

You Can't Fake Real Authenticity

By David Irvine, Best-Selling Author and Leader's Navigator

A couple of weeks ago, in *The New York Times*, Stephanie Rosenbloom denounced the overuse of authenticity as a claim for success in her article, "Authentic? Get Real." She cited politicians and television personalities who describe themselves as authentic, declaring that they owe their success to qualities of which authenticity was most important. US Congresswoman Michele Bachmann said, "I'm a real person", while TV talk show host Anderson Cooper says, "I've always tried to just be authentic and real".

Movie stars and politicians aren't the only ones to hop on the authenticity bandwagon to promote themselves. According to Rosenbloom, "legions of marketers and social networking coaches are preaching that to succeed online - on Twitter, Facebook, Match.com - we must all 'be authentic!'" I've even heard of organizations running 'authenticity programs' for their leaders, training them how to be 'more authentic.'

In a world of corporate and political betrayal, it's a no-brainer that authenticity is compelling. But like everything valuable, we have created counterfeits. We have now learned how to fake being authentic.

Authenticity is like leadership. You can't declare yourself as 'authentic' any more than you can declare yourself a 'leader.' You aren't a leader until someone else decides that you are. And you aren't authentic until someone else decides that you are. It's in the eyes of the beholder. While leadership in a confused society is also compelling, you can't use leadership as a way to promote yourself; you have to earn it. You can't train someone to be authentic anymore than you can train someone to be a leader. As valuable as the tools are that you might glean in a 'leadership training' program, leadership is not about the tools; leadership is about the tool user. Authenticity is not a method to influence; it's an outcome of living your life over time with integrity and a commitment to service. Authentic leaders are seen as great leaders, not because they set out to be authentic, but because they set out to be better at being themselves. It is that simple and that difficult.

Living authentically is not the road frequently traveled. I have found it to be so much easier to mimic others when I'm not sure of myself, to conform to others when I am afraid, or to put my faith in others when I don't trust myself. Living authentically has, at times, meant facing my own suffering and self-deception. As a consultant, I want to be perceived by my clients as having it all together, always having the right answers, and being intelligent, kind, and inspirational. As noble as these goals are, my ability to influence comes in my humanness, to accept and be where I am, for a genuine connection is made in that humanness and a seed of trust is planted. It's more important to be who I am than to be who I think you want me to be in order to be liked.

Here are three lessons I have learned about authenticity:

First, authenticity takes time to develop. You can't turn it on like a light switch. Developing your authentic self is a life-long journey. It takes conscious work. My own path to discovering and expressing my voice in a world that seems to be trying to make me just like everyone else is one of my greatest challenges.

Secondly, authenticity must serve the greater good. Like beauty, authenticity brings value to the world by its very presence. Notice that those you would regard as truly 'authentic' choose service over self-interest. They don't 'try' to be authentic (in fact, most authentic people would not even describe themselves as such); they use their gifts for a purpose greater than their own self-serving desires.

Third, authenticity is spiritual in nature. Its rewards are primarily internal. You can't measure its value in terms of the world's standards such as fame, financial success, or political achievement. Living authentically often means seeking solitude away from the world's approval and risking the rejection of others. Those who accept this path of seeking to live honestly, connecting to, and living in alignment with, their true self, discover an inner peace, clarity and connection that cannot come from society.

Authenticity then, is about being more fully human and, in the process, becoming more fully spiritual. It is not developed overnight, nor is it maintained without conscious attention, diligence and a daily commitment to come back to ourselves in a world that tells us how we should be. The more we realize our human state and need for spiritual awakening, the more authentically human we become. This is the authentic journey. You can't fake real authenticity.

© 2011 by David Irvine. Permission to reprint and circulate is granted.

David Irvine is sought after internationally as a speaker, author, and mentor. His work has contributed to the building of accountable, vital, and engaged organizations across North America. David is the best selling author of five books. His most recent book is *Bridges Of Trust: Making Accountability Authentic*. These are available in bookstores or can be ordered at www.davidirvine.com

For information on how David can bring value to your organization, contact david@davidirvine.com or call 1-866-621-7008 (toll free).