



Thinking back and looking forward – leading with authenticity and integrity in a complex world

Many of us over our careers will have had leadership roles and experienced the ‘outstanding, the good, the bad and ugly’ of leadership. My experience of outstanding leaders are those people who have nurtured me as an individual and as a member of a team; they have helped me to grow professionally; they have used every opportunity to help me learn by reflecting on my successes and challenges, recognising that learning in the workplace and academic study is key to development. Such leaders have created a workplace culture that see’s ‘me’ as a ‘person’, they have ignited a curiosity in the workplace setting in which all can grow and thrive. They have also displayed the characteristics of tenacity and a willingness to ‘challenge’ and to hold self and others to account for their actions and behaviours, they have been prepared to put their head above the parapet and to ask the unpopular (non-group think) question because it was the right thing to do. Such leaders don't display characteristics of egotism, it's the team and others first each and every time – every opportunity is used to celebrate the team's success, not theirs. These characteristics and behaviours strike me as being key, to the ability to lead with authenticity and integrity.

At this current time, within the 10 Year Plan for Health there is a key focus on the importance of supporting leaders aimed at improving culture, capacity and care delivery¹. We have heard a lot about the importance of leadership over the years and a significant investment in helping people to become the leaders of both the here and now and for the future. And yet, stories (and lived experiences) still resonate of poor experiences of leadership at all levels.

In a world that often celebrates charisma, quick wins, and image-driven success, authentic leadership offers an important and increasingly necessary values driven approach to support development and transformation. At times of turmoil, uncertainty and change it's not about being the loudest voice in the room or saying what others

¹ The Kings Fund, (2025). Truly Fit for the Future? The 10Year Plan Explained: https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/insight-and-analysis/long-reads/ten-year-health-plan-explained?utm_source=The%20King%27s%20Fund%20newsletters%20%28main%20account%29&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=15076729_NEWSL_WeeklyUpdate070725%5BMondaySend%5D&utm_content=Button_10yp_longread&dm_i=21A8,8Z5A1,5L9Z6O,11GSQ4,1

want to hear. It's about being 'real' and grounded with people and communities at the heart of decision making – it's about being authentic to self and others.

But what does it actually mean to be an authentic leader - is it just about 'being yourself', or does it require something deeper, more intentional?

At its core, authentic leadership is a leadership style built on the foundation of self-awareness, transparency, ethics, and inclusivity. Popularized by leadership experts like Bill George, former Medtronic CEO and author of '*Authentic Leadership*'², the concept emphasizes leading with your true self—your values, your beliefs, your story.

Authentic leaders are not perfect. They're human and in being human share when 'things' haven't gone the way that they had planned and share their learning to inform their own (and others) growth and development. They lead with purpose, they know who they are, and they don't try to be someone else to gain approval or maintain power. They build trust through openness and consistency rather than control or manipulation - personal ego has no place in their approach.

There are four key components that are widely accepted as the pillars of authentic leadership:

- 1. Self-Awareness**

This is the foundation. Authentic leaders understand their strengths, weaknesses, and emotions. They reflect regularly and seek feedback—not just to appear humble, but because they genuinely want to grow and learn with and from others.

- 2. Relational Transparency**

They don't hide behind corporate speak or the power of their position or title. They're open and honest in their communications, even when it's uncomfortable to hear what others might say.

- 3. Balanced Processing**

They listen to different perspectives before making decisions. They don't surround themselves with 'yes-people' or dismiss/ belittle different opinions – they see alternative views as a positive force to both critique and to build a consensus to move forward with. Authentic leaders are willing to change course when evidence and values require it and are prepared to listen and welcome the voice and views of others.

² George, B. (2003). *Authentic Leadership* (1st Edition). Rediscovering the Secrets to Creating Lasting Value, Wiley and Sons.

4. Internalized Moral Perspective

Perhaps most importantly, their actions are guided by a strong, inclusive ethical compass. They don't bend their principles to chase popularity, power or short-term gains to benefit themselves or to please 'others'.

Why Authentic Leadership Matters More Than Ever

High profile reports into the failings of care have brought to the fore the importance of leadership. Top-down, command-and-control style leadership approaches can be seen as failing organisations and systems that wish to transform and sustain ongoing development. Invariably these leadership styles do not have authenticity at their core in which the Collaboration, Inclusion and Participation (CIP)³ of all stakeholders (internal and external) are seen as being a central feature to help shape growth, development and embedded sustainability.

In this environment, authentic leaders stand out because they:

- **Build lasting trust.** Trust isn't a given - it has to be earned not by a title or position but by what they do and how that is experienced by others. Authentic leaders earn trust by visibly doing what they say and saying what they mean.
- **Foster inclusive, safe and effective workplace cultures that are good places to work⁴.** People are more willing to contribute and innovate in environments where they feel seen, valued and heard.
- **Navigate uncertainty.** When a crises or difficult times occur, people want leaders who are honest about challenges, ethical in their actions and steadfast in their values of authenticity and integrity.
- **Attract and retain talented People.** People who strive to make a positive change are drawn to leaders who live their values and who demonstrate authenticity and integrity in how they act and respond.

Authenticity doesn't mean a person never adapts, evolves, or reflect on their behaviour. It means they evolve **from a place of integrity**. Being authentic doesn't give a person a license to be reactive, inconsiderate, or resistant to feedback.

True authenticity requires deep inner work. It's about aligning actions with personal values, and those values must be examined and refined over time based on learning

³ Manley, K. Wilson, V. Oye, C. (2021). International Practice Development in Health and Social Care, Wiley Blackwell (Chichester: UK).

⁴ Cardiff, S. Sanders, K. Webster, J. Manley, K. (2020). Guiding Lights for Effective Workplace Cultures that are good places to work, International Practice Development Journal, Vol 10, Issue 2, <https://doi.org/10.19043/ipdj.102.002>

with and from others. Becoming an authentic leader is about a willingness to embrace embedded learning, recognising that this will never end. It's about looking a person in the eye and knowing that the decision you made, no matter how hard, was the right one driven by authenticity and integrity.

So what does this all mean? It's over 20 years since Bill George wrote about 'Authentic Leadership'. We live and breathe the complexities and challenges of day- to- day life in systems that are under pressure, constantly changing and are financially challenged. What becomes clear is that the 'same old' transactional approaches to leadership ie 'doing to' rather than 'leading with' will not deliver the sustained, embedded transformation needed for both the here and now and for the future which is rightly expected by all.

As Bill George wrote, *'You can only lead others if you can lead yourself'*. Leading with authenticity and integrity starts with that choice a leader makes — to lead, not from personal ego, a position of power, title or image perspective, but from the values they hold both professionally and personally as a person grounded in openness, transparency, ongoing learning and inclusive ethical actions.

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