

Authentic Leadership Insights

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Authentic Leadership: Insights, Learnings, Lessons

By Nick Craig

To be nobody but yourself in a world which is doing its best, night and day, to make you everybody else means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight; and never stop fighting. - e.e. cummings

Authentic Leadership is a 21st century model for leadership. The model became mainstream in 2007, when my colleague Bill George's article "Discovering Your Authentic Leadership" appeared in the Harvard Business Review and his bestselling book, True North, was launched. The following year, he and I completed Finding Your True North, a book in which we outline the process by which you can discover your Authentic Leadership. I have spent the ten years since then teaching and coaching Authentic Leadership to senior executives around the world from GE, Unilever, Wharton Executive Education, to the Girls Scouts and the National Children's Medical Center in Washington, D.C., which gives me a unique perspective on the topic.

In those years, we witnessed leaders who've been forced to "lead" through some trying times, such as the 2008 recession, the Arab Spring and its aftermath, Japan's 2011 tsunami, the economic meltdown in Greece, Brexit, and the upheaval of traditional political parties and systems. These leaders and their stories have inevitably affected my view of Authentic Leadership. In addition, we now know more than we knew back in 2007. All this leads me to offer you what I have learned on this journey of Authentic Leadership.

"Beginnings" of Authentic Leadership—What Is It?

To understand Authentic Leadership, you need to understand the conditions under which it was created.

The 1980s and 1990s were characterized by the wisdom, courage, vision, and impact of many charismatic leaders. The world we live in today was shaped at least in part by these larger-than-life leaders. Reagan and Gorbachev ended the Cold War; Margret Thatcher transformed England and proved that women are an equal match to men; Lou Gerstner turned IBM around; Mandela ended Apartheid;

Jack Welch rescued GE and became an icon of the industry; General Schwarzkopf won the first Iraq War; Warren Buffet made a fortune on all of it. And the list goes on. The concept of the omnipotent leader who can transform history and lead us all to the Promised Land was fully supported by business magazines and the press. The number of books published by these iconic corporate leaders exploded in the 1990s as each attempted to define and promote the unique approach that allowed them to be the best at their craft.

These leaders exhibited some common traits:

- Lots of charisma and "presence"
- Huge ambition
- A clearly articulated sense of their own impact and role in turning things around
- A view of themselves as the key to the success of the organization

But all was not as it seemed. Within the short timeframe of about 12 months, former front-page heroes and exemplars of the charismatic leader movement—such as Ken Lay of Enron, Bernie Ebbers of World Com, and Dennis Kozlowski of Tyco—became public displays of hypocrisy and deception.

All those traits that charismatic leaders shared had a dark side of arrogance, denial, hubris, and hypocrisy. Companies, employees' financial health, careers, and more were left in shambles. How could we have been so easily duped?

After passage of the Sarbanes-Oxley Act, which after the impropriety of Ken Lay and Bernie Ebbers (Madoff came later) required every U.S. company to redefine its policies, people began to question how we arrived at this state. The events of 9/11 further confirmed that one or two

charismatic leaders could not solve the complexity and challenges the world was facing.

In another arena, the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s led to big changes for the U.S. military. What if the thing you have been trained to lead others to overcome disappears? What do you do then? This is what my colleague Scott Snook and others in the U.S. Army faced at that time. To codify this emerging context, they created the concept of “VUCCA” and used it to address the shifting challenges facing leaders in this new world.

Leading in a world that is:	Leading in a world that is VUCCA:
Rational	Volatile: Change happens rapidly and on a large scale
Predictable	Uncertain: The future can't be predicted with any precision
Simple	Complex: Few single causes or solutions. Solutions emerge while in the system versus imposed from outside
Stable	Chaotic: changing continuously with few predictable markers
Linear	Ambiguous: Little clarity on what events mean and their effect. “Info” is incomplete or indecipherable

Probably, the demise of the charismatic, notable leader at the end of the 20th century was accelerated by this VUCCA world. The issues that the U.S. military faced in the 1990s after the Cold War have now become top of mind for every leader. It's not that the world hasn't experienced volatility in the past. But today there are many volatile situations unfolding simultaneously, and with broad implications. What transpires in Greece or Tunisia can have significant implications all of us. The posting of NSA tools to hack into Microsoft can shut down hospitals in the UK and make us all question our understanding of what is safe and secure. We are all intertwined on a global scale. Such interconnection has many advantages, but it also means that we can feel the immediate impact of events that are utterly out of our control.

