

The Power of Being Authentic

By Gary Burnison, CEO of Korn Ferry

Basketball practice was over. As the other kids waited outside the gym doors for their parents to pick them up, I started walking in the other direction—telling my teammates I had someplace else to be.

The truth, though, was I always asked my dad to meet me a few blocks away. It was the early 1970s, and I didn't want anyone at school to see my dad's car—a 1956 Buick with a rusted bumper that belched blue clouds of exhaust.

My dad had gone bankrupt a couple of years before and we had no money. I hated going to the grocery store and always tried to pick the checkout line with the fewest people so no one would see us using food stamps.

The car, though, was just as bad for a teenager trying desperately to fit in and not stand out for the wrong reasons. As I slunk low in the seat of that old Buick, my dad knew what was going on—and I knew that he knew. But we never talked about it.

He just let me be. Today, of course, I'd love to have that old Buick to restore. Even more important, I wish I could have one more chance to open that car door and sit up tall and proud beside my dad. But that was beyond what this 13-year-old could do. I was too embarrassed to know who I truly was.

Whenever I tell my story, it always amazes me how people immediately respond with their own stories. It never fails to happen. We all have our backgrounds and experiences that become the legacy we carry forward on our journey. The more we open up and share, the more authentic we become and the more relatable we are to others.

A great story is told about Winston Churchill when he met with a flight sergeant being honored for bravery during World War II. The sergeant had the courage to climb onto the wing of his bomber plane at 13,000 feet to extinguish a fire in the starboard engine. But meeting Churchill in person scared this officer until he was tongue-tied.

Churchill noticed and said, “You must feel very humble and awkward in my presence.” The flight sergeant agreed. “Then you can imagine,” Churchill continued, “how humble and awkward I feel in yours.”

Being authentic is the only way to bridge the barriers—physical distance, emotional separation, social divides, and even those not-so-intimate Zoom calls. We must show who we truly are, what motivates us, and what we believe about the future.

None of us can gaze at our reflection and self-proclaim, “I’m so authentic.” It doesn’t work that way. Authenticity needs to be experienced by others in dialogue and relationships.

As David Dotlich, Ph.D., a CEO and Board advisor and a senior leader in our Consulting business, observed in our conversation this week, that means leading not only with our heads—ideas, strategies, and analytics—but more important from our hearts and our guts, with empathy and courage. Here are some thoughts:

Our heads

Our heads are all about the technical skills that got us hired in the first place. At a certain point in our careers, though, it’s assumed that we’re “strategic.” Not that it doesn’t matter, but it’s table stakes. What truly distinguishes us is our ability to connect with, motivate, and inspire others—having a career that’s focused as much on others as on ourselves. At some point, we need to look up from our spreadsheets, PowerPoints, and processes—and poke our heads out to see people and allow ourselves to be seen. We know from our own research that when people are heard, seen, and understood, they’re more likely to be happy. And when they’re happy, they’ll outperform.

Our hearts

In our words and actions, we must signal to others, “I care enough to see you.” An executive recently shared with me a story from early in her career as an engineer, working in a factory. Her boss, who had worked in that plant for more than 40 years, told her, “It’s gonna be real hard for you to get the respect of the floor.” His advice for her was to start by learning everyone’s name. She told me how she worked the line at the factory every day for an hour. “I asked stupid questions while they got a [laugh] from putting this young engineer to work screwing in bolts and putting pamphlets in boxes. I learned the names and stories of nearly everyone out on those lines. I was not the smartest or the most talented person working in that plant, but I had the power of true relationships.” This executive took the risk of leading from her heart, knowing the reward was greater than any inadequacy she felt. Being vulnerable was her pathway to making meaningful connections.

Our guts

It takes guts, better known as courage, to be authentic and aligned with our values—especially in these times. After all, courage is not having no fear—it is to know fear. I was reminded of this when Tristan Walker, founder and CEO of Walker & Company Brands and a member of the Board of Foot Locker, shared with me this week his thoughts about the importance of empathy and courage. “Each of us has to ... model the way, understanding that we have to not only reflect our own values but challenge ourselves to ensure we are truly adhering to them on behalf of our consumers and ourselves... I do believe we will all come out on the other side better, as a force for change.” We must say and do what needs to get said and done, without fear of failure.

The art of vulnerability

When someone is described as “charismatic,” we might be tempted to think of that super-extrovert hosting a game show. Or maybe even the person selling knives at the county fair. That’s not being charismatic, and it’s certainly not authentic. Without vulnerability, authenticity becomes impossible. As Ken Blanchard, the management expert and co-author of *The One Minute Manager*, observed in a conversation we had a few years ago, “If you don’t know who you are—or what your strengths and weaknesses are—and you are unwilling to be vulnerable, you will never develop a trusting relationship.” The irony is that being authentic and vulnerable is also the secret to becoming charismatic. People are drawn to those who are genuine, willing to show who they truly are and who make it safe for others to be fully themselves.

Make it real

As much as we all Zoom, Skype, Meet, Team, and all the rest, we’re still in our own spaces. It’s hard to transcend that separateness, no matter how good the camera lens is. Technology may make the connection

possible, but emotion—authentic and palpable—makes it real. Just this past week, I was on a virtual conference with colleagues from around the globe to recognize and honor Marlene Briski, a vice president, beloved colleague, and a member of our Global Information Technology Group, on her 40th anniversary with our firm. As face after face populated the screen, I instantly felt warmth and joy. We shared a good laugh as one colleague (who shall remain nameless) struggled with his iPad and all we could see were his eyeglasses peering at us. “It’s really great to see so many faces,” I told them. “I feel like I’m at home.”

Authenticity means taking a risk to show others our true selves. It’s uncomfortable and vulnerable, and always carries with it the very human fear of not fitting in. But the greater risk is being inauthentic. Indeed, if we want to see others, we must first allow them to truly see us.

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