on the situation in an effort to save face. Then the chairman, thinking through the larger impact, asked the VP rhetorically, “Do you want to look good, or do the right thing?”

The statement was a sharp call-out. Caught up in the potential damage to their reputations and image personas, an elaborate cover-up seemed natural.

Since that event, we’ve seen marked improvement of c-suite leaders giving up on projecting the illusion of invulnerability. Increasingly, many leaders have made headway in connecting their personal values and interests to their careers and business decisions.

Despite this desire to reconcile value and work, leaders face strong pressure to *compartmentalize* and view work and home in different contexts.

For instance, the OPP report *Who’s Fooling Whom?* shows how much people still intentionally alter their true colors—both by acting more aggressive than usual or by being uncharacteristically taciturn—at work. Half of the employees surveyed admit to a major disconnect between the work selves and home selves. This masking is especially pronounced in the U.K., where two-thirds report putting on a “work face” when dealing with their colleagues, teams, bosses, and clients.

The rationale for this split personality phenomenon ranges from a lack of confidence about their genuine personality, concerns over promotion, questions about their ability to manage or fit in with the culture or teams, and the need to *be more effective*, achieving higher productivity and results.

In some ways, it makes sense. When people are agile in their learning and act in ways that aren’t directly connected to their strengths, it can expand their knowledge, increase comfort and fuel growth, revealing new potentials.

Yet being a *workplace chameleon* day after day, is not without toll. One-third

of workers say changing their personality from one situation to another is tiring and that wearing a false face is stressful. Moreover, research suggests that, if “impression management” is the default, it ultimately undermines individuals, engagement, thwarts their development, and reduces potential. For organizations, it stifles innovation due to the “cookie cutter” environments that create employee clones unable to see one another’s shortcomings or, for that matter, opportunities. Growth becomes more about imposing a familiar product than unlocking individual, innate strengths and interests.

For many people, moving ahead in their careers is about mastering some skillset. Instead of being seen as an *ongoing internal growth process*, mastery is usually seen as mastery of something outside of ourselves. Our train-



ing, development and educational systems focus on learning about things. We learn what to think and do, not how to think and be. We fill up the container of knowledge, but rarely consider comprehending it, expanding it, or using it more effectively.

We think we must operate this way because organizations and communities recognize and reward the degree to which we master our external environment. Revenue, profit, new product breakthroughs, cost savings, and market share are some measures of external competencies. Those measures are valuable, but is our single-minded focus on external results causing us to miss the underlying dynamics supporting sustainable peak performance?

Malcolm Forbes said, “All successful business operations come down to three basic principles: People, Product, Profit. Without top people, you cannot do much with the others.”

The reality is we lead by virtue of

who we are, and we are all CEOs of our own lives. The only difference is the domain of influence. The process is the same; we lead from who we are. The leader and the person are one.

Authentic Influence Creating Value

After seeing so many definitions and descriptions of leadership focus on outer manifestations like vision, innovation, results or drive instead of getting into the essence of leadership, we decided to step back and look at the most effective clients. Upon reviewing thousands of personality and 360-degree assessments, we challenged ourselves with the question, “What is fundamental to the most effective, results-producing leaders that supports their various competencies or styles?”

Three patterns became clear: first, effective leaders exhibit authenticity, showing well-developed self-awareness and transparency that openly face strengths, vulnerabilities and development challenges. Second, they achieve influence by meaningful communication with people—reminding self and others what is genuinely important. Third, they create sustained value through an aspiration to serve multiple constituencies—self, team, organization, world, family and community. Continuing to test these principles, we landed on what we think is an essential definition of personal leadership: *authentic influence that creates value.*

From this perspective, leadership is not hierarchical—it exists everywhere; and *personal leadership* potentially exists in every nook and cranny. The roles of leadership may change, but the core process is the same. Anyone *authentically influencing to create value* is leading. Some may influence and create value through ideas, others through systems, others through people, but the essence is the same. Deep from their core, the person brings forward their talents, connects with others, and serves multiple constituencies.

CEOs often lament, “If only everyone shared my sense of urgency, commitment and personal responsibility, we could elevate our performance.” What if all organizations could distribute leadership to every corner? This is the vision of *authentic influence that creates value*: an organization fully committed to helping all of its people “bring their best” to work every day. **LE**

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ACTION: Cultivate authentic influence.