

Developing authentic leaders, always able to engage at their best

Jane Sparrow

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Authentic leadership – what does it mean, what does it look like and why should businesses even care whether they have it or not? Perhaps, we should start with a different measure to understand this better – business performance. All business leaders care about business performance – the question is, do they understand the integral link between their company's performance and their own performance as authentic, engaging leaders?

Creating a high performance culture, made up of “investors”, employees who “invest” in their organisation and go that extra mile, requires leaders who constantly inspire and engage employees to be the best they can be. This means capable leaders who can flex a combination of different styles of leadership, dependent on the message, situation and audience whilst remaining authentic, which is crucial if they are to be trusted.

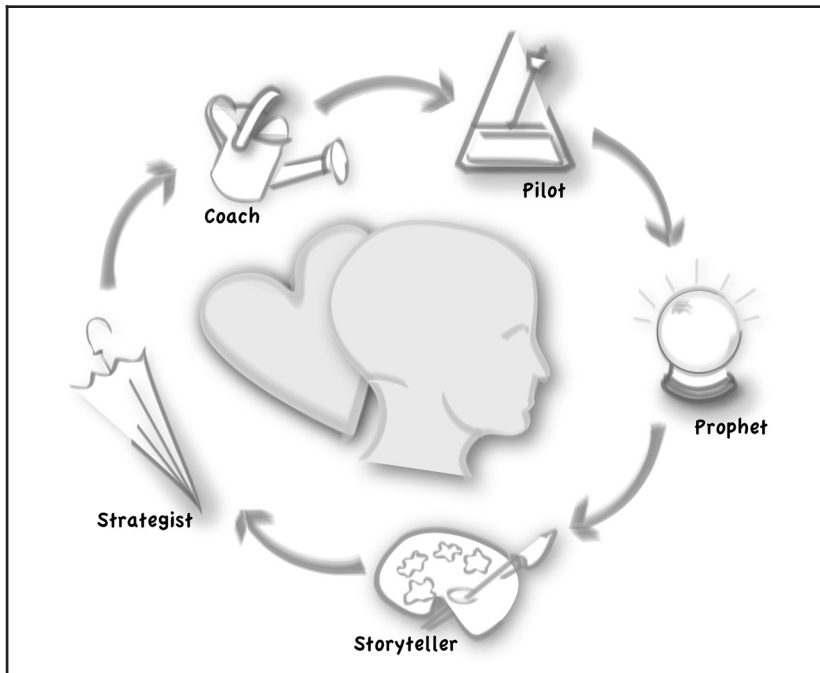
And, so to the critical question – can this level of authentic, flexible leadership be developed and if so, what interventions make that possible?

It all starts by understanding and working with what is there already – key strengths and natural preferences. The

Engagement Intelligence profiling tool was designed to understand just this. Based on five key roles that leaders need to embrace to become expert engagers of their people, the profiling tool works to understand the existing make-up of any given leader and how adept that leader is at each of the five roles ([Figure 1](#)). It is all about looking in the mirror and working with what is there rather than telling leaders what they should be. Only then can work be done on actively, but critically, authentically, dialling up other styles, when needed, or indeed dialling down those that are essentially the default position.

For example, through the profiling tool, I often find that human resources (HRs) or learning and development (L&D) leaders and managers have a low preference for the storytelling role. The art of storytelling uses an emotional and logical mix to bring to life the story about “why” we are doing what we are doing, by also talking about what it will look and feel like when we get there and crucially what does it mean for me as an individual. Instead HRs or L&D leaders tend to have more of a natural preference towards the strategist role, focused on logical, process-driven action planning and delivery. In practice, this means that the “why” part of the

Figure 1 The five roles of manager-as-engager



puzzle is often lost in the eagerness of the HR or L&D leader to explain what is happening and what will happen next. As a leader, being aware of this means that one can focus on developing that muscle and using it more as one among a range of engagement styles.

Once leaders understand their own preferences, a multi-faceted approach of positive interventions is required to develop and sustain a range of other authentic engagement styles. This can involve some “classroom” style group discussion and learning but will always need practical, ongoing support programmes including workshops, coaching, buddying and booster sessions to review progress and re-energise the process.

In Coloplast Wound Care, following work around individual preferences, I facilitated conversations with the management team to define and create deep commitment to the ambition. I then designed and

facilitated workshops with the broader team as part of their annual conference to design inventive ways for leaders to visualize the future and then identify what they needed to change in the way they worked everyday to get there, including instilling confidence into already high performing leaders to take on roles such as storytelling.

It was in the same organisation during a storytelling workshop that a story came out about a particular customer services manager in Coloplast who, the week of Valentine’s Day, had asked his team to bring in a photo of a loved one, be it a brother, wife or friend. In the morning team meeting, the manager encouraged everyone to display the image on their desk. This, he explained, was to act as a reminder that every single caller was also a much loved husband, mother or grandparent. Their customers were not account numbers or policy references – they were real people with real lives and emotions. It is a simple

example of a leader inspiring employees to deliver great customer service, and shows in practical terms what it means to engage staff to want to make a difference.

I worked with the CEO of another business on building his capability to deliver the Prophet role, which is all about passion, vision, inspiration and being adept at painting a visual picture of the future in an emotive way that people understand, believe and want to be a part of. By building this muscle, the CEO found he captured the imagination and ambition of his people in a completely new way. He had been expressing his ambition for the business up until that point but it just had not landed or made an emotional connection with his people. By adapting to more of a “Prophet” engagement style, at the appropriate times, and changing his approach ever so slightly to be more aspirational, including more emotive language; for example, people really bought into his vision and really delivered.

Achieving authenticity is not always easy, especially within business environments that are not suited to an individual’s natural preferences. We worked with the Senior Vice President in a leading media business to understand his engagement preferences and use this to consistently perform at the high level he wanted to maintain and grow. Working within a hierarchical, authoritative culture, completely at odds with his own natural style, which was one of enabling, it was vital that he learnt how to dial up and build his authoritative “muscle” to fit in authentically as a leader within that culture and have the impact required to be successful.

Engaging, effective and *authentic* leadership can be developed in

any organisation with the right level of commitment from both the HR and leadership team. Remembering that no-one does “you” better, developing authentic leadership is about individuals recognising and learning how to be themselves, but the best they

can be in any situation to truly engage employees and drive business performance.

About the author

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