



Insights from Leadership Fellows

# Being more authentic as a leader

June 2018

Society of Leadership Fellows  
St George's House, Windsor Castle

20

# Introduction

This is the 20th in our series of Insights from Leadership Fellows. It draws on the outcomes of a Leadership Conversation organised by the Society of Leadership Fellows on June 21/22 on the theme of “Being more authentic as a leader”.

Our theme of authenticity provided the basis for a fascinating Conversation that reminded us all of the extent to which leaders can spend a lot of time worrying about whether or not others view us as “authentic”, and very little if any time thinking through what we mean by the term when we apply it to our own leadership style.

At the end of the Conversation, a number of us agreed how useful it would be for Chief Executives and Directors to have this sort of discussion with your immediate team.

With this in mind we have structured this report around 10 questions in the hope that those of you who would like to open up a debate with your team are able to use this as a background resource for them. With the exception of questions 5 and 6 you could move through these questions fairly quickly in what we hope would be a really powerful trust-building session.

As always at our Leadership Conversations, Fellows came up with a number of thought-provoking propositions. We capture six of them on the next page.

Pete Ashby  
Director, Society of Leadership Fellows  
St George’s House, Windsor Castle

June 28, 2018

# Six key propositions

---

## i **Authenticity is fundamentally linked to TRUST**

The power of authenticity as a concept is fundamentally linked to trust. Our level of trust in someone else is crucial to determining how authentic we can let ourselves be with them

## ii **We need a better sense of what is DISTINCTIVE about our authenticity**

We need to be more conscious of what we want to “put out there”, otherwise we will find that in our quest to become more authentic we actually become too concerned with pleasing others

## iii **We need a stronger sense of SELF-LOYALTY**

The powerful concept of loyalty can easily be used as a cover for a leadership style this is so externally focused that we lose sight of one of our core needs as a leader: loyalty to our own values and principles

## iv **Many of us need a stronger sense of what we EXPECT from ourselves**

As leaders we can easily end up being tougher on ourselves than we are on others. This is why we need to change the balance between external and internal expectations by putting integrity and courage centre-stage

## v **We need to develop our capacity for SELF-COMPASSION**

Through working on the value of self-compassion, we can become tougher -and more compassionate – with others as well as ourselves

## vi **We need to create more TIME for ourselves**

We need to create more time for ourselves, to **be** as well as to **do**, and to affirm the joy of “bringing all of ourselves” into our authenticity as leaders.

# Ten questions

---

- 1     Do we agree that authenticity isn't ALWAYS a good thing?**
  - 2     With whom do we most want to be authentic?**
  - 3     In our key relationships as leaders, how do we manage the interface between authenticity and trust?**
  - 4     If we had to capture our “better self” in a few words, what would we each come up with?**
  - 5     Which characteristic of ours best defines us as an authentic leader?**
  - 6     How much is our authenticity as a leader about how we want to BE – and how much is it about the IMPACT we want to have on others?**
  - 7     We love to talk about our loyalty to others. How important is it to be loyal to ourselves, as part of our authenticity?**
  - 8     What is it that causes us to be tougher on ourselves than on others? Is it that we are more fearful of their harsh judgement than we are of our own?**
  - 9     How can we bring the spotlight back on to the standards by which we want to judge ourselves as leaders?**
  - 10    How do we NOW feel about authenticity?**
-

## | Do we agree that authenticity isn't ALWAYS a good thing?

---

Have you noticed that whenever people refer to authentic leadership there nearly always seems to be the assumption that it is bound to be a good thing?



**Authentic leader = tick in the box**

**Really? At all times and in all situations?**

On a day when you wake up feeling gripped by indecision and fear, or so stressed that you know you're at risk of biting off the head of the first person who says the wrong thing, is it really a good idea to let your feelings dictate your behaviour on the basis that this is you being "authentic"?

**Surely not!**

This doesn't mean that you have to pretend to be full of joy and optimism at times when you might actually be feeling depressed and pessimistic.

It just means that you might need to keep your head down for a few hours and hope that you're not put on the spot until you are in a better state to perform as **the leader that you want to be**.

### **Setting authenticity in context**

What this tells us is that authenticity needs to be set in context if it is to be useful as a concept.

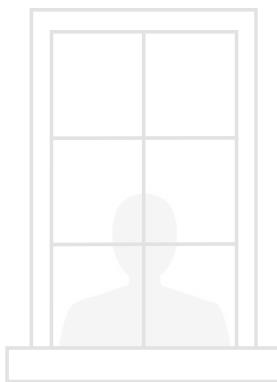
Out of context, it becomes yet another generalised abstraction that has little relevance to the real life needs of leaders.

**authenticity...  
in context**

## 2 With whom do we most want to be authentic?

As leaders we have different levels of professional and personal responsibility to different people. So it's really important to ask the question:

- in whose eyes do we most want to be seen as authentic?



### A “window into our true self”

This question reminds us that authenticity really is a big deal. It offers someone a “window into our true self” and a chance to see who we really are.

If we offer this to someone, then it is important that we accept responsibility for what we have done.

