

Having the courage to lead

Fiona Beddoes-Jones reveals three reasons why leaders fail and discusses the implications for L&D practitioners

Courage... from the old French *cuer* meaning heart

1. The quality of mind and spirit that enables a person to face danger with bravery
2. (*Obsolete*) The heart as the source of emotion. Compassion, empathy
3. Acting in accordance with one's beliefs and values in the face of criticism or danger.

Who is a leader?

Newspaper columnist Sebastian Shakespeare recently wrote that, with politicians and leading sportsmen regularly being found ethically wanting and morally lame, if they are the best that society has to offer, we don't need role models any more¹. I disagree.

With public figures and celebrities so often showing us how *not* to lead our lives, perhaps we need great role models more than ever? Surely it's the responsibility of our business leaders to engage and inspire people and to lead in ways that are pro-social, ethical and transparent? After all, an organisation's future leaders are mostly likely to be found within the ranks of its employees, and who are they most likely to emulate in terms of their own leadership style if not those who are leading them now?

But who and what is a leader? Many people, interestingly those who are results-orientated and task-focused, think that a leader is the person who has responsibility for the results to be achieved by a team or group of followers; therefore, anyone without at least one follower cannot, by definition, be a leader. Other people, myself included, think that leadership, although it certainly encompasses achieving results via legitimate power, as defined by French and Raven, also includes the personal, referent power that leaders have over others,

regardless of whether they are 'officially' our leaders or managers.

The Twitter phenomenon is a good metaphor for this; we choose to follow those people we consider to be role models or those who have something interesting or useful to say to us. If we subsequently decide that they don't, or they let us down as role models, we simply stop following them.

What do followers really want?

So, as followers, either legitimate ones or referent ones, what do we want from our leaders? In an age where senior leaders get paid to set strategic goals, influence operational objective-setting and create the conditions within an organisation for achieving them, it can be easy for them to misunderstand what their followers really want and need from them.

In 2009, a Gallup research team asked more than 10,000 followers what they wanted from their leaders. The answers will not surprise you if you are a follower, but may have escaped your attention if you are a leader tied up in the meetings and activities that constitute your normal working day. The four things that followers want from their leaders are not task-focused or results-driven. They are neither operational nor strategic and they say →

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less about what a leader *does* than who he *is* in terms of his personal characteristics and values.

The first thing followers want most from their leaders is to be able to trust them; to believe that what they say is true. The second thing is for a leader to be compassionate; to have empathy and to care about their well-being. Leaders would be well advised to remember the saying that *'people don't care how much you know, until they know how much you care'*. Thirdly, followers want stability, which is something that many leaders either overlook or simply don't seem to realise in their relentless drive for change, performance improvements and financial savings. Finally, followers want to feel hopeful about the future, something that is impossible without trust being present².

So what kind of leader engenders trust, compassion, stability and hope? What kind of leader is going to show the best of pro-social, sustainable and values-led leadership? What kind of leader isn't going to be so competitive that they believe that the end justifies the means, be so blinkered by greed that they are prepared to put profit before people or become embroiled in a debacle that shows a lack of ethical judgment and personal integrity?

I have come to believe that the answer is a leader who, in Bass's terms, is authentically transformational³, and who, in Jim Collins' terms, is a level five leader⁴. A leader who embodies the very best of leadership and who, more than any other quality, has *the courage to lead*, where courage is embodied in both its modern usage and its original French derivation. These leaders are the new authentic leaders.

Driven by passion and purpose, authentic leaders combine personal courage with ethical decision-making to deliver pro-social, sustainable and meaningful results.

What is authentic leadership and why do leaders fail?

But what actually is authentic leadership? It means much more than simply 'being genuine' or 'true to

yourself'. After all, you could argue that all leaders are being true to themselves and that any leadership style is 'authentic', despite its good or bad qualities.

New research that I have conducted with senior RAF officers into authentic leadership within the military has revealed that there are three statistically-significant dimensions that form the pillars of authentic leadership⁵. Moreover, if you pause for a moment to examine the reasons why the leaders that you know are not successful or actually fail, in every case you will find that they are lacking in one or more of these pillars of leadership.