Imagine, if you can, leading in a non-VUCCA world. That world would be deterministic and predictable. We would expect order and certainty in the world around us. But in our VUCCA conditions, we must lead assuming that the world is at best unpredictable. The best leaders will be those who are effective when disorder and uncertainty are the norm.

The Authentic Leadership model was born in the context of such systemic uncertainty and ethical missteps. If the external world is so uncertain, where can we find solid ground? This ever-changing environment increases the demand on leaders to be grounded and centered from within, independent of an ambiguous environment. This executive notes the passing of the old model and the demands of the new:

Previously, when we had to lay off people or restructure the business, I could say to my direct reports, “Look I will take care of you and there will be a big bonus and stock options at the end of this that will make things right.” Today I don't have any of those levers and I now need to step into who I really am and what I stand for and find out what they stand for and who they really are before we have any chance of being able to make it to the other side. I realize that I now have to lead from the inside out versus depending on the “system” to do the leading for me. ~GE executive

The Roots of the Authentic Leadership Model

There are many “founders” of Authentic Leadership, but I focus here on a few who significantly affected my thinking during 2001-2005.

In 2001, Jim Collins published his seminal book “Good to Great”, in which he identified the underlying archetype of Authentic Leadership. Exemplary companies in his research had leaders characterized as Level 5. Level 4 leaders, who didn't make his “exemplary” list, were examples of the charismatic leaders of the '80s and '90s. One of their key limitations was the inability to create the next generation of leaders in their organizations. Their focus was on themselves and there wasn't much room for anyone else to be “great.” Therefore, when they left the organization, the leadership deficit became painfully evident. In Jim Collins's

view, Level 5 leaders (those who were key to the success of the companies he studied) had a striking absence of charisma. Collins defines these leaders as those who *“Build enduring greatness through a paradoxical combination of personal humility plus personal will to create sustained business results.”* Level 5 Leaders are identified as:

- Never boastful
- Act with quiet, calm determination; rely on inspired standards and live them, not inspiring charisma/speeches
- Channel ambition into the company, not the self; set up successors for even greater success
- Look out the window, not in the mirror, to apportion credit (or take responsibility when things go wrong and give credit to others when things go right)

He ended his 2001 HBR article with a challenge to the community:

“We would love to be able to give you a list of steps for getting to Level 5—other than contracting cancer, going through a religious conversion, or getting different parents—but we have no idea. Our research exposed Level 5 as a key component inside the black box of what it takes to shift a company from good to great.”

So, as of 2001, the old models were no longer working and the new model hadn’t been developed. We just hoped to recognize it when it showed up. Some of the great leaders of the ’80s and ’90s, such as Mandela and Gerstner, more closely fit the Level 5 model. Yet a few good men and women are not enough, we needed to dramatically accelerate those getting to Level 5.

Beginning in 2003, an academic team at the University of Nebraska—Bruce Avolio, William Gardner, Fred Luthans, and Fred Walumbwa—began publishing academic articles on Authentic Leadership. Their names are on many of the more than 90 papers that have appeared since then. There have been three special issues of academic journals focused on Authentic Leadership: *Leadership Quarterly* (2005/1), the *Journal of Management Studies* (2005/5), and the *European Management Journal* (2007/2). A team lead by William Gardner published *“Authentic Leadership: A review of the literature and research agenda”* in 2011.

