Arise and Shine Forth

One determined leader, making her way alone, might make it through darkness and opposition. And yet inspiring leaders support each other in standing for what is right, as others come up behind them.

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Lead from the Inside Out

Create a New Normal of Sustainability.

by Michelle Maldonado

Authentic leadership begins with a transformative personal decision to develop your abilities and bridge tactical and soft skills with a holistic and sustainable leadership model. This cultivates leaders who are self-aware and inspire others to execute a unified strategy, spur innovation and creativity, and produce lasting value by advancing culture and fostering empowered mindsets.

Whether honing my leadership skills or supporting others in their development, I’ve discovered five principles that make great leaders tick.

1. **Blind spots are only blind to one person—guess who?** We all have blind spots. Certain traits and behaviors escape our view, either by intention, justification, or ignorance. Beyond being self-aware of these influencing behaviors and mindsets, we must also choose to act and lead with integrity and an empowered mindset. This requires courage, stamina, patience, persistence, and compassion. To be authentic leaders, we need to adjust our mirror in order to expose our blind spots. We can invite trusted coworkers to help us stay accountable to our leadership and growth objectives. They can share their observations and perceptions of the influence and impact of your words, actions, and body language in various situations. We can also employ mindful leadership techniques that encompass meditation, a more integrative approach to self-awareness that quiets your mind, sharpens your focus and allows for sound and strategic decision-making.

The outcome is that you’re fully present as you engage your tasks, conversations and activities. That means no mental or physical multitasking.

2. **Adaptation is key.** If necessity is the mother of invention, then adaptation is the key to reinvention. Authentic leaders are facile adapters to change. They adjust their decisions based on the flux of information and dynamic circumstances. In one study, Sean T. Hannah and his team discovered that both psychological and neurological complexities of the brain contribute to a leader’s ability to be “more adaptive in their situational awareness, decision-making and other aspects of leadership.” While some may conclude that certain people are “hard wired” to be more effective leaders, this study shows that leadership authenticity and behaviors can be learned. Great leaders aren’t just born—they adapt and grow over time.

Situational awareness is the ability to perceive and understand how others may feel or respond to what you are saying or doing, or what’s taking place in a larger situation of which you’re a part. It also encompasses what you’re not saying or doing. Situational awareness endows leaders with a more holistic view of business operations, market conditions, and office dynamics, and it helps them be more receptive to the contributions and opinions of direct reports, leadership and other colleagues without feeling threatened.

3. **Don’t take things personally.** Effective leaders are self-actualized and confident in their skins, regardless of their title or role. They don’t make false assumptions or take things personally. They remain objective observers. We can’t make up a story around why a supervisor, direct report or CEO said something in a particular way, gave a certain look, or is silent in a meeting. Such cues require awareness and create dialogue that builds a bridge between colleagues. However, to create a story around it, even when feeling justified, facilitates a pattern of dysfunctional leadership. Maintaining clarity and objectivity inspires and motivates others.

4. **Conscious capitalism—the New Normal.** How do you create a meaningful cultural shift that won’t get bogged down by process and languish due to failed support or buy-in from key stakeholders? How do you create a culture of authenticity, creativity and innovation and become what Fred Kofman calls a Conscious Business?

Change is hard, and people don’t like it even when their comfort zones aren’t so comfortable. You can’t force authenticity or culture transformation overnight or through required workshops or development sessions that are separate from business projects, functions, and operations. Expressions of leadership authenticity must be an integrated part of the whole message. Employees should experience it in all they see and do—in meetings, strategy development, project execution, institutional mission, and core values. It should be reflected in the messages spoken and seen in the behaviors of leaders, managers, and others.

5. **Build a legacy that outlasts you.** The journey of authentic leadership differs for each of us. However, there is a common theme that crosses organizational boundaries and sets the foundation for future leaders. Those who create lasting legacies do so by leading with compassion and by regulating their emotions, words and behaviors over time. We’re better able to inspire and motivate others when we consistently balance and express these elements together. It’s not about striving for perfection—that’s a recipe for failure and folly. Authentic leadership consists of assessing and developing excellence, integrity, transparency and accountability, and aligning them with your actions at every moment.

It’s about finding your cadence in the walk and talk of everything you do.

Be aware of the differences between direct authority and influencing authority. Most leaders have both, but each concept serves unique purposes. Creating a thriving business often takes a personal transformation and the infusion of principles that represent the shifted mindset and the reinforcement of core behaviors that create positive change over time. Real leaders eschew instant gratification. Leadership authenticity is cultivated and nurtured from within so that each of us may achieve our best selves as we strive for excellence. We naturally and organically grow into compassionate and competent leaders whose efforts are sustainable and whose impact generates a lasting legacy.

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**ACTION:** Practice the five principles.