The fact that we don't want to **lie** about who we are doesn't make us **obliged** to expose our inner selves to everyone we come into contact with.

### It's fair to be selective

So, it seems fair and reasonable to say that we should be selective in deciding **who** is going to be granted a view into our inner selves, and when.

Of course, most of us say that we want to be seen as authentic by our immediate team of closest confidantes at work.

So far, so good – and then it gets rather tricky. For example, when CEOs talk about the Chair of their Board, and Chairs talk about their CEO, a lot of uncertainty can come in.

This is no surprise, because our degree of authenticity with others depends to a large degree upon how much we trust them. In some of these key work relationships, trust is sometimes more **precarious** than either side will openly acknowledge.

### 3 In our key relationships as leaders, how do we manage the interface between authenticity and trust?

This is another one of those questions that we all need to think about pretty hard before knowing what's the right answer. It is also one where there is, of course, no single right answer.

#### **Authenticity up-front – to help BUILD trust**

For some leaders, the offer of real authenticity with someone is a means of building greater trust.

The simple fact that authenticity involves a measure of risk on our part contributes a lot to the trust-building process.



As we let ourselves be authentic with others about our ambitions and fears as a leader, this helps our relationship move on to a different – and higher - level.

We know we are taking a certain risk, and we know that it can bring us some real benefits in terms of building trust.

#### **Trust BEFORE true authenticity**

In the case of other relationships, we can regard this degree of self-disclosure as a step too far.

We tell ourselves that if we are to let our guard down and be truly authentic, we first need to establish a higher level of trust.

Until that time, we need a measure of guardedness to ensure that we don't let ourselves become too vulnerable to individuals whose honourable intentions towards us cannot yet be taken for granted.

Every relationship is different. What's key is that we **trust ourselves** in determining the degree of authenticity that we should offer in each particular relationship.

# Authenticity & trust

## 4 If we had to capture our “better self” in a few words, what would we each come up with?

---

This theme of authenticity and trust draws out a powerful point:

- When we talk of authentic leaders, we tend to make the assumption that what they share about themselves “authentically” makes it possible for others to achieve a **stronger connection** with them.

This connection is often described as being with their “better self”.

### **Describing what you see as your “better self”**

This is why it would be a really good exercise for you and your immediate team to give yourselves the challenge of describing in as few words as possible what you each see as your “**better self**”.

We find that when leadership teams first ask themselves this question, they tend to come up with quite general terms such as:

- Approachable/ open-minded/ encouraging/ resilient/ curious/ adaptable/ strategic.

Most of these words apply to a wide range of leaders and don’t shine a particular light into anyone’s personal authenticity as a leader.

After all, if a leader didn’t feel able to associate themselves with all of these adjectives to one degree or another, there would be grounds for concern.

### **Identifying something more distinctive**

This explains why we asked ourselves a more focused question in Windsor, to encourage Fellows to identify something more distinctive about their leadership style that they would like others to see as key to their authenticity.

It was a question that triggered some really fascinating answers.

**& Authenticity  
& your better self**

## 5 Which characteristic of ours best defines us as an authentic leader?

---

If you go through this exercise with your team, some might want to stick with calling themselves “good listeners” or “calm in a time of crisis”.

We suggest that you give yourselves 15 minutes or so in groups of 2 or 3 to sharpen up your personal answers, and then set aside quite a bit longer to share your answers among the team. And make a point of saying that no-one can “recycle” anything that has already been said. It’s a great ground rule!

### **“The joy of bringing ALL of yourself ...”**

In Windsor, the answer from one Leadership Fellow really captured our imagination as a group.

He defined authenticity in terms of:

- “The joy of bringing all of yourself to something and being part of something bigger than yourself”.

When you look at these words, they are the sort of language that wouldn’t be out of place at an evangelical rally. Yet here we were thinking about them in a Conversation about authentic leadership – and it was exciting!

What really gripped us was the way in which this combined two propositions:

- Us giving all of ourselves to something, joyfully - in a way that many associate with mindfulness
- This something else being “bigger” than us and having a wider purpose that enables us to have a greater impact as leaders because we are part of something bigger. Wow!

*JOY - and something  
bigger  
than ourselves*

## 6 How much is our authenticity as a leader about how we want to BE – and how much is it about the IMPACT we want to have on others?

---

In these Insights reports we do not generally share detailed outputs from the Conversation. In this case, however, we want to offer more to help explain the discussion that this then made possible for us.

As other Leadership Fellows came up with different phrases to describe what authenticity means to them, they focused on how they want to be as leaders. They used terms such as:

- Stretching themselves to grow
- Setting high standards, whilst being a good listener with an open style
- Leading from the front, whilst caring for and nurturing others
- Showing that “I want to know” the individuals I’m working with and “care about what matters to them”
- Being fiercely loyal, “doing the best for my people and the organisation in every situation”.

The words that other Fellows used emphasised how they wanted to increase their impact as leaders, for example by:

- Providing positive creative disruption
- Demanding the extraordinary as well as offering real time honest feedback
- Enabling curiosity through insightful facilitation
- Inspiring others to maximise their potential
- Optimising the value of people.

