

## Authenticity is the key

What does it take to be a leader that can be not just effective, but inspiring? This is the question that Sydney-based leadership and communications expert, Walter Bellin, sets out to answer in this new book, *Climb a Different Ladder*. Having shared his insights into leadership with clients including Department of Defence, Medicare, CSIRO, Toshiba, Microsoft, and McDonald's, he now shares some with us as well.

OVER the past 25 years I have used the following exercise on my leadership development workshops many times: I ask groups of 5 or 6 participants to identify someone from the present or anytime in the past who they all agree is (or was) a truly great leader – and then I ask them to come up with the four or five traits or qualities that made them great leaders. There has been an amazing consistency in both the leaders chosen and the qualities or characteristics that made them great.

The most common leaders chosen were leaders of great social movements such as Mahatma Ghandi, Nelson Mandela and US civil rights leader Dr Martin Luther King Jr. The typical characteristics identified as making them great leaders were: integrity, courage, a deep commitment to their cause and a clear and compelling vision of the future they wished to work towards.

### What is authenticity?

Authenticity implies two basic things when applied to a leader such as those identified above. Firstly, it implies something about their qualities as a person, the quality of their values, and the quality of their actions that follow from these values. It implies that they have good motives and intentions, which are broad and inclusive of the welfare of all whom they lead and all who are affected by their leadership.

Secondly, authenticity implies that the leader is real, that they are exactly who they claim to be and exactly how they present themselves. This means, among other things, that what they say they believe in or value is exactly what they believe

in or value; that their motives or intentions are exactly what they say they are; they "walk the talk"; they do (or at least attempt to do) what they say they will do.

A leader who demonstrates this authenticity will earn the trust of the people they lead. The vision of the future they want others to join them in creating will be both mentally attractive, credible and emotionally compelling. Their authenticity will inspire people, win their loyalty and people will follow them because they want to.

### How do people perceive our authenticity – or lack thereof?

There are two primary means by which people will perceive our authenticity as a leader. The first is very obvious: they will simply watch our actions and, over time, compare these with what we have said.

There is a second subtle, but equally powerful, factor that affects people's perception of our authenticity, and does so more quickly than comparing words with actions. When we speak, in addition to the words we are using, we express non-verbal cues contained in our voice qualities and body language – especially facial movements – that others pick up subconsciously.

This occurs through our brain's right hemispheric function, which subconsciously but simultaneously picks up these non-verbal cues, while our conscious mind is listening to the words. According to extensive studies by psychologist Albert Merabian, only 7 per cent of a message's meaning is conveyed by the words and 93 per cent by non-verbal cues.

# CLIMB A DIFFERENT LADDER

## SELF-AWARENESS, MINDFULNESS AND SUCCESSFUL LEADERSHIP

When we are speaking, the right brain of our listeners is subconsciously picking up and assessing the congruence of these non-verbal cues with the words they consciously hear. If they are congruent, there is a greater likelihood that the listener will accept and be positively influenced by the message. Conversely, if they are incongruent, the listener will experience a kind of internal dissonance, and be more likely to reject the message and, perhaps, become sceptical or cynical about the leader.

### What you can do to assess, develop and demonstrate your own authenticity

In spite of how busy you may be, it is important to do a regular internal audit. At a quiet time and place that is regularly set aside for this, ask yourself: what is really important to me? What are my most important priorities? Do I actually feel, value or fully believe what I am telling the people I lead? Should I be changing my message to make it more congruent with the above? To succeed with this internal audit, you need to be really honest with yourself.

Do a regular external audit of you daily behaviour. Most people are boss watchers. They will be constantly comparing your daily behaviour with the messages you are giving them about what is important to you and what you believe and value. Seek feedback about this from people you trust to be honest with you.

Finally, as part of this external audit, open your diary and compare the use of your time with your messages to others. Does how you use your time demonstrate commitment to your stated priorities, beliefs and values? If not, reprioritise your time usage to become more congruent with your message.

Such changes will usually initially take you out of your comfort zone – but, as a leader, the payoff to you in winning people's hearts and minds will be manifold.

*Walter Bellin is the CEO of Corporate Crossroads and author of the new book *Climb a Different Ladder: Self-awareness, Mindfulness and Successful Leadership* (Jane Curry Publishing \$29.95). For more information visit [www.corporatecrossroads.com.au](http://www.corporatecrossroads.com.au)*