



CXO FOCUS

AUTHENTICITY SHAPES GREAT LEADERS

AUTHOR MIKE ROBBINS SHARES HOW A GROWTH MINDSET
ENABLES CXOS TO BE THE LEADERS OF THE FUTURE.

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Authenticity is a method. Often associated with something unique and possibly natural, authenticity is, in fact, crafted by the use of a number of skills.

Mike Robbins, the author of *We're all in it together*, says authentic leadership is more important than ever in a post-Covid economy of rapid digital change.

Many of us will hold views of what authenticity consists of. Robbins sets out what authenticity is not - and some of these will challenge long-held views of authenticity. "Shooting from the hip and speaking your mind is not authenticity," he says. "It is about honesty, but also some empathy, compassion and intelligence.

"The foundation of authenticity is honesty, but we also have to remove something from our honesty and add something to it," he says of how authentic leaders care about those they are dealing with and moderate their honesty by using compassion and intelligence. This will be challenging for some leaders.



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Ideas Flow

One of the most important skill sets of being an authentic leader is the ability to constantly grow and learn. Robbins describes this as the growth mindset, and for him, it stems from a personal experience of losing his first career as a professional athlete in baseball and having to rethink his life. A growth mindset is about more than just learning, though; it also enables leaders to deal more effectively with stress. “How we deal with stress and challenges has a lot to do with how we lead,” he says. “The growth mindset is the concept that we can challenge ourselves and that

we are not stuck with a fixed set of skills. The aspect of a growth mindset that I have found helpful is the notion that you look at everything that comes your way as a way to grow and learn.” That means that throughout life, leaders are students because, as Robbins says, students learn through trial and error. “The more you do this, the more you learn. If you take risks and make mistakes, that will be understood by your team,” he says. For many, especially those in leadership, there is a fear of stepping outside of their comfort zone.

By learning through trial and error, Robbins says leaders can control stress more easily. “Focus on what you can control, which are your attitude and your effort. Everything else is outside of your control. So much of what causes us stress is out of our control,” he says.

To ensure stress doesn't grow, authentic leaders balance their opinions and positivity. Although a leader must have opinions in order to shape their understanding of the world and develop a strategy, Robbins says keeping our sharing of opinions in balance will benefit leadership. The author is at pains to stress that the validity of opinions is not in question; however, all of us become self-righteous about our opinions. “We end up with the ‘I am right, you are wrong’ scenario.” This, in turn, can lead to conflict.

Although conflict is good, only conflict that leads to a ‘healthy productive debate’ is helpful. “When that doesn't occur, the best ideas don't come out,” he says. So how does a leader balance this? “Conviction is really helpful; for example, I am prepared to speak up about it and discuss it,” but he says authentic leadership comes when alongside conviction, leaders have the humility to accept that they may be wrong. “Focus on speaking about what is true for you rather than what is right,” he advises. In doing this, the authentic leader is continuing the growth mindset by being able to learn rather than be self-righteous. Robbins adds that the natural human reaction to self-righteousness is defence. “People don't defend themselves against the idea; they are defending themselves against self-righteousness.”





Appreciating influencer

By being able to remove self-righteousness and learn, authentic leaders, are also revealing vulnerability. With a great deal of leadership heritage based in military history, there are those that believe there is no room for vulnerability in leadership. In a post-Covid economy, Robbins says vulnerability is a strength, as it shows some empathy. “Most of us are not playing with a full deck of cards after the last couple of years. So it is important to understand where we are in terms of context. Leaders are akin to an iceberg; people only see what is above the water; however, the depths of an individual and, therefore, the leader is below the waterline, so to be an authentic leader requires showing some of what is below the surface - the vulnerability. “Admit when you don’t know something,” he says of a typical example,

and: “be willing to have some difficult conversations, which are uncomfortable and sensitive; it is hard as it shows we are vulnerable,” he says.

“There is nothing weak about sharing our emotions. We want people to bring their passion and engagement to work, but then worry about them showing some emotion that is not real,” Robbins says of how organizations have struggled with emotion, but an authentic leader will welcome it.

Again, asking for help is a sign of an authentic leader, despite some seeing it as a sign of weakness. “If you ask for help, you get more help, and it is a sign of courage, and people like helping one another,” he says.



Appreciation is about who people are and valuing them. That is fundamental to everything that we do as leaders. It is important to separate the two and remember that there is not always something specific to recognize

Authentic leaders understand the difference between recognition and appreciation, Robbins says. “Recognition is about performance, and it is conditional and specific, like a promotion. Appreciation is about who people are and valuing them. That is fundamental to everything that we do as leaders. It is important to separate the two and remember that there is not always something specific to recognize,” he says. This will lead authentic leaders to focus on the individual strengths of team members rather than, as is often the case in society, focusing on weaknesses. “If we focus on strengths, then we leverage those.”

Authentic leaders will have a leader above them, and when in receipt of appreciation, Robbins says it is important to: “just say thank you. Anything else will sound weird.” He uses a good analogy for how to react to appreciation, describing it as the same as receiving a birthday present; you don’t

then go and give a present to those that gave you a present.”

Authentic leadership, therefore, is a series of skills that are essential in today’s digitally disrupted businesses, which are in a state of constant change. It is because of this new economic landscape that authentic leadership has become essential in order to manage teams that are spread across geographies and, hopefully, are more diverse. Robbins titled his latest book, *We’re all in it together*, to describe how authentic leadership is not a case of everyone being equal, but what everyone does share is the same challenge. “In truth, we are all in the same storm, but we are in different boats. As leaders, that is really important to understand.” By harnessing the skills of authentic leadership, a CXO can deal with stress, be a constant learner, influence, hold and discover opinions, show vulnerability, and appreciate and be appreciated.



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