The first pillar is **self-awareness**: knowing your real strengths and weaknesses, understanding how other people perceive you, being acutely aware of how your thoughts and emotions influence your language and behaviours and, therefore, the impact and influence that you have on others. It is the ability to articulate your core beliefs and values, and understand your personal boundaries and emotional and intellectual drivers. In short, it is knowing who you are and what you value, thereby building a secure sense of self that provides an anchor for your decisions and actions on your path through life.

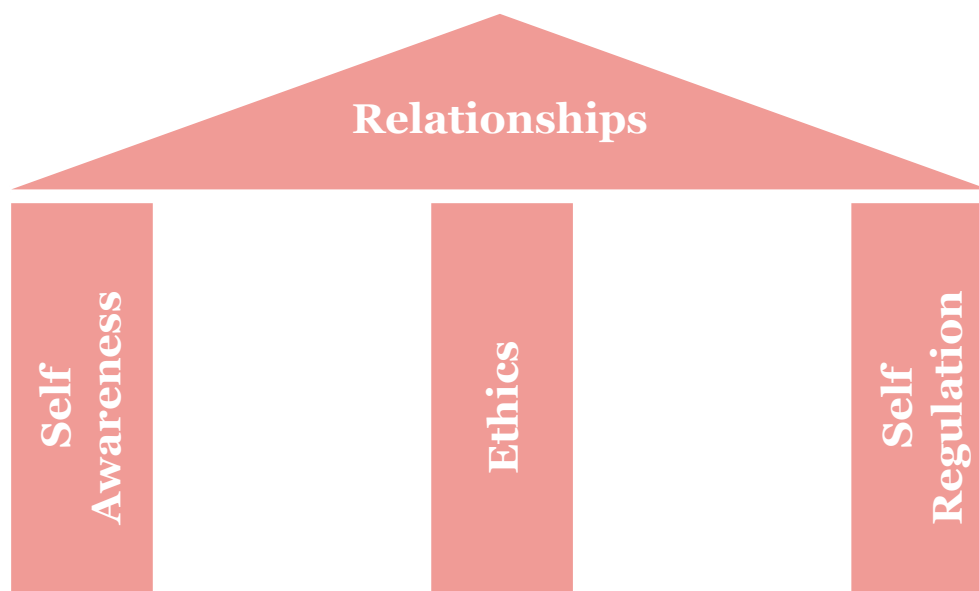
But self-awareness requires reflexivity in the moment and reflection after the moment has passed. As an executive coach and psychologist, I encounter many leaders who lack even a basic level of self-awareness; they fail to understand themselves and, worse, they fail to understand those people they are meant to lead and manage.

Research conducted by my colleagues at The Cognitive Fitness Consultancy, using Thinking Styles, has identified that, within the workplace, there are three kinds of manager/leader⁶. Sitting on a continuum, at one end there is the task-focused person. To him, nothing is more important than goals, targets and the results that are achieved. People are purely a disposable resource in the pursuit of the right results. Often highly competitive, driven and cold, he is rarely well-liked and relies on coercion, reward or legitimate power to get things done.

At the opposite end of the scale there is the people-focused person. For him, people are paramount. Tasks and results may become a casualty of his concern for the well-being of others. Frequently taking an almost parental level of responsibility for their teams, these people are very well liked but may not be respected as others frequently take advantage of their good nature and focus on others.

The vast majority of managers and leaders sit somewhere in the middle and, although they may

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have a natural preference, are able to maintain an appropriate balance to get the job done through the concerted efforts of others. Knowing where you sit on this continuum and the implications and consequences that this has for you and for the people you work with is one of the fundamental building blocks of self-awareness that many leaders simply fail to grasp.

Self-regulation is the second pillar of authentic leadership and is closely connected with how well you know and understand yourself. It concerns self-management: your focus; your self-discipline; your ability to be actively and deliberately in control of your thoughts, emotions and behaviours; your levels of tolerance and patience; how you manage your energy, and your physical, mental and emotional resilience.