Academics have a variety of definitions for Authentic Leadership. William Gardner and his team created a working definition based on their extensive review of all the literature on Authentic Leadership as of October 2012:

Authentic Leadership refers to a genuine form of leadership through which leaders achieve:

- **Self-awareness:** They know and own who they are—including their strengths and weaknesses, motives, emotions, and core values
- **Balanced processing:** They welcome both positive and negative feedback as a means of learning about themselves
- **Transparency:** They openly share their thoughts and feelings with those close to them
- **An internal moral compass:** They stay true to their personal values and display consistency between their words and deeds

Today, rather than offering any of these definitions, we ask our workshop participants to create a definition based on personal experience. We think it would be prescriptive and inauthentic to impose a definition of authentic leadership on the group, since in the end it must come from within. Not surprisingly, many of characteristics in Gardner’s list end up in each group’s definition. The other four are:

- **Vulnerability:** They show their vulnerability as a sign of inner strength
- **Purpose:** They serve a larger purpose versus being driven by ego (“we” versus “me” orientation)
- **Others’ success:** They set others up for success; helping others find their voice
- **Results:** They deliver sustainable business results

We are seeing a significant shift from the “Teflon” perfect leader who “owns the stage” to leaders who use their roles to help build the stage so that others can shine. There is a deep level of trust that is inherent in this approach and a higher purpose that permeates the leader and those who work alongside him or her. Anyone familiar with “Servant Leadership” will see parallels. The question becomes less “How do I become an Authentic Leader?” and more “How do I create the conditions to allow Authentic Leadership to be present in those around me?”

Authentic Leadership, the first book on the topic, was published by my colleague Bill George in 2003. The book describes Bill's personal life journey and the seduction he experienced to become a Level 4/Charismatic leader. The book follows his journey to authenticity as a leader and offers his insights on what it means to be an Authentic Leader. When an idea's time has come, multiple people "discover" it. Bill was the first non-academic to write about Authentic Leadership. His writing deeply engaged readers because of the transparency and vulnerability with which he shared his trials, wake-up calls, and challenging life experiences as a highly visible CEO and board member of two Fortune 500 companies. Academics may have been describing Authentic Leadership from the outside in, but Bill described it from the inside out:

"Hitting the Wall"

"In the middle of the road of my life, I awoke in a dark wood, where the true way was wholly lost" Dante writes in The Divine Comedy. My most agonizing time in the career crucible also came when I least expected it. I call this "hitting the wall," something; that happens to most leaders at least once in their careers. As painful as it was, this experience provided the basis for growth and change that transformed my career. It caused me to look inside myself.

Honeywell. What began as a huge promotion turned into a decision to reassess my career and to move in an entirely new direction. ...During this period I started questioning whether Honeywell was really the place for me. I have always seen myself as a growth-oriented leader, not a turnaround specialist. ...I also found myself becoming more concerned with appearances and my attire than with being myself. Reluctantly, I faced up to the reality that Honeywell was changing me more than I was changing it. I had "hit the wall," but was too proud to face it. I felt I was in a trap from which I couldn't escape. The macho side of me said, "I have to tough it out." Sure, I was leading, but the purpose of my efforts was not at all clear. Where was my "leading" leading to? ...like Dante, I too was "in a dark wood." I needed to wake up and overcome my fixation on being CEO of a very large corporation.

Reluctantly, I realized I was letting my ego get in the way of my values. If indeed I was in a trap, it was a trap of my own making. ...It finally dawned on me that I was so caught up in my drive to run a major corporation that I was in danger of losing my soul. ...That evening Penny and I had a long talk about our lives and our careers. We recognized that my lack of fulfillment in my job was having a negative impact on all of us. She encouraged me to take another look at Medtronic. I kept thinking about the vision I had in my teenage years: leading a mission-driven, values-centered company where I was passionate about the company's products and the opportunity to serve others. What better place to do that than Medtronic? I called Medtronic's CEO and reopened the door. Five months later I walked through Medtronic's door to become its president and chief operating officer. Rarely in life does opportunity knock four times.

—Bill George, *Authentic Leadership*, 2003

Bill took Medtronic from \$1 billion to \$60 billion in stock value in 10 years. Eventually he left the corporate world to become an academic. He did so because he felt disappointed by his generation of leaders and felt a need to ensure that we find a better way to prepare future leaders. In 2004 Bill George began teaching his version of Authentic Leadership, "True North," at Harvard Business School, where it is still one of the most in-demand programs for second-year MBA students.

