

# CHOOSING EXCELLENCE

BEING A LEVEL THREE LEADER  
Part one of three

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# The path to authentic leadership begins with a choice

There are three levels of leadership. When you're hired or promoted into a leadership position, you are an appointed leader – and a leader in name only as you have no track record with your team. As you grow and acquire the basic skills of leadership, your team accepts you as its leader and you become an accepted leader – a leader in practice. This is the level achieved by the vast majority of leaders through experience and exposure to other accepted leaders – and it's also where most of them will remain throughout their careers. Finally, there are those few leaders who make the choice to excel and dedicate themselves to the difficult process of personal challenge, study, and commitment to the success of their team. We call these rare leaders authentic leaders. In our experience, authenticity comes from a mix of clear values and direction, dedication to the success of others, setting high standards for performance and honor, and a track record of achievement. Authentic leaders have low employee turnover, develop leaders for the future, are liked and respected by others, and get things done.

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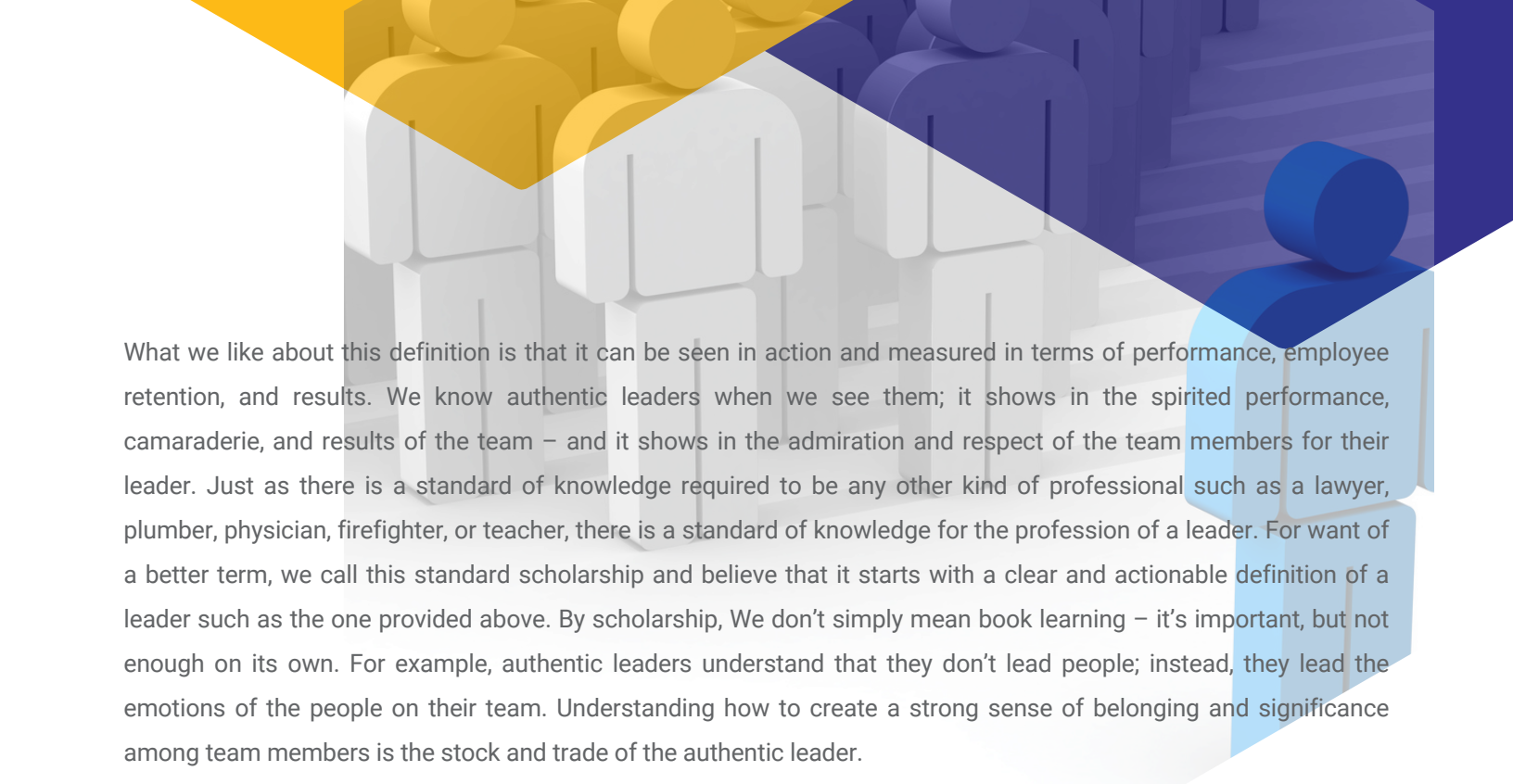
## WE ARE WHAT WE REPEATEDLY DO

It was Aristotle who defined personal excellence as the habit of doing the right thing in the right way. 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...

