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How Great Leaders Display Authenticity

By Marcel Schwantes

Editor's Note: In the August 2015 edition of The Stepping Stone,¹ executive coach Marcel Schwantes demonstrated that applying daily practices of servant leadership is really the best way to engage workers to perform at a high level, which will improve the bottom line. Here Schwantes returns to kick off a six-part series that delves deep into the best practices of what a servant leader is, and does.

Organizations around the world are changing their attitudes toward leadership. Leadership has been written and talked about for decades, with great authors defining it in different ways calling it different things. In the end, most of these folks have been talking about the same things. The simple truth is that leadership and life are about people and relationships. And it's about who you are ... not what you do. Consequently, servant leadership has emerged over the last 20 or 30 years on a grand scale in some of the most admired and successful companies *on the planet*.

“You must unlearn what you have learned.”—Yoda, *The Empire Strikes Back*

Now, I'll be the first to admit that not everyone reading will have a positive view of the term “servant leadership,” or even be sold on the idea that this is a leadership style you have to aspire to in your role to motivate your troops. There's a lot of confusion about what a “servant leader” actually is and does in the corporate sense. We bring our experiences—good or bad—on a professional level, including the types of bosses we've been exposed to over the years, and the culture and environment of previous companies. All these factors drive a lot of our professional behavior and thinking.

And so our wise Jedi Master Yoda has it right in his famous *The Empire Strikes Back* quote. There are many things that we must *unlearn* first.

There's another quote by a more human guru—Lao Tzu, the Chinese philosopher, who goes on to say: “To *attain* knowledge, add things every day. To *attain wisdom*, subtract things every day.” That observation is really going to feed into this article about what it is that we have to unlearn in the way we view leadership.

Authenticity is showing up with your best self. It's leading from your mind *and* your heart.

But first, here is some context. As we dive headfirst into our servant leadership series and explore its tenets, we need to narrow it down to a proven framework that practically works. I'm going to break down this series into six key areas of leadership research and best practice, plus my own observations, while borrowing from the research work of Dr. Jim Laub.

Professor Laub is dean of MacArthur School of Leadership at Palm Beach University, and president of the OLAGroup. Laub is a scholar who developed the Organizational Leadership Assessment (OLA)—arguably the best and most accurate tool in the market to assess organizational health based on the foundation of effective servant leadership. It's a great tool that our company uses with clients, and I'm really thankful for his partnership.

According to the OLA, servant leaders in healthy organizations:

- Display authenticity
- Value people
- Develop people
- Build community
- Provide leadership
- Share leadership

We'll start with the proven fact that *great leaders display authenticity*. Here are eight ways they do this well:

1. THEY SHOW UP WITH THEIR TRUE SELVES

Well, what does that mean? Sometimes the tendency is to hide, withdraw, stonewall or put on a mask. And that mask hides who we truly are; maybe through how we order people around, or how we forcefully command attention with a false charisma. Ever been around boisterous and loud leaders who are three decibels above everyone else? There's a perception that *because I speak loudly, I will command respect*. But false charisma is driven by ego, not character, which we all know is not sustainable.

Authenticity is showing up with your best self. It's leading from your mind *and* your heart. You show up with:

- Excellence
- Integrity
- Emotional honesty
- A great attitude
- Being open to feedback
- Being self-aware of not only your feelings, but those of others in your sphere of influence

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2. THEY TREAT THEMSELVES (AND OTHERS) AS HUMAN BEINGS

Great leaders display authenticity by making room daily for laughter and joy, while accepting that they're not perfect and that they make mistakes. These leaders will resist the tendency to protect themselves at all costs. When they make mistakes, they will admit them. And when employees make mistakes, it's safe for them to risk being open enough to say, "Hey boss, I messed up." They can say this due to the high levels of trust built over time with those healthy bosses.

These leaders also allow themselves room for creativity and spontaneity, and room to build relationships. They understand that they don't always have to be formal and business-like in the way they speak and interact with their team. Now, I'm not saying be unprofessional or inappropriate about it, but these leaders allow their people to see them as human beings. So when they connect with their people on a personal level, they find things in common to talk about—their favorite jazz band, sports team or hobbies—and add some color to these business interactions. This builds trust with peers, subordinates and clients alike. When you have allowed them into your world by letting them see and know who you are, you have an edge.

