

The Authentic Leadership *Paradox*

Why "just be yourself" is both the best and worst advice you'll ever get as a leader

Being authentic is reducing the gap between who we are internally and how we show up externally.

"Authenticity" gets tossed around a lot in leadership circles. It can mean radical transparency, or staying true to your values, or just "being real." The word has become so broad it risks meaning nothing at all.

Bill George's work cuts through that noise. As CEO of Medtronic from 1991 to 2001—a decade when corporate leadership was still largely defined by power, prestige, and shareholder returns—George made the case that the best leaders aren't the most commanding. They're the most genuine. His 2003 book **Authentic Leadership** landed in the middle of the Enron-era scandals and offered an alternative to the charisma-driven, command-and-control model that had dominated corporate culture.

What makes George's framework especially useful is that it breaks authenticity down into something you can actually work with. Rather than treating it as a personality trait you either have or don't, he identifies five concrete dimensions that any leader can develop.

🕒 Five Dimensions of Authentic Leadership

Based on Bill George's *Authentic Leadership Framework* (Harvard Business School, 2003)

🕒 Purpose

Your deeper "why" for leading—the meaning that drives your decisions beyond personal ambition. Purpose-driven leaders connect their work to something larger than themselves.

🛡️ Values

Core beliefs translated into consistent action. Your decision filters when the stakes are high and the pressure to compromise is real.

❤️ Heart

Leading with compassion and empathy. Caring about your people as whole humans—not just their output—and creating space for them to do the same.

👥 Relationships

Genuine connections rooted in transparency, vulnerability, and mutual trust. The willingness to build real relationships—not just transactional ones.

@ Self-Discipline

Staying true to your principles under pressure. Following your internal compass when external forces push back—and holding yourself accountable when no one else will.

"Just be yourself" can become *a crutch* that prevents the very growth leadership demands.

⚠ Three Traps of Authenticity

Authenticity is essential—but without these guardrails, it can undermine the trust you're trying to build.

01

Authenticity Without Earned Trust

Sharing vulnerability before establishing credibility doesn't build connection—it undermines confidence in your ability to lead.

- ✓ Establish competence first. Be strategic about when and how much you open up.

02

Authenticity Without Empathy

"I'm just being honest" can become an excuse for behavior that damages trust and harms the people around you.

- ✓ Your truth still needs to account for how it lands with others.

03

Authenticity Without Boundaries

Full transparency without awareness of power dynamics or organizational context can erode the very trust you're trying to build.

- ✓ Frame issues in terms of organizational impact, not just personal truth.

The *Paradox*: Growth Feels Like Faking

That doesn't mean it is.

The Problem

A rigid sense of self becomes a crutch that keeps us from adapting to new challenges and contexts.

The Reality

Growth requires moving beyond comfort zones—which can trigger imposter feelings even in capable people.

The Paradox

The moments that most challenge our identity are the ones that teach us the most about leading.

A CAUTIONARY TALE

Cynthia was promoted into a role with 10x her previous scope. In the name of transparency, she told her new team:

"I want to do this job, but it's scary, and I need your help."

— From "The Authenticity Paradox" by Herminia Ibarra, Harvard Business Review

Her candor backfired. Instead of building trust, it **undermined confidence** in her ability to lead. The lesson: being authentic doesn't mean people can see right through you.



You don't have to choose between being real and growing as a leader. These strategies, drawn from Herminia Ibarra's research at INSEAD, help you stretch without breaking.

01

Draw from Multiple Selves

You have many authentic identities. The you who leads a team meeting isn't less real than the you at the dinner table. Each context calls on a different—but genuine—version of you. Expand your repertoire rather than narrowing it.

02

Experiment Playfully

Rather than perfecting a fixed identity, treat leadership development as exploration. Try on "possible selves"—approaches and styles that feel like a stretch but not a betrayal. Not every experiment will stick, and that's the point.

03

Borrow from Role Models

Selectively adapt what works from diverse leaders you respect. Copying one person is imitation. Studying many and synthesizing what resonates is research. Build your style from the best of what you observe.

04

Evolve Your Story

The narrative that got you here may not take you further. As you grow, update how you frame your journey, your motivations, and your identity as a leader. A good story isn't static—it grows with you.

Your leadership identity can and should change each time you move on to bigger and better things.

The only way we grow as leaders is by stretching the limits of who we are—doing things that make us uncomfortable but teach us who we want to become.

📖 Further Reading

- **"Discovering Your Authentic Leadership"** — Bill George, Peter Sims, Andrew N. McLean & Diana Mayer. Harvard Business Review, February 2007.
- **"The Authenticity Paradox"** — Herminia Ibarra. Harvard Business Review, January–February 2015.
- **"Authenticity Is a Double-Edged Sword"** — Adam Grant. WorkLife with Adam Grant (TED Podcast), April 2020.