

# The powerful role authentic leadership plays in driving culture

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- People are the most valuable asset in a business.
- Once considered weak to show vulnerabilities today it's vitally important.
- This article outlines how leaders can improve their authenticity scorecard with both customers and employees.



In a recent [Harvard Business Review article](#) about brands' social advocacy, Latia Curry, a Principal with Rally Communications, articulates the backlash or blowbacks where authenticity is either lacking or ill perceived and maps this in a brand advocacy model. In an interview I conducted with Latia Curry she affirmed a key lesson from the advocacy model as being rooted in this simple idea of authenticity.

The model and case study exploration she puts forward in that article applies to one of two people levers in the experience economy: customers. The same ideas, namely where leadership gets authenticity right or wrong, are just as critical with the other human lever: employees.

People are, arguably, the most valuable asset in any business. Without people a business is merely a name, an empty, soulless shell, registered on ASIC's shelves for a tad shy of \$500 plus GST.

Customers buying into your brand are your culture, albeit external, as much as your employees forge your internal one.

With this in mind it's worth considering how leaders may then improve their authenticity scorecard with both groups. We can do so with swift, practical tips. What's more in context relative to broader leadership models.

## Great people perceptions

Older theories explored ideas of the *great man or great woman*. Meaning someone deserved title, position or power through specially endowed talents: remaining great regardless of time or circumstance to some degree. To apply authenticity here is to accept no single leader is truly great at everything. Despite their own words or PR reiterating so.

Whilst it was perhaps once considered weak to show vulnerabilities, today it's vitally important: especially in Western cultures where automatic, eternal respect for title or life earned wisdom is less common. Your people (employees, customers, collaborators) want to know more the real you, not the filtered PR version.



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## Strength in vulnerability

Leaders too eager to be seen or perceived without blemish, beware! There's a high likelihood people will go digging. The danger being not that they'll find one — that's inevitable, but they'll figure out a fictitious fault or, worse, perceive a fatal flaw. A finance leader that doesn't know numbers, or culture head with a people aversion akin to the Grinch, may come unstuck swiftly. Perhaps irreparably so!

Flaws don't detract from strengths. They humanise them. In the same vein of legends around respected emperors, like Marcus Aurelius: who had servants walk behind whispering in his ear 'remember, you're just a man.'

The same is true regarding authenticity with customers. Making mistakes is being human. To deny culpability, or resist lowering a mask of perfection does not make the mistake go away. People distrust this behaviour and they'll call you out for it.

## Traits have evolved

If we shift our view of leadership models to *trait or behaviour theories* it's easier to appreciate how authenticity has taken a more relevant, even prioritised, place. If we stick with the ancient Rome metaphor, too much authenticity (or its close cousin transparency) was considered

risky and could leave the leader exposed (and ultimately lead to a nasty encounter with the assassins' daggers).

Today it's business leaders who demonstrate antiquated traits (being closed, untouchable, acting with impunity) that fall victim to modern weapons of blunt and brutal PR or cultural unrest. And leaders who choose to shed the self-protective masks, such as Jacinda Ardern, who despite being a politician — a group is frequently mistrusted, enjoys popularity around the globe.

## Stringency with contingency

Which leads us to a final theory, being that of *contingency*. Which simplified implies that one's natural gifts may be in the top percentile in one circumstance yet less effective or even ill-suited in another circumstance. Richard Branson is perhaps a shining example of this. He promotes openness and listening to staff and acting on their input. His business empire, which encompasses hundreds of brands and over 70,000 employees, requires a willingness on his part to know others are better suited in to take the reins in some circumstances.

The lesson here begins with an authentic ability to appreciate the valuable input of others. And then to authentically delegate to a level you are comfortable with. This includes empowering others with resources, access or even credible positioning, sharing any concerns yet without feeling overtly threatened or insecure.

## Gold medal authenticity

In fact, in many ways Branson is perhaps a gold medal example of holistic authentic leadership. He has long-standing dislike of public speaking and although openly uncomfortable when presenting, this doesn't deter him from being giving it a good crack. Nor does his authentic discomfort deter others from lapping up his presence or question his leadership ability in building cultures with customers or employees.

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