3. THEY APPROACH CONFLICT WITH GREAT AWARENESS

Authentic leaders don't assume and jump into conclusions.

They look at difficult situations from several angles. They talk to several people for perspective, get clarity, and then determine a course of action. Sometimes the final decision may not be popular, but it's always the right one. So in authentic leading, you seldom see that person casting blame and pointing fingers. Have you heard the expression: "For every finger you point, there are three pointing back at you"?

In conflict management, authentic leaders will avoid creating distance, being silent or stone-walling—all passive-aggressive ways to deal with conflict. They are naturally assertive and speak up when they have to. Now, I'm not saying

that authentic leaders speak up so they can run over people with their authority, no sir. But authentic leaders have the courage to run toward the eye of the storm ... because they know that cutting through a conflict to resolve a problem with respect, dignity and listening to understand first, is easier than the negative consequences of running away from a conflict.

4. THEY SPEAK THEIR TRUTH

They don't say things to sugarcoat, to try to please others, or to try to look good in front of their peers. They don't betray themselves or others by using words or making decisions that are not aligned with who they are. It's highly unlikely that

you will hear such a leader being talked about around water coolers on Monday morning for "throwing someone under the bus." So these leaders speak clearly, honestly and with integrity. That's why they usually have great reputations.

5. THEY ARE TEACHABLE

Leaders in a healthy organization gladly accept the role of a learner, because they know it will make them better. They know that each person has something important to teach them. The truth is that good leaders don't always know what is needed and what to do—so they are willing to listen before making suggestions. They ask questions, and are sincerely interested in the answers.

6. THEY LISTEN TO UNDERSTAND

I mentioned this earlier: Effective communication isn't just about talking; it is also the ability to *listen* and understand what's happening on the other side of the fence. In today's virtually connected world that relies on technology rather than face-to-face interactions, it's even more important to be able to know the cues on the other side that you would normally get eyeball-to-eyeball. But it goes way beyond that.

Authentic listeners don't dominate the conversation by talking only about themselves or the task at hand. So in meetings or one-on-ones, they listen and reflect back what they heard to clarify ("What I hear you saying is ..."), and they ask questions to probe the other person's feelings or opinions on the topic of conversation. That



can be as simple as: “Tell me how you feel about this.”

Authentic listeners are careful not to talk over someone’s point. That just shows impatience on their part, and it may cause the other person to lose interest in the conversation, or shut down.

Authentic listeners, in the truest sense of servant leadership, will listen for meaning and understanding with the other person’s needs in mind. The listening has one modus operandi: How can I help this other person? This will give you the edge as a leader to build trust when others see that you have their interests in mind. You also benefit from this style of listening because by being receptive to helping them, you make it a safe place for them to be open enough to give you great input, great ideas and great contributions.

7. THEY ARE ACCESSIBLE

Great leaders, particularly during hard times, are out in front of the organization sharing plans for the future. They don’t hide behind closed doors or conveniently delegate important communication needs

to others. Employees will look to leaders for information, clear expectations, and status of what’s going on when the chips are down. Great leaders are especially adept at “walking their four corners.” They spread the gospel of engagement by being amongst the people, joining their meetings, being interested in what they’re doing, and connecting with them on an emotional level.

8. THEY PROMOTE TRUST AND OPEN COMMUNICATION

There’s a type of leadership I have seen where employees walk on eggshells, not really sure where they stand and how open they can be with each other, and especially with those in management roles. Imagine coming to work there every day. This is an environment where perhaps some risks are taken but failure is still feared and many workers don’t feel valued. Even worse, many feel used by those in leadership positions. But, why?

Well, there is no breakthrough or *a-ha!* moment here. *People respond to leaders they can trust*, and are motivated to the rafters in trustworthy organizations.

Why? Because they feel safe. When they are allowed to take risks, exercise their creativity, communicate ideas openly, provide input to major decisions without reprimand, and work alongside their leaders as partners—not worker bees—in a spirit of collaboration, you will see your employee satisfaction surveys skyrocket.

In what ways do you display authenticity? ■

Editor’s Note: Watch for Part 2 in this series—“How Great Leaders Value People”—in the February 2016 issue of The Stepping Stone.

ENDNOTE

¹ “Making a Case for Servant Leadership.”



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