When to Use Authentic Leadership

Authentic Leadership isn't a "what," it's a "how." What we ask leaders to do hasn't changed for millennia. Is there any time we haven't wanted authentic leaders? The only challenge now is that the cost of **not being authentic as a leader** has gone up.

There are three trends propelling Authentic Leadership to the front of the line:

1. **In today's world, we are vulnerable to being seen in every context.** It is impossible to "fake" it. We live in a world that is on and online 24/7, and highly transparent. Everything that we do impacts how we are seen. You can no longer be one person at work and another outside of work. Ubiquitous video recording

devices capture revealing details as we move through our lives, instantly making whatever has been recorded available to the world. In 2012 when Prince Harry was caught in Las Vegas with his pants down (literally) much of the focus was on why his bodyguards allowed people into the party with their phones! It's interesting that the issue was less about Prince Harry's behavior and more about why they allowed it to be recorded. This is an old-world view that it is still possible to present one view in the public and have another in private.

2. **Distributed Leadership:** The pace and variety of events that each of us face in today's world means that everyone must operate as a leader. Gone are the days of a few people at the top leading while everyone else follows orders. When was the last time you had a satisfactory discussion with someone from a call center? In a VUCCA world, the only true leadership is what takes place on a call with a customer, in a fire fight in Afghanistan, or while taking a U.S. Air flight that has suddenly lost both engines to a safe landing in the Hudson. The two-minute tape of Captain Sullenberger as he lost both engines is a haunting indictment of leadership at a distance. The dialogue between Sully and air-traffic control during the short flight shows the challenge of attempting to lead from afar in a quickly changing environment. Most of the controllers' advice had no correlation to the reality Sully faced. When Sully told the controller he would have to land in the Hudson, another controller had to repeat it since the person "leading" Sully couldn't comprehend what was happening. Welcome to the 21st century! We can no longer depend on a few leaders, as their bandwidth and ability to take action in the "real" world isn't sufficient. Everyone at all levels in an organization must be a leader. Leadership is "distributed." The day of the "air traffic controller" as leader is over.
3. **Increased external uncertainty/change (VUCCA world) demands that we increase our internal certainty:** With external chaos all around us and former governance models failing, we become much more dependent on internal character strengths in ourselves and others. Great leaders were made in times of chaos and confusion. We tend to forget the ones who were leading in times of abundance and ease.

Keys to Becoming an Authentic Leader

Leaders who understand the background of the Authentic Leadership model and see its relevance in today's fast changing world often ask me how they can become more authentic. Here are some of the counterintuitive insights that we have learned over the last ten years of working with leaders around the world.

Appreciate the events that have shaped who you are. We find our authenticity by thinking back to the most challenging times in our lives. Often the moment in which we were the most challenged is the one that provides the key. Participants learn that on the other side of this journey into their own past there is a deep well of Authentic Leadership waiting that only they can discover. When we step back and unpack these events, the stories unveil an Authentic Leader that is our own utterly unique "definition" of the term. We refer to these challenging events as "crucible stories," a term coined by Warren Bennis and Robert Thomas in their 2002 book *Geeks and Geezers*. These are stories in which our basic assumptions about who we are and how we relate to the world are "reset." We discover a level of resilience that we didn't know we had. At some point, we "lead" ourselves out of the desert into the Promised Land. These stories usually spring from one or more places in our lives:

- Challenging new job or assignment
- Significant reversal in your professional or personal life
- A challenge or opportunity that goes on for a long time

The objective is not simply to tell the stories but to expose the keys to being an Authentic Leader. It's not just our stories that shape us, but also the place from which we tell the stories.