BEING IMPACT

## 7 We love to talk about our loyalty to others. How important is it to be loyal to ourselves, as part of our authenticity?

---

As this discussion went on, we found ourselves spending more and more time talking about what others expect from us. This is why every now and again we made a point of pulling ourselves back to the fact that authenticity is in a very fundamental sense about what we expect from ourselves.

### **Asking what sort of leader we WANT to be**

If we are to be seen as authentic by others, we need a pretty good idea of whether the ways in which we are currently positioning ourselves as a leader actually reflects what we want.

This is why it can be so helpful to talk about loyalty, because this enables us to challenge ourselves about **where we see our loyalties lying**.

### **What holds back so many leaders**

Through this discussion we shared the insight that so many leaders are held back by their ongoing preoccupation with what others think of them.

The fact that their sense of loyalty is so outward-facing stops them from acknowledging their loyalties to **themselves**, that they have to see if they are to step into their full potential as a leader.

### **Giving ourselves a good kicking**

It is our occasional lack of loyalty to ourselves that makes it so easy for us to be tougher on ourselves than we are on others.

We all say that people follow **authentic and not perfect leaders**. Yet many of us love to give ourselves a good kicking on those occasions when we are other than perfect!



# Authenticity & loyalty

## 8 What is it that causes us to be tougher on ourselves than on others? Is it that we are more fearful of their harsh judgement than we are of our own?



This line of thinking led to another insight that took a number of us by surprise and yet seemed completely natural once we had let ourselves spend a few minutes thinking it through.

A range of concerns quickly came to the surface about how we were performing as leaders. Namely:

- We tend to be “cowardly with our teams”
- We let our leadership be “too much about others”
- We’re “not nearly as tough on others as we are on ourselves”
- We “hold back from being our best when we know others aren’t being theirs”.

### **Worrying most about what OTHERS think**

We were clear that our first instinct is to worry most about what others think of us.

Why is this? In part it's because a term like authentic makes us ask what **others** think of our leadership and not how **we** feel we're performing as a leader.

So, whenever we consider our authenticity as leaders, wouldn't it be good if we could spend a little more time focusing on the values and virtues that we want to associate ourselves with, so that they really can drive our behaviours in a more conscious way than they tend to do at present?

**Authenticity & ducking  
harsh judgement by others**

## 9 How can we bring the spotlight back on to the standards by which we want to judge ourselves as leaders?

---



The thought here is more about us **changing the balance** between external and internal expectations, so that the expectations that we set for **ourselves** come to the fore rather more than at present.

### **Integrity and courage – putting them centre-stage**

This takes us back to the insights from previous Leadership Conversations on the theme of courage in leadership (Chapter 3 of Nurturing Wisdom, Volume I) and leading with integrity (to be the subject of a special volume of Nurturing Wisdom later this year).

If we are to become rather more willing as leaders to risk criticism from others for the sake of our own principles and standards, we need a clear sense of our “bottom lines”.

Our personal integrity and courage need to be at the very heart of our internal dialogue that enables us to say to others “I am drawing a line in the sand just there, and **beyond that point I will not go**”.

### **The importance of self-compassion, too**

As we work at projecting our own values rather more, we also need to create space to think through the force of **self-compassion**, building for example on the excellent work of [Kristin Neff](#) on this theme.

For the vast majority of leaders, more self-compassion could only be a good thing.

It should also enable us to **expect more of others and show them some compassion too** at those times when they fail to meet the high standards that we expect of them.

# Authenticity, standards & self-compassion

## 10 How do we NOW feel about authenticity?

At the end of this Leadership Conversation, our general sense was of continuing to value the concept of authenticity as a way in to asking ourselves some tough questions about the sort of leader that we want to be – and therefore want to project to those around us.

### Devaluing the importance of what we stand for

At the same time, a number of us came to the view that our cultural preoccupation with authenticity has contributed to the process of many of us devaluing the importance of what we stand for as leaders as we seek to “adjust and trim” to make sure that those around us give us the thumbs up!



This is why we ended up spending a fair bit of time discussing **what is important to us**, as well as our authenticity. We ended up with a wide agreement that our own sense of integrity and self-loyalty and self-compassion need to be seen as sitting at the core of our authenticity.

We also challenged ourselves with the thought that at times the “authentic us” might not be particularly pleasant to be with. A desire for authenticity requires us to find ways of **owning** our not so likeable side, as well as defining more clearly the core virtues that we will draw on in those moments whenever we take the moral high ground as a leader.

One other rather practical point came to the fore in the final stages of this Conversation. Most of us do not create enough time for ourselves, with the result that we don’t perhaps know ourselves as well as we think we might.

### More time needed – for ourselves

We need to place a higher premium on the **time** that we all need just to **be**, and remind ourselves of the simple **joys of life**, without having to be tied in to some worthy mission that accounts for every moment of our working life.

*Using the word joy again brings to mind the words of one of our Leadership Fellows during this Conversation to describe what authenticity means for him ...*

“The joy of  
bringing all  
of yourself to  
something and  
being part  
of something  
bigger than  
yourself”