BUILDING PERSONAL AUTHENTICITY

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THE SEVEN BUILDING BLOCKS OF BEING AUTHENTIC

BY LATA CHAWLA AND KRIS KILE

Being authentic is being true to what is so for you for the purpose of creating connection and value with another.

The practices required in being authentic are: 1) authenticity, 2) vulnerability, 3) transparency, 4) integrity, 5) courage, 6) awareness, and 7) intentionality.

Being authentic will require that you have a vision for yourself and what you desire to create. Having this vision allows you to be centered and grounded in who you are and what you are committed to.

It enables you to be clear about the value you intend to create for others and yourself.

“Authenticity is a collection of choices that we have to make every day. It's about the choice to show up and be real. The choice to be honest. The choice to let our true selves be seen.

— Brené Brown, The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You’re Supposed to be and Embrace Who You Are

AUTHENTICITY

Being authentic is being true to what is so for you for the purpose of connection to another. This enables you to fully engage life such that it creates value and generates the results you are committed to having for yourself and others.

Authenticity is self-generated. It comes from being connected and aware of what is going on inside of you and being in tune with your own internal experience.
Being authentic requires participating in that experience without self-judgment or condemnation.

VULNERABILITY

We are often put in a position of seemingly having all the answers, knowing the unknown, and being able to find our way out of any sticky mess. Growing up, we were taught to squash our vulnerability. We believe this is truer for men than women, but that is not always the case.

“The purpose of ritual for men is to learn the rules of power and competition. Watching sports together, for example, they see the formal enactment of ritual, become loyal to a team, and learn to conceal their vulnerability.

-Diane Ackerman

We are taught to conceal our vulnerability so that we don’t appear weak. Invulnerability is a common feature found in video games, superhero comics, and movies. It is all over the media and has become part of our society. Being invulnerable makes us impervious to pain, damage, or loss. It is seen as power and a “God-like” ability to survive a fall and escape. Think of the James Bond, Die Hard, and Jason Bourne movies. The heroes all escape at the end, with their vulnerability unscathed.

Many of us, especially leaders, carry this image in our minds and try to live up to it.

While it works in movies, it does not work in real life. Often, it projects just the opposite—an air of arrogance and the illusion of an all-knowing superiority to which others cannot connect to.

The truth is, as human beings we are fallible. We are not superheroes. We have emotions, and we are not omnipresent and all knowing. Being vulnerable breaks down this illusion and it creates the ability to connect to others. This also allows us to be real and in touch with the fallibility of others.

Vulnerability is an invitation for feedback and honesty - allowing people to speak and hear the truth. It is about embracing unpredictability, tension, and resistance as a path forward. It allows people to see who you are. And, while it is risky, it is absolutely necessary if others are to connect with the deepest parts of your vision and commitment. Vulnerability is also linked to how we view transparency. If we are not willing to be vulnerable, we will not be transparent.

TRANSPARENCY

Transparency is the “ultimate juice” of authenticity. It is being willing to share your experiences and being honest and open. When you are with people who are transparent, what you see is what you get. There is no need to second-guess.

Transparency, as it is used in a business context, implies openness, communication, and accountability. It is about operating in a way that is easy for others to accurately know the territory because the quality of the information shared by the leader has integrity.
INTEGRITY

Integrity is the route to creating wholeness and completeness in your personal and working relationships. Integrity occurs when your actions and results match your commitments. You honor your word and commitments to others and yourself, or renegotiate them when needed. When you can’t keep or successfully renegotiate your word, it’s about cleaning up the mess afterward.

Keeping your integrity intact builds trust and sows confidence in others about what you bring to the table. It shapes opinions and inspires action. Keeping your word to yourself and others is not easy. Therefore, integrity combined with courage will allow you to access a superior level of performance. When people see that you have integrity, you will build strong relationships with those you lead and they will be invested in your success.