Identify your personal Board of Directors. Who we trust with our most challenging decisions and during our most crucial moments determines how "authentic" we will be as leaders over time. There are few people who will tell us the painful truth, and even fewer of us who want to accept the painful truth. Unfortunately, as we move up the chain of command, truth tellers become scarce, for obvious reasons. Who did Lance Armstrong, Rupert Murdoch, or former VW CEO Martin Winterkorn confide

in? Were their trusted friends authentic leaders, and were they honest with these powerful men?

Nobody is an Authentic Leader 100 percent of the time.

The goal is to become more authentic. Nobody ever achieves perfection. It is a lifelong journey during which we will spend a great deal of time aware of our inauthenticity. How we identify those moments will have a significant impact on our “authenticity” as seen by others. Transparency has great power. We must have empathy for ourselves in order to have empathy for others.

It’s okay to have weaknesses. Without weaknesses, there is no Authentic Leadership. If we hide our weaknesses, we become inauthentic. If we embrace them, realizing that others may be strong where we are weak, we create Authentic Leadership.

- Think of the least authentic leaders you have known. How did they deal with their weaknesses?
- Now think of the most authentic leaders you have ever worked with. How did they deal with their weaknesses?
- Which do you tend to be more like?

We can’t be authentic by ourselves. The key is how we dance with others. There is no such thing as an “Authentic Leader” without the interaction, dialogue and environment created around two or more individuals at a given time. Interaction is what gives rise to “authentic” or “inauthentic” acts.

Which leaders would you not follow even if they paid you \$1 million a year to work for them? Which leaders would you follow if there were no money involved? And when did you experience them at their most “authentic?”

Purpose is at the center of Authentic Leadership. Most of us don’t know the answer to this most fundamental and critical question: What is the purpose that drives who you

are as a leader? Most executives find it truly humbling to realize that something so basic is so unclear to them. What we have seen as we work with leaders is that either their purpose or their ego is the filter through which they interpret and view the world. If you don’t really know your purpose, then what is the chance that your ego is running the show? The impact of knowing in your bones what purpose has been driving you, and what leads you when all else fails, is the most important ingredient of authentic leadership.

To make the point, let me introduce you to Dolf Van Der Brink who works at Heineken.¹ When Dolf began his journey, he thought his purpose in life was “*to drive business,*” but somehow that didn’t feel right to him. As a participant in one of our Wharton programs, he discovered that, as he puts it, “figuring out your purpose is a process that starts quite rationally and then gets more emotional along the way.” Along with other participants, Dolf shared some crucible experiences, including one incredible event that took place in the Congo.

Listening to others talking about their purpose and being touched by the emotions suddenly made my purpose pop up in my mind: “To lead with wisdom, the wuxia master who saves the kingdom.” I find myself always moving toward high-risk situations that compel me to operate from a deeper wisdom, just like in the Chinese martial artist movies I so enjoy.

What I’m getting excited about is to lead people in different cultures and in different businesses. I’ve been an executive for Heineken for the last four years and I love it. I would love to continue working, but it’s not my purpose to sell beer. My purpose is to lead people – not just to earn a lot of money, but to lead with wisdom.

Through this Authentic Leadership experience, I realized that what I’ve been doing in the Congo is my real purpose – to lead with wisdom. The Congo– the DRC (Democratic Republic of the Congo)-- is an extreme business environment. On the one side, you have to hit

¹From Wharton *Leadership Digest* September-October, 2009, Parsons, Wendy. *Learning Leadership from the Crucible Experience.*

your numbers, you have to make your plans, you have to brief your agencies—just as if you are running any other big fast-moving consumer operation. But you're in a bizarre business environment. The Congo is rock-bottom from any perspective. On the United Nations Human Development Index, Congo is in the bottom five for poverty, and the top five for corruption. It is the worst place in the world to do business. And being relatively young to the position in such an environment has been an incredible stretch for me.

The key moment was an attempted overthrow of the government. Fighting broke loose; my boss was on vacation and I was the acting managing director, responsible for 3,000 people. We had to evacuate people, centralize people, get kids out of school and blockade the brewery. There were many decisions to be made. The fighting reached the gate of the brewery and a couple of missiles fell on the site, where we had 250 people. Thirty expatriates including wives and children from 10 families were in my house and my neighbor's house. Our employees in the township were disconnected from TV and radio did not know what was happening at the brewery. They came to the brewery in the morning; they were caught in the crossfire, and the gate of the brewery was closed.

