

THE PATH TO AUTHENTICITY

Being a level three leader

Part two of three

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Personal growth starts with a simple realization: You can be better than you are. When realization combines with motivation, a path to personal improvement becomes open to you. When the desired growth has to do with your leadership skills, the obvious question is “How good do you want to be?” While part of your answer will be based on your understanding of what a leader does, equal weight should be given to what excites you. Specifically, what gives you the sense that you are making a difference in the lives of others? That insight raises the important question of “What do you want to be known for? This is about your reputation and how you want to be remembered as a leader. For most of us, it’s a wonderful thing when someone who has worked for you says: “Oh, yeah, he or she changed my life.”

For sure, authentic leadership is about achievement, but it’s also about the personal character and the deep satisfaction that comes from contributing to the growth of others, the energy created by high standards, and experiencing the excitement of building something that you are proud to have as part of your life. The importance of internally-focused motives like these is the heart of authentic leadership, and why the model of leadership growth described below puts leadership of yourself front-and-center. In our experience, the most powerful motives for personal growth are always “selfish” in that they have to come from within. Only reliance on your personal drive to grow will sustain you against the almost irresistible pressure to compromise your dream.

GIVING COMES FIRST

As it is for all positive relationships, the one between leader and follower is one of give and take, with giving being the driving force of the authentic leader. Integrity, credibility, and balance are the defining characteristics of a positive relationship that flows from leader to followers. In return, spirit, commitment, and performance go from followers to the leader.

The Eastern idea of Yin and Yang – the complement between two forces – summarizes the nature of the relationship between leader and follower.

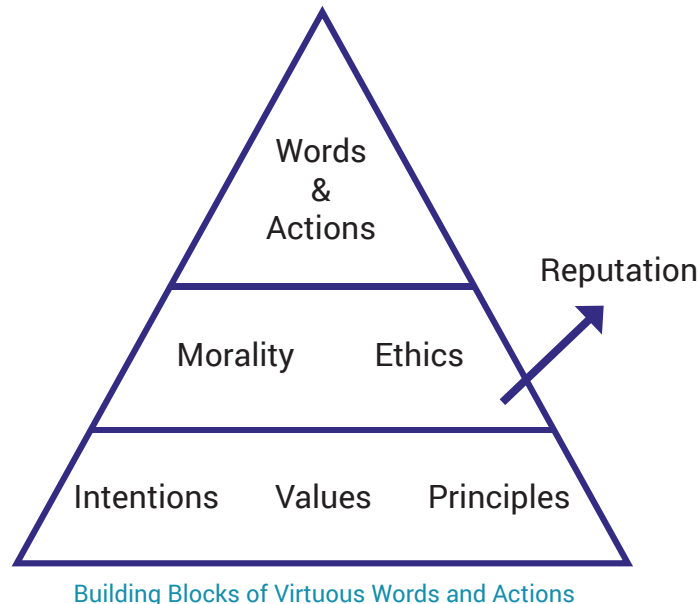


WHAT GOES AROUND COMES AROUND

The relationship between a leader and the best team members is always voluntary. This relationship is perfectly captured by the Yin and Yang of complementary forces. The spirit, commitment, and performance of followers cannot be demanded by the leader any more than the integrity, credibility, and balance of the leader can be demanded by followers. *These are gifts exchanged in mutual trust.*

Gordon Bethune (former CEO, Continental Airlines) perfectly described a follower's gifts when talking about his career. "I used to be an airline mechanic . . . and do you know how much faster I could fix an airplane when I wanted to fix it versus when I didn't want to fix it? That's where the money is." What he is talking about is the profit inherent in employee enthusiasm, commitment, and performance earned by leader integrity, credibility, and balance. *No matter how much you may want it to be otherwise, your followers make the choice to be adequate or inspired in response to your choice to be adequate or inspiring.*

The idea of being an authentic leader has good intentions, doing the right things well, and achieving results at its core. This demands living in accordance with a set of values that make your leadership both predictable and inspiring. It's your values – articles of your personal goodness – that stamp your words and actions with your character. This process is represented by the *Building Blocks of Virtuous Action*.



