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## CHOOSING EXCELLENCE – BEING A LEVEL THREE LEADER

The path to authentic leadership  
begins with a choice.

Part One of Three

*Tom DeCotiis, PhD*

There are three levels of leadership. When you're hired or promoted into a leadership position, you are an *appointed* leader – a leader in name only. As you grow to the satisfaction of your followers, you become an *accepted* leader – a leader in practice. This is the level achieved by most leaders, and where most will remain throughout their careers unless they make the conscious choice to be better. When followers experience your personal excellence, commitment to their success, and honorable character in all circumstances, you become an *authentic* leader – a leader who earns the excellence of followers. Authentic leaders focus on results by moving followers forward through teamwork and insisting on personal excellence.

*“Excellence is not something that you stumble into, but something that you build through good intentions, grit, and constant improvement.”*

## WE ARE OUR HABITS

You are defined by your habits – you're on time or you're chronically late, respectful or predictably disrespectful, you laugh easily or you frown. What's for sure is that you grow only when a bad habit is replaced by a good one. Excellence, then, is not something that you stumble into, but something that you build through good intentions, grit, and constant improvement. Choice, more than chance, determines your destiny. “Authentic” describes a leader who consciously works to raise the bar on his or her character, skills, and results.

## A LEADER IS . . .

Ask a leader what a leader is and you typically hear that “a leader is a role model” or “a leader inspires others.” True enough, and while you get what they mean, shorthand answers like these don't tell you much in the way of “how to” – and that makes them hard to teach. That's why I prefer a more action-oriented definition:

*A leader is someone who earns the active loyalty of followers and molds them into a high performance team that achieves results.*

I know an effective leader because I can see his or her team's performance and results. Becoming an authentic leader is the result of high personal standards. Just as there is a standard of knowledge required to be any other kind of professional such as a lawyer, plumber, physician, or teacher, there is a standard for the profession of leader. For want of a better term, I call this standard *scholarship* and believe that it starts with a clear and actionable definition of the leader you want to be.

*“Being an authentic leader starts with your personal commitment to being an “A” student of leadership and a life-long student of your profession.”*

Authentic leadership demands the same thing that any other form of excellence demands: good intentions, grit, and constant improvement. Intentions are things that can be clarified, grit is something that can be learned, and constant improvement is an unwillingness to rest on what is. They are qualities that can be learned through practice, the acceptance of honest feedback, and the determination to be better.



## GO WITH EXCELLENCE

You know excellence when you see it in the spirit of a team, its high mutual respect among team members, accountability, and consistently achieved results. Integrity, credibility, and balance are the hallmarks of an authentic leader.

As you read the definitions of the hallmarks, think about their implications for your leadership. Can any of them be just so-so? How do they build on one another? Can you think of situations where they were the difference between winning and losing? What is it like to work for someone who has solid integrity, credibility, and balance?

## THE HALLMARKS OF AN AUTHENTIC LEADER

*Integrity* demands alignment of feelings, thoughts, and actions. It requires that the leader decide what is right and what is wrong, act on what he or she decides is right, and pay the price of his or her actions.

*Credibility* adds the power of performance and achievement to authenticity and signals the leader's *value to followers* and to the enterprise.

*Balance* is the drive to deliver compelling value to *all* stakeholders (e.g., customers, employees, investors and community) without sacrificing the interests of one to the interests of another. It is a long-term force within a team that occurs only at the insistence of its leader.

The definition of integrity puts muscle on the cliché “walk the talk” as it is clear that it may come at a price. However, it speaks only to the alignment among your values, words, and actions. That’s why credibility is the sister of integrity as it adds skill to the foundation of courage inherent in integrity. Balance rounds out the requirements of authenticity. Its absence is what you see when a team functions as a collection of stars or when its leader settles for a short-term fix at the expense of long-term strength. It’s not so much that the authentic leader creates balance as she prevents imbalance by keeping the interests of all stakeholders front-of-mind. Put all three hallmarks together and you earn the priceless rewards of the authentic leader: being honored your character *and* achievement.

## "A" STORY ABOUT LEADERSHIP

A friend of mine taught anatomy to the first-year medical students at the university where I did my graduate work. By any standard, he was a perfectionist, a master of the human body, and impatient with the "wannabe docs" he considered unprepared. One day I walked into his lab just as a small group of students incorrectly answered his question about the cadaver they were dissecting. He went ballistic, reaming the students in a very direct and public way. After he calmed a bit, I made the mistake of suggesting that he "lighten-up." In hindsight, this was the wrong choice of words, as he looked right through me, and asked: "When you get really sick, which of these students who earn a "C" in anatomy do you want to take care of you?" Point made, and many years later, his lesson sticks with me: You don't want "C" followers and, "A" followers don't want a "C" leader.

## MAKE THE COMMITMENT

Being an authentic leader starts with your personal commitment to being an "A" student of leadership and a life-long student of your profession. The starting point is to craft your own definition of what it means to be a leader and commit to spending the remainder of your career to achieving it through the only two tools available to any leader: words and actions.

It is in terms of these tools that expressions such as "walk the talk" and "be a role model" make sense and answer the most basic question of leadership: "Why should I follow you?" Poor answers to the question go a long way toward explaining employee turnover and mediocre results.

In part two of this three-part article we'll examine the path to authentic leadership and the importance of personal growth.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Tom DeCotiis, PhD co-founded Corvitus in 1985 to provide a range of innovative, science-based measurements and services that tie a company's culture and core values to talent processes. Throughout his 40-year career, Tom has worked with organizations - from start-ups to Fortune 500s - to help them grow and succeed through a rigorous focus on company mission, values, business basics and stakeholder promises.



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