

# Nicole Heimann: The Rise of Authentic Leadership



**Even before Covid-19 swept the globe, deep societal change was already underway primarily due to advances in technology, increased ecological awareness and political and social unrests. The internet began a shift toward working from home while at the same time making political and business leaders more transparent than ever before. Leadership is changing.**

The virus has accelerated the switch to a digital workplace and increased the need for 'authentic' leaders who can clearly communicate their purpose, their vision, the strategic intentions, desired outcomes, ethics and values of what they aspire to achieve. To do this and maintain team cohesion and productivity from afar, they need to be genuine to achieve a level of trust.

Authenticity is not a new concept. Ancient Greek philosophers stressed the need for people to know themselves first and be honest when evaluating their life goals and objectives: "Know thyself." The concept of authentic leadership has been assessed and explored throughout history but with increasing uncertainty around us, the only certainty leaders truly have is when they can draw energy from within.

## **What is Authentic Leadership?**

There are many definitions of Authenticity. We define Authenticity as a dynamic process of constant evolution into a better version of yourself – a PROCESS that never ends and a conscious choice that goes hand in hand with taking responsibility for your impact.

Expanding and integrating more dimensions into our leadership brings us in touch with new aspects of who we are and helps us to become the leader we strive to be. If we are separated from (parts of) ourselves, we are also disconnected from others and unable to lead in a way that makes people want to follow us. Authentic Leadership is an approach emphasizing the building of legitimacy through honest and intentional relationships.

People will not follow a leader who they feel is unauthentic. Unauthentic behaviour creates mistrust and significantly reduces productivity in organizations.

To lean into a process of expanding more and more authenticity, leaders need to be self-aware, self-reflective and honest with themselves. They need to “go inside” and know their strengths, weaknesses, personal values, their ego-parts, their sabotaging parts and core beliefs and also their false beliefs.

Employees want leaders who have the courage to be true to themselves, not act one way in the office yet different outside. This is especially important in times of crisis such as that posed by the coronavirus.

### **The Coronavirus and the rise of Authentic Leadership**

The Covid-19 crisis has not just changed the workplace, it has also shifted people’s outlook on work culture and authenticity. Crises seem to reveal organizations and leaders that are less than genuine and authentic, with many being judged on how they behave.

As a result of the pandemic, there has been an increased awareness of personal and interpersonal connectivity. People are realizing they need to listen to their gut and be true to themselves and their core values. Externally, there must be a belief in being part of a greater whole. Authenticity requires an understanding that everything is connected. A person that is not authentic tends to think of issues in isolation or separation and there needs to be a shift away from this separation of problems and concerns. Topics and ongoing events such as the pandemic and global warming urgently require a shift to authentic leadership at the highest levels of organizations so that pressing issues can be addressed without ego or bias.

In this way, the coronavirus has enforced the rise of authenticity and genuineness by the simple fact that work and personal life is suddenly occupying the same space. Video calls, in particular, have made leaders, co-workers and clients see the human side of each other on an almost daily basis. It is an authentic glimpse into the lives of others outside the usual professional setting of an office. Recognizing humanity in each other deeply connects people. This transition has been made easier by the fact that everyone is in the same boat.

The imposition of virtual collaboration has forced leaders to adapt and transform to meet the needs of workers in a digital workplace. The Covid-19 crisis has reinforced the need for trust, guidance and authentic leadership.

### **The new normal where trust is essential**

In the current climate, shaped by the pandemic, social media, and post-truth populism, there is an urgent need for leadership that can be trusted. Trust is something that corporations must authentically weave into their brand if they are to succeed in the post-lockdown world.

The trust is between employees, clients, suppliers, consumers, all stakeholders. But people also need to be able to trust their leaders to take ethical decisions beyond the ego – for the environment, for the planet, for the future generations. As Harry Kraemer, former Chairman and CEO of Baxter says: “It’s not about doing things right, it’s about doing the right thing.” This quality comes from an authentic leader connected to their inner wisdom. They take wise decisions, doing the right thing – and this creates trust.

Trust is a complex intangible and is the result of the integration and consonance between your words, actions and behaviors. Trust is either given or not. **It is the reflection of who you are** and is mirrored back in your organization.

*How do you see your own relationship with trust reflected back in your organization?*

The deeper we know – and trust – ourselves, the more comfortable we are with navigating uncertainty and the more we are able to trust the process and lead. This aspect of trust, which comes with expanding our authenticity, results in authentic resilience, serenity and sovereign leadership.

One of the key qualities required of leaders as we move toward the post-corona era is the ability to build resilience both for themselves and the workforce. Resilience means being able to withstand and recover quickly from difficulties and problems. Long-term resilience is built by individuals focusing on expanding their authenticity, always evolving into a better version of who they are and connected to their inner wisdom, choosing to do the right thing.

Covid-19 has disrupted business strategies and the focus will rightly be on strategic outcomes. But the new corporate culture employees find themselves in can only be created by the leaders at the top of the organisation. If they set the tone with true authentic leadership, they give permission to the rest of the organization to step into authentic leadership too.

### **Why does Authentic Leadership matter?**

Authentic leadership's key purpose is the evolution of consciousness resulting in leaders becoming more aware that everything is connected. Leadership decisions made at a higher level of consciousness have a greater degree of integrity, ethics, and sense of responsibility.

Leading with authenticity, connected to their inner wisdom, creativity and truth develops a sense of belonging, shared values and success – and it is these aspects that are in danger of disappearing in a modern digital workspace. Previous research has shown that authentic leadership is the main predictor for employee satisfaction, company loyalty and workplace happiness.

The pandemic has made work more authentic by forcing people to blend work and home life and by confronting us all with each other's humanness and mortality. Authentic leadership is key not just for these new workplaces and employees to succeed – but also for the future of humanity and our planet.