Your values are your ways of being a good person and serve to align your intentions with your principles. Your principles are your habitual ways of doing things and serve to bring consistency to your behavior. It is this consistency – or lack of it – that your followers experience as your predictability. Together, they are the centering force for your personal moral code or sense of right and wrong as well as your system of ethics. Your ethics are the personal limits you put on what you will or will not do as a leader – and, ultimately, determine what you say and do.

Your reputation reflects the alignment between who you say you are and how others experience your leadership. That is why feedback on your methods and results should not be viewed by you as criticism, but as a monitor on whether you are internally consistent; that is, do, in fact, walk your talk. Misalignment between your walk and talk is a call to action and an opportunity to build both integrity, credibility, and balance. In conjunction with skills building, developing your character serves to raise the bar on the effectiveness of your words and actions and, thereby, is a giant step toward routinely earning the spirit, commitment, and performance of your followers.

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The more filters there are between your values and your team members' understanding of them the less certain the spirit, commitment, and performance of the team.

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It is also the path to embedding a defining set of values and principles in your team. This is an opportunity that many leaders miss simply because they do not recognize that all teams have values and principles. The question is whether they are the values and principles of the leader or derive from some other source. To paraphrase Tolstoy's comments on the difference between happy versus unhappy families, all good teams are alike; each failing team fails in its own way. One of the certain ways to fail is for the leader to allow the teams' (usually the informal leaders of the team) values and principles to govern the team. You see this all the time in teams that are in conflict as well as with losing sports teams.



FAKE IT UNTIL YOU GET IT RIGHT

Good leaders are good actors. That renders comments like “I am who I am” a bad excuse for refusing to grow. Our point: You are who you are only if you do nothing to change it. While the cards you were dealt in life are important, they are not nearly as important as how well you play them. Being an authentic leader, like playing cards well, is a skill that improves with the intent to be better, sharpened focus, and reflective practice.

In this sense, “I am who I want to be” is an important part of being an authentic leader. To paraphrase Muhammad Ali, “To be a great champion (or an authentic leader) you must believe you are the best. If you're not, pretend you are until you are.” This is not being inauthentic or grandstanding; rather, it's the art of visualizing success, directed practice, and reflective learning. Acting is a skill that authentic leaders have in abundance.

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Being an authentic leader is a skill that improves with the intent to be better, sharpened focus, and reflective practice of new ways of being.

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Pretending and practicing requires that you know what you want to stand for, make it clear to yourself and your followers, and accept that there will be gaps between your good intentions and the reality of your words and actions; i.e., your performance and results. A leader focused on improvement looks for progress in closing the gaps between his intentions and reality. There are three steps in this process:

1. Define the leader you want to be.
2. Identify the disciplines that support your definition.
3. Assess how well you execute the disciplines against your definition and revise accordingly.

These are the basic steps to personal growth. With them you begin a journey that helps you gauge the distance between your methods of leading (i.e., your words and actions) and the target you have set for yourself – your personal vision of leadership excellence. To achieve the level of awareness characteristic of an authentic leader demands that you become a “scholar” of you. This is no small point as many of the leaders we have worked with appear to know much more about their company than they do about themselves. Not only that, they consider this imbalance to be normal and acceptable. Normal, but unacceptable if you want to grow as a person and as a leader.

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

ABOUT THE AUTHORS:



Tom DeCotiis, PhD co-founded Corvirtus in 1985 with his partner Marta Erhard. Their company provides a broad range of innovative, science-based measurements and services that clarify and tie a company's culture and core values to its vision, strategy, and 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.



Jennifer Yugo, PhD, SPHR leads Corvirtus as Managing Director. She provides direction across the team to deliver useful tools and practical solutions to our customers that support their success. Under her leadership Corvirtus helps organizations build strong and healthy cultures through hiring, developing, and retaining remarkable people – not only helping them reach their intended results – but enabling their employees to grow and flourish.

ABOUT CORVIRTUS

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, or schedule a demo by using this link:

[Schedule time for us to connect.](#)