COURAGE

Courage is the fuel that feeds integrity and authenticity. Being authentic and keeping your word to yourself and others is not easy. The root of the word courage is cor—the Latin word for heart. Courage originally meant “To speak one’s mind by telling all one’s heart.” Courage also involves taking action in the face of fear. Courage acts with transparency even when the fear of vulnerability exists. That is what we mean by courage.

Once you have made a promise, courage brings access to a superior level of performance and connection. If you are truly stretching to keep your promises and commitment, bringing courage to the mix will help you break through fear, conflict, and the obstacles that get in the way of delivering results and being authentic. It also will bring others more fully into the process through your honesty and openness.

AWARENESS OF SELF AND OTHERS

Awareness begins with understanding our own beliefs, values, and perceptions and then seeking to understand someone else’s. We see the world differently because we filter things from our own point of view. And because of this, each person has a specific way of doing things, and responds to situations differently.

Awareness needs to become a central reference point when we interact with others. As individuals, we see, interpret and evaluate things from our frames of reference. Confusion and misunderstandings happen when I use my subjective understanding to make sense of someone else’s reality.

Our lack of awareness regarding what we believe often becomes an unconscious standard or rule of behavior that we project on others. In most cases, we assume, what is standard for me is standard for the other person involved. When we presuppose people are similar to us, we may act inappropriately and cause confusion, backlash or harm to a person’s self-esteem.

Raising self-awareness begins with the willingness to take a look at what you are experiencing internally, and how that influences your behavior and impacts others. Being aware of others begins with noticing how others respond to you (or are behaving), sharing your
observations/assumptions and allowing the other person to respond.

Staying open and neutral through this process allows you to gather more information about the things that are puzzling, concerning or frustrating you. It also allows you to dive into a deeper conversation with others, clear up misunderstandings, reassess situations, and help gain clarity.

PROCESS OF REFLECTION - SEEING REALITY AS AN ICEBERG

Ten percent of life happens above the surface of the water while at least ninety percent happens (or is a result of what has happened) under the surface. Our culture and environment has shaped how we were socialized.

This has helped form our assumptions, beliefs and values—which in turn shape stereotypes, biases and valuation systems. These are an integral part of our belief systems which influence and drive our conscious and unconscious instincts and intentions. These, in turn, drive our behaviors which produce our results, including both intended and unintended results and consequences. The “unintended” results and consequences usually are the result of unconscious conflicting intentions that are below the “water line” of our conscious awareness.

Your personal, social, and cultural contexts spill over into your family life, love life and work life. They impact the people you choose to be around, what you purchase and the activities you participate in. Being aware of what drives you and others is the beginning of developing self-awareness and other awareness.

DEFAULT MODE VERSES BEING INTENTIONAL

When we operate in default mode, we cannot be intentional about life and the results we want to produce. Our default mode has already prescribed how things should look either due to past experience, social expectations, or personal preferences.

When things don’t turn out the way we prefer, we assume something is wrong and resist that reality. This resistance can often take the form of blame. Often, from this resistance, we look to blame:

- **Ourselves**—something is wrong with me or what I did
- **Others**—something is wrong with another individual(s) and what they did or didn’t do
- **The Situation**—something is wrong with the situation, process and/or system
When we blame someone or something, we create additional resistance, defensiveness and negative energy. We call this the “blame game.” When people play the blame game, they can be very invested in finding out why things did not work out and how to get things back to the way they “should” look. This is largely due to the fact that something inside them has been triggered and they are seeking to get back in balance.

Our mental programming is similar to the thermometer—there are a variety of set points regarding the way things should be. When things are the way they should be, there are no triggers set off. As a result, there is no tension or resistance. However, when things do not show up as expected, a trigger goes off and we automatically go into action to bring things back to our desired state.

There is nothing wrong with having set points. We all have them and they are useful. Having goals, standards and expectations keeps life moving forward efficiently, effectively and provides a level of predictability and consistency.