Physical and emotional courage both sit within the pillar of self-regulation and perhaps unsurprisingly, due to the high levels of self-discipline and courage required by our military leaders, it was here that RAF officers scored most highly in the 360° feedback ratings from their colleagues and peers.

The third pillar is **ethics**. When conducting my research, I divided the ethical dimension into two: ethical virtue and ethical action. I wanted to find out, from a follower's perspective regarding ethics, whether there is a difference between what a leader *says* and what he *does*. I used two samples: a business sample and the RAF sample. The results

were the same in both cases. Followers expect consistency and congruence from their leaders. They expect a leader to walk his talk and will cease to trust him if his words and actions don't match. More crucially though, despite any rhetoric, followers judge leaders against their actions; what a leader *does* is far more important than anything that they may *say*. This is a critical lesson for all leaders to learn, especially those politicians and public servants in the public eye.

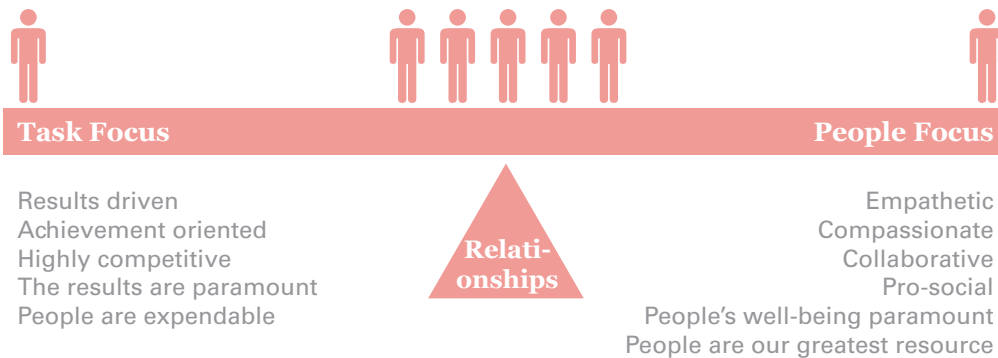
Sitting neatly within the ethical pillar of authentic leadership is professional integrity – all ethical decision-making; those core beliefs and values that underpin your personal leadership philosophy; the courage to remain steadfast in the face of ethical dissent or wrongdoing by others; having a pro-social leadership ethos and the desire to serve the wider community. Honesty, openness, trust, transparency, the moral capacity to judge dilemmas from multiple perspectives and be able to take into consideration different stakeholder needs, honour and fairness are all evident here.

With the notable exceptions of a failure of self-regulation such as drink driving or bullying, it is failures within this pillar of leadership that seem to so often hit the media headlines.

These three pillars support, and shelter under, the roof of **relationships**. The quality of relationships that an authentic leader has, i.e. the healthy relationship that he has with himself as well as those collaborative, mutually supportive and



People vs Task Focus



nourishing relationships that he has with others, is a critical differentiator between a leader and an authentic leader.

"The strongest predictor of happiness is not money, or recognition through success or fame; it's having meaningful relationships." Professor June Gruber, Yale University

Authentic leadership: the courage to lead

Leadership isn't easy. Anyone who thinks that it is has clearly never tried it! But why would a leader need courage? The courage to do what exactly? Some of the things that people on authentic leadership development workshops have said when they have thought about what it means for them to have the courage to lead include:

The courage to do what exactly?

- to do what's right, regardless of the cost to you
- to develop your own voice and be known for your ethical standpoint
- to take daily steps to develop your self-awareness and yourself
- to ask for honest feedback and to accept it without becoming defensive or self-justifying
- to be vulnerable, to make mistakes, to admit you were wrong, to apologise sincerely and to change
- to be prepared to lose your job rather than compromise your principles⁷

- to be not only your authentic self, but your very 'best self'.

Some implications for HR and L&D professionals

While task-focused leaders focus on bottom-line results, often at the expense of pro-social and ethical decision-making, the paradox of authentic leadership is that, by taking an ethical approach and engaging the hearts and minds of followers, it actually delivers better and more sustainable results than other leadership approaches. That's an obvious reason for all leaders to become authentic ones, if only it were that easy!

