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Even Authentic Leaders Have Their Kryptonite

When I think about leadership, I am reminded of the credit card company famous for the slogan "membership has its privileges." It's a slogan those of us lucky enough to be in a leadership position should remember – being a leader is, in fact, a "privilege." Being a good leader is hard work, and all leaders screw up. But that means that we're human, that sometimes we are flying by the seat of our pants, and that we don't always have all the right answers.

The leaders that I most admire (and aspire to be like one day) have a courageous quality about them – the ability to communicate to the people on their team (if when they are scared to death) – "Check this out, I want to go over there, and I'm going to be responsible for getting us over there, and no one has ever been over there, and I'm not sure how to get over there, but I'm sure that together we can there, so let's go."

I have been a human resource professional for over two decades. My specialty is diversity management, specifically helping people around the corner and around the world, understand the inherent dignity of the individual, and to manage organizations better by getting the best from all people. I have been greatly influenced by the professional diversity work that I do, and I have witnessed firsthand the impact of authentic leaders on companies and communities across the country.

Authentic leaders can make their vision a reality because they can gain the trust of the people on their team. They understand that they are dependent on the people on their team to move forward.

One of the keys to be an authentic leader is to recognize the polarizing and destructive behaviors that impact engagement and inclusion on your team.

1. Being Disingenuous.

Authentic leaders stay true to what they believe, and they remain true to their values even in the face of difficulty. They don't waiver simply because it would be easy to do so. They can be trusted to show up in the same way, every time because they operate from a place of total honesty. Employees know when a leader is faking it.

2. Over Promising and Under Delivering

Authentic leaders are very careful about the carrots they dangle to motivate their employees. If you make a promise, your team members have every right to expect follow-through. On several occasions, I have had to catch myself because I have shared ideas in the heat of a conversation, not realizing that the people on my team were taking every word to heart.

Remember that when you offer suggestions or ideas, your employees hear them as directives or promises. Failing to deliver on a promise -- no matter how large or small -- will violate the trust of employees.

3. Being ambiguous

The people on your team require specificity when it comes to communicating direction. When you are ambiguous, it sends a message that you are either unclear about the direction or uncertain about your true intentions. Both of these impressions can create mistrust and skepticism. The best way to ensure clarity is to explain the "why behind your decisions, vision, and direction. This behavior will build trust and increase engagement.

4. Avoiding Feedback

As a Baby Boomer, I grew up in traditional, hierarchical organizations where information and performance feedback flowed from the top-down, through a tightly controlled chain-of-command. I did my job and received the precise information that my boss wanted me to have.

Today, Millennials have a powerful voice. They desire – no demand—to work in healthy cultures where they are empowered to contribute ideas and observations. Authentic leaders recognize this and embrace the fact that the people on their team have valuable feedback and should be heard.

One of the best ways I have found to create a culture of two-way communication is to solicit feedback from those on your team routinely. After every presentation, I go to a person on my team

ask them to *"tell me one thing I did well, two things I messed up, and three opportunities I missed overlooked."*

The people on my team have become so competent, confident, and comfortable, giving me feedback; I rarely have to solicit their observations or evaluations. Authentic leaders realize that the people on their team are their single most valuable resource for insight into what is happening in the organization.

5. Taking/Making Things Personal

Authentic leaders have thick skins and can resolve conflict and solve problems even when they are being pounded by negativity. They also have strong self-confidence because of the non-believers who question their abilities and would find pleasure in seeing them fail.

However, as a leader, you have to check your ego at the door and ensure you put the good of the team ahead of your agenda. This behavior may be one of the most challenging to eliminate because it requires a lot of self-awareness and the ability to discern intent versus impact.

6. Losing self-control

There is no place in leadership for uncontrolled anger. It conveys fear, disrespect, and lack of concern for those who are on the receiving end. Enough said.

7. Showboating and Hogging the Ball

I have never understood dancing in the end zone after a touchdown. Leadership is a team effort. When people join your team and support your vision, they bring experience and skills that can move your strategy forward. A leader's job is to hand the ball off to others on the team even when you know that they may not do things exactly as you would.

However, one person -- even if they are a star -- can't do it all by themselves. Authentic leaders understand that effective delegation enables you to stay focused on what you do best and what you love most.

Delegation not only expands your ability to get things done, and increases the capabilities of others on the team. It also tells your employees that you trust them. Employees want to know they are

making an impact and contribution. They want to feel needed and empowered – they want to score and dance too!

8. Acting arrogantly

Employees see you very differently from the way you see yourself. In most companies, there is a line of demarcation between leadership and the rest of the company, even if the leaders don't intend to create such a division. As an organization grows, it's easy for us to get disconnected from the people on our team. Authentic leaders remember this and are intentional about recognizing and reward people on their team. More on this in my next article.

9. Playing favorites.

One of the most demoralizing leadership behaviors is favoritism. While every team has a "franchise player" or two who are essential in holding the team together, ideally, a team should aim to be "outcome-driven" and not "superhero-driven."

When teams revolve around a handful of superstars, the remaining team members can begin to feel that they are expendable. To minimize dependency on heroes, authentic leaders invest in the creation of processes so that if key people leave, there is continuity on the team.

Some final thoughts.

Every person in a leadership position will invariably display one or more of these behaviors at some point. After all, we're all human, and leadership is hard work.

The most important trait of an authentic leader is self-awareness. The more self-aware we are, the more successful we will be at recognizing these destructive behaviors and correcting them before they impact the team. Authentic leaders build the best teams so that they do their best work and live their best lives.