When we ask a group of leaders for their definition of a leader, we always hear the same thing: “A leader is a role model” or “A leader inspires others,” and so forth. They aren’t wrong, while you get what they mean by these shorthand answers, they don’t tell you much in terms of the “how to” of being a leader. In addition, they don’t provide much in the way of guidance to the leader who wants to be better – and they are impossible to teach. That’s why we 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.**



What we like about this definition is that it can be seen in action and measured in terms of performance, employee retention, and results. We know authentic leaders when we see them; it shows in the spirited performance, camaraderie, and results of the team – and it shows in the admiration and respect of the team members for their leader. Just as there is a standard of knowledge required to be any other kind of professional such as a lawyer, plumber, physician, firefighter, or teacher, there is a standard of knowledge for the profession of a leader. For want of a better term, we call this standard scholarship and believe that it starts with a clear and actionable definition of a leader such as the one provided above. By scholarship, We don't simply mean book learning – it's important, but not enough on its own. For example, authentic leaders understand that they don't lead people; instead, they lead the emotions of the people on their team. Understanding how to create a strong sense of belonging and significance among team members is the stock and trade of the authentic leader.

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Authentic leadership demands the same thing that any other form of excellence demands: a clear idea of the “what and how” of leading, positive intentions, grit, and constant improvement. Intentions are things that can be clarified, grit is something that can be learned, and constant improvement is the hallmark of a winner. They are qualities that can be learned through practice, the acceptance of honest feedback, and the determination to be better.



## CHOOSE AUTHENTICITY

You know an authentic leader's team by its spirit, off-the-charts mutual respect among team members, selfaccountability, and consistently achieved results. We have thought about this for a long time and concluded that 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 own leadership. Can any of them be just soso? How do they build on one another? Can you think of situations where they made the difference between winning and losing? Think about what it's like to work for someone who has solid integrity, credibility, and balance?



**INTEGRITY** is the 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 the team 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.





The definition of integrity puts muscle on the cliché “walk the talk” as it is clear that integrity may come at a price. However, integrity has nothing to do with competence; instead, it speaks to the alignment among your values, words, and actions. That’s why credibility is the sister of integrity as it adds performance to integrity’s foundation in courage. 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 so much as he or she prevents imbalance by keeping the interests of all stakeholders front-of-mind. Most important, it’s the long-term force within a team that occurs only at the insistence of a leader unwilling to sacrifice the future to the easy achievement of short term results. 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 (Tom’s) taught anatomy to the first-year medical students at the university where I did my graduate work. By any standard, he was a perfectionist and had total mastery of the human body and the stuff that can go wrong with it. To say that he had high standards would be an understatement as I witnessed his impatience with the “wannabe docs” he considered unprepared on several occasions. One day I walked into his lab just as a group of three medical students incorrectly answered his question about the cadaver they were dissecting. John went ballistic, reaming the students in a very direct, public, and, I thought, humiliating way. After he calmed a bit, I made the mistake of suggesting that he should “lighten-up,” and give some thought to how he could build the students’ confidence. In hindsight, I’m the one that should have thought before I spoke as my suggestion and poor choice of words were unwelcome. John looked right through me, saying: “Tom, when you get really sick, which one of these three wannabees who doesn’t know how the human body works do you want taking care of you?” I had to agree that he had a good point, and many years later, his lesson is still with me: As a leader, you don’t want “C” followers and, conversely, “A” followers don’t want a “C” leader. It’s as simple as that.



## MAKE THE CHOICE AND COMMIT TO IT

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 then committing to spending the remainder of your career achieving it through the only tool available to any leader: Using your head to think before you speak and act – and if you don’t know, find out from someone who does. Expressions such as “walk the talk” and “be a role model” only when you use the tool to answer what is perhaps 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 Corvitus

Corvitus provides a range of innovative, science-based measurements and services that tie a company's culture and core values to talent processes. Corvitus solutions have enabled hundreds of companies to strengthen and scale their corporate cultures, and to identify, develop and retain those employees with the characteristics and capabilities essential for business success and customer satisfaction. For more information, visit [www.corvitus.com](http://www.corvitus.com) or schedule a demo by using this link:

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