

*This article is adapted from Chapter Two of Bruna Martinuzzi's new book, [The Leader as a Mensch: Become the Kind of Person Others Want to Follow](#)*

*Based in British Columbia, Bruna is the President and Founder of [Clarion Enterprises Ltd](#), a company which specializes in emotional intelligence and leadership training. Click [here](#) to contact her.*

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## **The Talisman of Leadership – Authenticity**

By Bruna Martinuzzi

*“I have come to realize that, for me at least, the quest for ‘authenticity’ is really a new spin on an age-old quest to find meaning and do the right thing. It’s a journey not a destination; a process not an answer.” – Hugh Mason*

Some time ago, I heard a young woman say, “I am enough.” I was struck and intrigued by the expression, and so I set out to research it. It originated with Carl Rogers, the psychotherapist, who was asked how he did what he did, so successfully. His response was, “Before a session with a client, I let myself know that ‘I am enough.’ Not perfect—because perfect wouldn’t be enough. But I am human, and there is nothing that this client can say or do or feel that I cannot feel in myself. I can be with them. I am enough.”

This echoes the serenity of mind, the calm spirit that characterizes a Mensch. A Mensch is a person of integrity, a quality that is defined in the dictionary as ‘a state of being complete or undivided.’ The Leader as a Mensch is the epitome of authenticity. When we are in the presence of a Mensch, we cannot help but notice the absence of artificiality. We sense that we are confronted with a real person, one who doesn’t set out to make an impression. A Mensch just is. These leaders come from the standpoint of being enough, of seeing themselves as complete human beings, providing a unique contribution to the world by giving their own brand of wisdom, ingenuity, perceptiveness, fairness, and fierce loyalty to their organizations, and to those they lead.

Authenticity also implies a steadfast commitment to honesty, to being truthful. To that end, consider the notion of the corporate child: We are all a product of our upbringing, and our families of origin were the first organizations that we experienced. This is where we first learned about power, hierarchy, rules of conduct, competition for rewards and avoidance of punishment. This is where we also learned to lie. In longitudinal studies of young children and lying, it was found that if children who are still lying by age seven, they are likely to continue the behavior for the rest of their childhood. Other research has found that when adults are asked to keep diaries of their own lies, they average one lie per day. The Leader as a Mensch strives to promote truth telling in the organization. He or she does so by the eloquence of their example. Are you known as a truth teller in your organization?

Part of a Mensch’s code of conduct is that they are also promise-keepers. This applies to even the smallest of promises. Years ago, I met the CEO of a Fortune 500 organization. I noticed

something about him. He carried with him a small, black notebook into which he noted down any promise he made. No matter how junior the person was to whom he spoke, he made the same effort to note down his promises to that person so that he could follow through. We can rely on the word of such a person. We don't hear the expression 'a gentleman's agreement' as often any more. It refers to an unwritten agreement backed only by the integrity of the individuals involved in the transaction. It is an agreement based on honor, on the premise that the person's word is the pledge. This is one of the sterling qualities of a Mensch.

Conformity smoothes our day's journey at work. Blind conformity, however, has its downsides. It saps creativity, for one. It removes all sense of individuality. If you are a leader who demands conformity, I encourage you to think how this might erode your constituents' authenticity as they are pressured to conform. I once worked for a leader in a technology company, who adopted, as part of the company values, the notion of 'intelligent disobedience.' The concept comes from Seeing Eye dogs. While dogs must learn to obey the commands of the blind person, they must also know when they need to disobey commands that can put the owner in harm's way, such as when a car is approaching. Intelligent disobedience is not about being difficult and disobeying for disobedience sake. Rather, it is about being given the authority to use your judgment—for example, when a decision no longer applies, or when a rule interferes with the wellbeing of the customer.

A major tenet of The Leader as a Mensch is transparent communication, a by-product of their lucid thinking and uncompromising ethic. They say a great deal with a few words, and there is no communication gap between their internal vision of the world and its outward expression. There is directness in their language – we experience it as one might a black and white photograph, where the attention to the subject is not skewed by color. This transparency in communication is the holy grail of leadership, especially today – with a reported four million blogs in the blogosphere – where a lack of transparency can be particularly detrimental to an organization.

Much has been written about 'CEO disease' – a term that describes the isolation that surrounds a leader when constituents are reluctant to bring bad news or worst-case scenarios to them, for fear that such disclosure might trigger a shoot-the-messenger reaction. Establish a culture that values openness – a literal, not only figurative, open-door policy. Make it safe for employees to stick their neck out. Consider instituting 'Giraffe Awards' to encourage people to stick their necks out for the overall good of the company and its stakeholders.

