

by Mike Thackray

Your Right to be You



The concept of 'authenticity' is one we are hearing a lot about at present. The idea that if we can be our authentic selves at work, then good things will follow. This Holy Grail is not just sought-after, in some organisations it is actually promised as an employee offering. 'Come and work here, and we will allow you to be who you really are'. Sounds great! But what happens when 'who you are' doesn't align perfectly with 'who you might need to be'?

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Let's state at the outset that aspiring to create the optimum organisational conditions under which your people can apply their skills and attributes in a truly authentic manner, and have it work for the organisation at the same time is a worthy goal. If we achieve perfect alignment between who someone is, what they are competent at, and what the organisation needs, then Hallelujah! we've solved 'Work'.

Unfortunately, I know from experience that if I acted in an unthinkingly authentic way in my organisation, I would likely be seeking alternate employment within weeks. That's not to say that there isn't plenty of alignment between who I am, what I do, and what is needed by OE Cam, it's just that there's a whole other set of characteristics inherent to me that I would be wise not to demonstrate on a daily basis. I therefore need to act 'constructively authentic', in a way that works for me, *and* OE Cam.

The potential misalignment between organisational vs. individual needs has perhaps become more obvious (or acute?) post Pandemic with a widespread shift in working locations. If your authentic self wishes to join important stakeholder meetings via Zoom from a beach in the north-west Highlands wearing a Leeds United shirt and drinking a can of Tennent's Super, then at what point, and how, should the organisation articulate its right to reject that version of authenticity? In short, if part of my authentic self is being a compulsive flame thrower, what do we do when this clashes with the needs of the paper factory?

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The goal of authenticity leads to some major challenges that organisations need to address:

1 Recruiting the right people – This comes back to the analogy that if we do happen to run a paper factory, we shouldn't be recruiting flame throwers. Sounds obvious, but how much thought do we actually give to ensuring we are recruiting people whose authentic selves are likely to be a good fit for the role, and the organisation? When offset against the challenges that ensue when recruitment goes wrong, are we putting enough time and effort into finding people that really fit in with our organisational culture?

2 Articulating the acceptable and unacceptable – Part of the challenge in an organisation of any size is the felt pressure to place hard and fast rules on what is and isn't considered acceptable.

In our experience, leaders need to be better at articulating the boundaries between self and organisation through stories and principles rather than rules or absolutes. This ambiguity and comfort with tackling situations as they arise is not a natural state for a lot of organisations.

We've seen this time and again in respect of hybrid working – where even though the leadership agrees in principle with the concept of people coming into the office when they are needed, they find it hard to resist putting boundaries around this requirement along the lines of '...but we expect you in at least 2/5 days'. Rules will never be able to define that need in the way that rich stories can, and as far as possible, perhaps we should resist pressure to interpret 'fairness' as being 'the same'.

In the article on page 12, my colleague Paolo shares his experience about a related issue on what counts as a legitimate explanation for a shortfall in performance and behaviour, and what is simply an excuse that needs addressing...

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Whilst leaders need to be more emotionally intelligent and tuned into individual needs, they also need to be more willing and able to have adult conversations about balancing the needs of the individual, team and organisation...”

- 3 **Holding difficult conversations** – Linked to the previous point, and a logical next step is the ability to engage in a conversation that addresses these shortfalls. If the goal is authenticity at work, then leaders do need to be more emotionally intelligent and tuned into individual needs, but also more willing and able to have adult conversations and balance them with the needs of the team and organisation, as and when the need arises.

This is the cornerstone of most managerial roles, but also the one we struggle with the most. Building awareness of *when*, and the skills of *how*, to deal with these types of conversation is becoming increasingly critical when blanket rules &/or a ‘one size fits all’ approach no longer apply.

- 4 **Practicing ‘Constructive Authenticity’** Finally, we come to the idea I’d like to promote that builds on the idea of authenticity in the workplace. The addition of the word ‘constructive’ is a useful addition that makes it clear that there is a limit to the expression of individual wants, needs and preferences.

We want people to behave in a consciously authentic way. Finding enough congruence with who they are, and who they need to be to make it work, but keeping certain aspects in check for the good of the whole. This sounds blindingly obvious, but we have heard several anecdotes that really test this idea that anyone should be anything other than ‘who they are’.

Four big challenges then. In order to begin to be more constructively authentic, we suggest you start with three small steps:

- 1 To what extent are you allowing your people to be who they truly are? Do you have the right balance between meeting individual and organisational needs?
- 2 To what degree do people understand the boundaries they need to operate within, and how are you articulating these?
- 3 How equipped are your leaders to interpret, explain and ultimately enforce these standards?

Or just email me and I’d be happy to talk through how it might work in your organisation!



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