As human beings we need a certain amount of predictability to function at full potential. Maslow’s hierarchy of needs reveals both our physiological and psychological needs. These needs are universal longings and are hardwired into the way we are designed as human beings. When any of these levels are at risk, we automatically go into survival mode and seek to bring them back to our desired state.
How things should look at each of these levels varies from culture to culture and person to person. But, what is universally true is that when there is a threat to any one of these categories, we use default survival strategies to stabilize the conditions around us so that we can get back to our original set point.

Many times, when people are stuck in default mode they invest most of their time protecting the bottom four levels in the hierarchy of needs. This is being trapped in the politics of life (how things should look) versus living at the top level of the hierarchy which is self-actualization and living to full potential—which is what we are calling “living intentionally.”

When people are invested in “politics”, most of the time there is an underlying fear of:

- Not Looking Good (tarnishing our image)
- Not Being in Control (being seen as incompetent)
- Not Being Right (losing face, being wrong and/or losing trust)
- Not Being in our Comfort Zone (being pushed into an uncomfortable state or the unknown)

In most corporate environments today, most individuals are playing the blame game and employing their survival strategies in order to play politics in the “acceptable” way. This wastes a tremendous amount of effort, energy and time on the wrong things.

To shift this type of culture into a more productive state, we suggest a total transformation (redesigning and reengineering) of the:

- interactions we have with one another
- conversations we hold (internally and externally)
- reference levels, set points and perceptual controls that keep us stuck

We accomplish this through a mindset of being intentional versus a mindset that is governed by default mental programming. When we are in default mode we are on autopilot and tend to blame others and seek to protect ourselves. When we are being intentional, we are open to others and focused on creating unprecedented results.

The behaviors listed in figure 3 above show the behaviors associated with each mindset (default and intentional) as well as the outcomes. To begin the process, we need to understand how belief systems work and how they impact the way we see the world and interact with one another.

**BELIEF SYSTEMS**

Our default modes are programmed by our belief systems and drive our emotions, experience, attitudes and behaviors which in turn impact our relationships, team performance, productivity and results as well as our confidence and efficacy.

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**FIGURE 5 - BELIEF SYSTEMS**

*Corporate belief systems are embedded in its policies and practice. New power, privilege, and resources are in believers. Mental or belief systems are not built to be flexible. When we believe a new set of beliefs, we can change our impact.*

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A belief system is made up of many supportive beliefs that drive our behavior. It impacts the emotions we have about something and those emotions shape our experiences.

Here are a few examples:

**Scarcity vs. Abundance:** If I believe that my resources are scarce and that there is not enough to go around, I may withhold sharing or giving, see others as a threat, or be jealous of what others have. The opposite, more useful belief would be to believe in abundance—there is more than enough to go around and what I need will be there when I need it.

**Suspicion vs. Provision:** If I believe that people are out to rip me off, or hurt me, I may be suspicious of the intent that people have as I engage them. A more useful belief might be to see people as a gift, a provision and co-creators with you in life.

**Avoiding Pain vs. Acceptance:** I work to avoid pain at all costs. This can lead to avoidance, addictions to numb the pain, and reactivity. A more useful belief might be to accept the reality of what is painful to me, and relax and be with it as I try to negotiate my way through it.

**Struggle vs. Adventure:** If I believe that life is a struggle, I will experience life as a struggle for everything I attain. A more useful belief might be that life is an adventure and there are wonderful things for me to explore and discover.

Can you see how one set of beliefs over another can shape how you engage and experience the things in life?

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**BRAVEHEART - A LESSON IN AUTHENTICITY**

Mel Gibson’s 1995 movie “Braveheart” won Best Picture and Best Director as well as five academy awards. The movie made a huge impact on many who watched it.