A fallout of working for, or being associated with, an inauthentic leader is that this person robs us of our own authenticity as we tread carefully around them, playing a slow, cautious chess game. We carefully watch the metrics – we focus on what keeps us safe in our jobs. In the process they don't get the best out of us – they get our labor, but not our full engagement – that X factor that divides high performance from minimum acceptable standards. We all know too well that high engagement is one of the keys to building a high-performance, sustainable organization in today's competitive environment. It's what every organization seeks: employees who give their discretionary effort every day, people who go the extra mile to help their organization achieve critical goals. There are many ways to foster that engagement in organizations – one of them is to take a close look at the quality of the leader. Is the leader an authentic person? Do people feel that the leader is who he or she says they are? Does that person engender trust, that is, are people convinced that the leader has no hidden agenda, and that the person genuinely cares for them? All of these factors affect engagement and the bottom line. Lack of authenticity in a leader carries a hefty price tag.

A test of our veracity as leaders is the annual or semi-annual performance reviews. While a necessary and useful aspect of corporate life, these can be instruments of mild torture for those being reviewed. No matter how busy you are with other more pressing business issues, promise yourself to enter those review sessions with the utmost of authenticity. Before you write the first word, sit back and see that person as a real human being. It is very difficult to capture the sum totality of an individual in a form. More animosity and erosion of trust has been unnecessarily generated through the dreaded performance reviews than through any other HR process. A few decades ago, a leader to whom I reported and for whom I had great respect, reviewed my performance and wrote 'rarely, if ever late' as the rating for my attendance. When I pointed out that, in fact, I was never late, he said that he couldn't write that, as this might be perceived by head office as the 'halo effect' because 'no one is never late,' and that this would cast doubt on the veracity of all the other comments in the performance reviews. If you are unsure how to rate someone because you have not had a chance to observe them in a certain behavior, level with them, and ask their help in rating that particular aspect of their performance instead of guessing. Watch the level of trust soar with that individual.

Leadership is difficult work, and it can be easy to stray from who we are at the core in order to satisfy the business imperatives. Being totally authentic may present particular challenges in today's highly competitive environments where, for example, proprietary knowledge needs to be closely guarded, or where news of impending layoffs needs to be managed in order to avoid losing key staff. We can be unwittingly mired in politics. We sometimes find ourselves in situations where we need to continuously look over our shoulder to protect ourselves. We cannot always trust that others are genuine with us. Even with the best of intentions, even when we strive to do our very best, others will sometimes betray us. Much happens in the course of our careers as we climb the achievement ladder. We can sometimes, slowly and imperceptibly, wander off from our authentic selves, the core of who we are. Despite all of this, we need to make every effort to stay true to who we are. Find the way to yourself. Or, as Howard Thurman eloquently said, "Find the grain in your own wood."

Here are what I call the 'leaves' of authenticity

1. Living your values as a leader every day is an important key component of authentic leadership. However, you need to examine these values periodically to consider their validity in today's environment. Examine whether or not they still fit your current reality. Work-life balance, for example, is no longer a perk – it may be an essential requirement for attracting the best minds to your organization.
2. Are you in the habit of making hasty promises that you know from past experience you are unable to keep? Think back on what promises you made, to whom, and see if you can fulfill some of these. In particular, think twice about promises you make to young people. Breaking those promises is particularly damaging to their views of the world and adults.
3. There is a real freedom when we shed all affectation. Are there times in your life when you see yourself being forced to put on a show to make an impression on others? Resolve to stop that, once and for all. Watch yourself soar when you are unencumbered by the weight of pretense. Tell yourself, "I am enough" – and mean it.
4. Straight talk, self-confidence and simplicity – these are the building blocks of substance; the triumph over image. Think about how you can make these a daily habit.

5. Are there areas in your life where you might lack consistency without intending to? For example, are you kind to some people, but not to others? Are you completely truthful in some circumstances, but not in others? What does this insight tell you?
6. Start collecting personal stories that you can use to illustrate to others important aspects of your leadership style, such as, what motivates you to lead; what your philosophy of leading is; and who you are as a person. Personal stories are the most effective form of storytelling for leaders.
7. Adversity reveals our true character. Consider your conduct when things go wrong. Remind yourself that, as a leader, you are continuously under a looking glass. People want to be inspired by you.
8. When you are given a script you didn't write for a presentation that you have to deliver, spend extra time to make the words your own. Purge your presentations of inadvertently inflated language, which often ends with others questioning our authenticity as a speaker. For example, replace the words 'eating establishments' with 'restaurants', 'learning environments' with 'schools' or 'universities', 'expeditious' with 'efficient.' Take inspiration from Winston Churchill, who said, "Speak in short, homely words of common usage."
9. Are you forced to live in disharmony between who you are and what you do? Have you turned a deaf ear to the whispers of your heart? Resolve today to take action to start the journey back to finding yourself, to reconnecting with your passions and values. If this is not possible for you because of restrictions in your current circumstance, think about small compromises that you can start making right now to be more in a state of harmony.
10. If you are an emergent leader, comfortable with seeking approval before making any decisions, develop a plan to start practicing self-reliance. Start with smaller-scale decisions, and progressively move on to more significant ones. Only when we free ourselves from the need to have others' approval can we truly start to evolve into the authentic leaders we were meant to be.

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