The security manager called to tell me that about 15 people wanted access to the brewery, and asked what he should do. I asked him, "What's your security advice? Can you open the gate?" And he said, "No, I can't. I cannot check whether there's half an army behind them who could get access to the brewery at the same time."

I asked what would happen to the people. He said their lives would be in jeopardy. I had about 10 seconds to make a decision. It's not a typical business decision! Nobody prepares you for this. I decided that they could not have access to the brewery through that gate. We would open another gate where there were only materials, not people. But there were a couple of hundred meters to cover between the two gates. Half the people were taken by the fighting militia and had to do the most dangerous jobs, like moving crates of grenades. Luckily, just sheer luck, nobody got killed. Someone was shot in the foot, but there were no deaths

or serious injuries. A couple of weeks later, I realized—what if someone had been killed?

It was in the retelling of this story that Dolf rediscovered the purpose that had been leading him all his life. Yet it took those of us who listened to this story—and others Dolf recounted—to see the purpose that had always been there.

Organizational Implications

What I find most challenging, yet necessary for the continued success of Authentic Leadership, is creating "Authentic Organizations." I have had the privilege of delivering Authentic Leadership programs across many organizations over an extended period of time. Once participants have returned to work, they quickly discover that the organization, by its nature, makes it challenging for them to sustain their Authentic Leadership.

We know this is true because our participants return as alumni. They come back and are reenergized to shift into another level of mastery. At the same time, much of the discussion is about how difficult it is to operate as an Authentic Leader in organizations designed in the 20th century. Corporate office politics (who is in and who is out), which executives get promoted (often the inauthentic ones), who stays in their position long after it makes sense, and travel policies that are arbitrary are the tip of the iceberg. What would it be like if the very way in which the organization operated helped to create Authentic Leadership? There are a couple of examples of more authentic organizations (Southwest Airlines, Spotify, Ben & Jerry's, Netflix). Unfortunately, what is "authentic" for them doesn't translate to other organizations. How we can help organizations figure out their special power to become an Authentic Organization within their industry is still a mystery. I don't believe applying mechanistic solutions, as we have attempted in the past with rewards systems, organizational structures, or change efforts, has been effective or sustainable. It's so disheartening to put it in place and get it "right," and then watch the next leader come in and dismantle it within months. How do you create an Authentic Organization in which authenticity becomes emergent and resilient to the point where the leaders who thrive are the ones who are authentic and have aligned

their purpose to that of the organization? Remember the old Hewlett Packard of the 1990s and how authentically it operated? What would have allowed it to not lose its way?

I believe the starting point is to work with a group that creates its own definition of an Authentic Leader. Then we

can ask, “Okay how do we design the organization to behave this way?” Of course, first we would have to find the leaders who are willing to take on that challenge, and the challenge would require them to really step into who they are as Authentic Leaders.

A few final reminders:

“Leadership without perspective and point of view isn’t leadership—and of course it must be your own perspective, your own point of view. You can’t borrow a point of view any more than you can borrow someone else’s eyes. It must be authentic, and if it is, it will be original, because you are original”

~Warren Bennis

“Be who you are and say what you feel because those who mind don’t matter and those who matter don’t mind”

~Dr. Seuss

About the Author

Nick Craig is the president of the Authentic Leadership Institute (ALI). Nick is the co-author of “From Purpose to Impact” with Scott Snook, published in *Harvard Business Review* (May 2014). He co-authored *Finding Your True North* with Bill George and Scott Snook of Harvard Business School. Nick has designed and delivered leadership programs around the globe for many Fortune 500 companies, including GE, Siemens, and Unilever. He is also a Wharton Fellow and delivers the Authentic Leadership programs for their senior leadership programs. Nick can be reached at ncraig@authleadership.com or via www.authleadership.com

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- VUCCA - United States Marine Corp.; MCDP6, Command and Control, HG