There is currently a debate raging on the Internet after the *News of the World's* phone hacking scandal, which seems to blame HR professionals and suggest that they should somehow police the actions of senior leaders and the board⁸. Quite apart from the courage it requires for an HR or L&D practitioner to stand up to unethical leadership from above when he has a mortgage and/or a pension to consider, surely leaders should take responsibility for their own actions? Is that not what adulthood involves?

My personal belief is that, as HR and L&D professionals, we can advise and support but, ultimately, we should place responsibility for the decisions that are taken fairly and squarely on the shoulders of those people who took them. "Ah," I hear some of you cry, "it's not as easy as all that." You are quite right, often it isn't and it is the authentic leader who lays awake at night grappling with every angle of a situation, trying to find a way through that is the least adverse for people's well-being and, moreover, is a course of action that his conscience tells him he can live with.

If you are a trainer or a coach, despite the obvious benefits for well-being and the achievement of

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meaningful results, you need to recognise that not everyone wants to become an authentic leader. Leadership style is intensely personal; no two people will ever lead or manage in exactly the same way. That becomes obvious when you take a moment to consider the implications for leadership style of someone's seat on the task vs. people see-saw. Combine that with their personal leadership philosophy, multiply it by their experience and the organisational culture, and we have some idea of the complexities of leadership style.

If you are fortunate enough to be working with leaders/managers who *do* want to develop, I have written enough in this article to give you a starting point and a route map.

Authentic leadership development

The ABC of authentic leadership is **authenticity** (being true to yourself and your values), **bravery** (having the courage to lead, particularly in the face of danger or dissent) and **compassion** (leading with empathy and concern for the well-being of others). Authentic leaders combine pro-social, collaborative leadership with integrity and purpose. Authentic leadership therefore links who you are as a person – your beliefs and values – with how you lead and manage – your personality, thinking and behaviours.

The barriers to authentic leadership are all psychological. As authentic leaders look outwards rather than inwards, they are more focused on others than they are on themselves. Anyone who is self-absorbed and inwards-looking will not have the successful, supportive and fulfilling relationships that are a crucial hallmark of authentic leaders.

Self-absorbed leaders, or leaders with low self-awareness, will lack understanding of the negative impact they have on those around them. Highly task-focused leaders will show low levels of empathy and compassion for others and will have limited people skills. Many recognise their weakness and want to become 'better' leaders. In which case, provided that it's used skilfully, feedback from a 360° instrument can be an enlightening and hugely beneficial source of information for leaders who want to become more effective but simply don't quite know how.

Fear is the final psychological barrier to authentic leadership. It can manifest itself as a need for control; micro-management; an overbearing attention to detail; the constant worry that things will go wrong; a lack of self-confidence, or neuroticism.

Summary

As Bass identified, there are authentic transformational leaders and pseudo

Tips for authentic leadership development

- Decide what kind of a leader you want to be
- Think about your personal leadership philosophy – where do you sit on the task/people see-saw?
- Remember that self-awareness is necessary for self-development
- Allow people to get to know you and what's important to you
- If you find yourself lacking courage, consider other options – you may find another way
- Courage relates to self-confidence and is like a muscle: the more you use it, the bigger it grows
- Speak with colleagues if you find a particular issue difficult – you will find that you are not alone
- Familiarise yourself with the characteristics of authentic leaders – you will find people all around you who display elements of authentic leadership
- Make an effort to develop meaningful, successful and supportive relationships with colleagues.

transformational leaders: those people who want the positive results that authentic leadership brings but lack the motivation or self-understanding to be either psychologically self-aware or philosophically sound.

Authentic leadership is just one leadership style and is obviously a personal choice. If you want to be not just yourself but your very best self, if you are prepared to invest time and effort in yourself and your relationships with the people around you and if you really feel that you can have the courage to lead, perhaps authentic leadership is for you. As a way of being, rather than just a way of doing, I can wholeheartedly recommend it and I wish you the very best on your journey. **TJ**

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