In Braveheart, William Wallace encountered tension. His family was killed, his wife was murdered, and he was betrayed by his countrymen and was eventually killed. Wallace's tension was external—things were done to him by others. But in spite of that he showed very little internal tension. He was clear about who he was and what he was up to, and we, the audience, were awed by his stand and bravery. He was living from an authentic place. He knew, and therefore, he did. He may have had some concerns about how, but never what, meaning he never asks himself, "What do I do now?" in the midst of these circumstances.

Robert the Bruce also encountered tension. But his tension was internal. Why? Because he was a Scottish nobleman who was next in line for the throne and had a lot to lose. He was not clear about what he was up to or why. Throughout the film, he was always questioning... "What do I do now?" So, what was the internal tension going on within Robert the Bruce?

Let’s take a look at the two people that had the biggest influence on him, William Wallace and Robert’s father. These characters had two opposing forces that created the internal tension that Robert experienced within himself. One force came from a cultural system—status and power; the other force came from an internal place—a vision for freedom.

Robert’s father, was withering away from leprosy. Throughout the movie he tells
Robert to do whatever needs to be done to keep his land, possessions and title. That meant lying, cheating, betraying...whatever it took to get the job done. Nothing else mattered—only land, possessions and title would bring him power and nobility.

William Wallace, on the other hand, was a man that had no desire for land, possessions or title—or at least not when it came to justice, honor and personal integrity. When Robert witnessed Wallace’s integrity, authenticity and courage to do what was right he was inspired to join the cause. This was where Robert’s tension began.

What shall I do? Do I go against my father’s dying wishes and fight for justice, honor and integrity? Or will I go against what is right in order to secure my land, possessions and title?

This struggle for authenticity was deep and genuine. It was so genuine that we, the audience, empathized deeply with him. What Robert the Bruce faced is similar to what we are faced with in life. “What will I do? Will I do what is right or will I sell out and go against my conscience to obtain or preserve what I have?”

Wallace raises a thought provoking question: “What makes a person truly noble? Is it land, possessions and title?” Robert the Bruce discovers for himself, through a series of betrayals to Wallace, that true nobility is not a matter of land, possessions or title. Instead, it is a matter of being true to one’s self.

Robert realizes that Wallace truly lived and that his father had never really lived at all—he had compromised everything worth truly living for.

In the closing of the film Robert the Bruce is out on the battlefield with the English troops in front of him. The plan was to give

in and to sell out. But Robert looks down at the cloth that dropped from Wallace’s hand at his execution and makes a decision.

He decides to live fully...even if that means his death. He asks his troops, “You bled with Wallace; will you bleed with me?”

And, they did....

They won the battle and their freedom...without compromise or selling out.

IN SUMMARY

Robert the Bruce finally arrived at a place of authenticity, vulnerability, transparency, integrity, courage, awareness (of self and others) and intentionality.

He no longer let culture and politics rule his life. He was not occupied with looking good, being right, being in control or being safe.

He raised his set point from “what it should look like—comfort and certainty” to his vision “what he wanted to create—intentionality and commitment”. And he was no longer driven by the belief systems he grew up with under his father. He shifted his attitudes and created something new for himself and others.

It was once said, that the closest we get to authenticity is to realize how inauthentic we are.

The survival strategies that automatically run in our subconscious never go away. There is always the pull to play it safe, or avoid pain, or explain away and minimize our incongruencies, or go for what ‘the
crowd’ thinks, rather than what rings true for you as an individual.

But, think about the legacy authenticity generates verses inauthenticity—selling out. Every great movement in history, every great invention, every uplifting shift in the progression of man occurred out of a heart committed to authenticity, at least in regards to that series of events. They embraced vulnerability, transparency, integrity, courage, awareness and intentionality in expressing their vision and stand in their life.

They walked it out. This is true, not just on a grand scale that the history books record, but also on a very personal scale. It changes the trajectory of families, friendships and communities. Authenticity is life giving. To do otherwise is life draining.

Every day, moment by moment, we get to choose whether to be true to what is so for us for the purpose of creating connection and value with others. To do so is to choose well. It generates a legacy worth having.