

The Real Deal: Authentic Leadership—Lessons from David

By Joe Whitefield

We have all seen many leaders with different leadership abilities and styles. Introverts, extroverts, facilitators, team builders, mavericks, coaches, mentors, visionaries, pragmatists, optimist, pessimists—the list goes on. I can probably identify a person with each style of leadership that ultimately proved to be a very good leader. On the other hand, I can also probably identify a person with each style of leadership that proved to be not-so-good.

Why such a large discrepancy in leadership styles and their effects? It's hard to pinpoint a single reason. It has been said that “everything works, but nothing works for long.” That may also be the case with leadership. Certainly some styles are better suited for specific

organizational environments than others. Sometimes the environments and cultures change and leadership that was once effective can become stale and ineffective. It is easy to focus too much on styles of leadership and not enough on the substance of the leader.

AUTHENTICITY: THE ESSENTIAL QUALITY

In one way or another, leadership is ultimately a judgment on the quality of relationships. Effective leaders foster great relationships by combining a strong sense of direction with a mysterious blend of energy, trustworthiness, empathy, humility, and faith in others.

Still, there is one substantive quality that is essential for all effective leaders. Without it, the other qualities, skills, and approaches will be limited. That quality

is authenticity.

Authenticity is a basis for believability and, ultimately, trust. People can tell when you are faking it. You can't fool them for very long. Feigning interest, false humility, and conditional faith are relationship killers. On the contrary, authentic leaders foster a strong sense of support and loyalty and even an occasional measure of forgiveness from others simply because they are real and relatable.

I have learned a great deal about the importance of authenticity from a former boss of mine, David Gray. If ever there is a what-you-see-is-what-you-get kind of a person, it is David. Intellectual and driven, he addressed the specific needs of the day with a keen eye on the big picture. He worked hard at developing relationships where his employees would be comfortable enough to offer their ideas and fully use their talents. Collaboration was the norm. And he was never concerned about being the smartest person in the room. That freed him up to pursue better ways of doing things in an environment that was both motivational and rewarding to those working for him. So here are just a few things I learned from David.

GIVE OTHERS CREDIT

In Facilities Management, like most organizations, there is a high level of interdependence and collaboration, is essential for success. Collaboration is a social dynamic. When things work, it is important to provide positive feedback on a personal level. Recognition and



expressions of gratitude go a long way. Authentic leaders give credit where credit is due.

David was intentional about spreading any praise. He thanked people individually—sometimes privately, sometimes publically. What really stood out, however, was his willingness to praise his employees to others, I will always remember hearing him tell others, “I’ve got good people.” That was his response to every successful project or initiative. Employees really get a boost when they hear that said about them. Now that’s authentic.

INVEST IN YOUR PEOPLE

David believed in providing training opportunities for his employees. He would talk about the value he’d always received, and wanted others to benefit as he had. The educational benefits from quality training are obvious. David also understood that training is also an opportunity to say “yes” to people. Giving people a break from the routine along with some quality Quadrant II time to think and network can be a real energy booster. New knowledge is great. New knowledge and motivation is greater.

Of course there is a financial cost for training and professional development that has to be evaluated. Similarly, there can also be a potential risk of attrition for employees with better expertise or credentials. David’s perspective on this was simple: What if I train them and they leave? What if I don’t train them and they stay? Now that’s authentic.

HUMILITY OVER HUBRIS

Over the years, I have had a unique opportunity to work with David on projects and initiatives of all types. No matter the challenge, we always evaluated the need and determined what outcome would qualify as a success. We have experienced several periods of change and challenges. We have had our share of successful projects. We have also had a few that weren’t perfect. The trick is to build on successes and to learn from the mistakes. Humility and self-awareness

keep you grounded. I have been involved in many working sessions where David would say, “Remember, one of us may have to say we’re sorry.” What a valuable perspective. Now that’s authentic.

I have worked for several excellent people throughout my career. I put David Gray at the top of the list. While he possesses so many of the qualities and

skills that make a strong leader, the one I value the most is his *David-ness*. He is an authentic person—and that makes him a strong leader. Thanks, David! ☺

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