



Discovering Your Authentic Leadership

by **Bill George, Peter Sims, Andrew N. McLean, and Diana Mayer**

During the past 50 years, leadership scholars have conducted more than 1,000 studies in an attempt to identify the styles, characteristics, or personality traits of great leaders. None of these studies has produced a cookie-cutter leadership style, and individuals would not imitate it. They would make themselves into personae, not people, and others would see through them immediately.

No one can be authentic by trying to imitate someone else. You can learn from others' experiences, but you can only be successful when you are trying to be like them. People trust you when you are genuine and not trying to be someone else. Amgen CEO and president Kevin Sharer, who gained priceless experience working at GE in the 1980s, saw the downside of GE's cult of personality in those days. "Everyone wanted to be like me. Leadership has many voices. You need to be who you are, not try to emulate somebody else."

Over the past five years, people have developed a deep distrust of leaders. It is increasingly evident in the behavior of business leaders in the twenty-first century. In 2003, Bill George's book, *Authentic Leadership: Reclaiming Your Power and Creating Lasting Value*, challenged a new generation to lead authentically. Authentic leaders demonstrate a clear purpose, practice their values consistently, and lead with their hearts as well as their heads. They establish meaningful relationships and have the self-discipline to get results. They know who they are.

Many readers of *Authentic Leadership*, including several CEOs, indicated that they had a tremendous need for authentic leaders and wanted to know how. As a result, our research team set out to answer the question, "How do you become and remain authentic leaders?" We interviewed 125 leaders to learn how they developed their leadership skills. These interviews constitute the largest in-depth study of leadership development ever undertaken. The participants spoke openly and honestly how they realized their potential and candidly shared their life stories, personal struggles, and triumphs.

The people we talked with ranged in age from 23 to 93, with no fewer than 15 per decade. They were selected based on their reputations for authenticity and effectiveness as leaders, as well as our personal knowledge of them and recommendations from other leaders and academics. The resulting group includes women and men from a variety of racial, religious, and socioeconomic backgrounds and nationalities. Half of them are CEOs, and the other half are a range of profit and nonprofit leaders, midcareer leaders, and young leaders just starting on their journey.

After interviewing these individuals, we believe we understand why more than 1,000 studies have not produced an ideal leader. Analyzing 3,000 pages of transcripts, our team was startled to see that these people did not have a set of characteristics, traits, skills, or styles that led to their success. Rather, their leadership emerged from their life experiences. Consciously and subconsciously, they were constantly testing themselves through real-world experiences. They used their life stories to understand who they were at their core. In doing so, they discovered the purpose of their leadership.

that being authentic made them more effective.

These findings are extremely encouraging: You do not have to be born with specific characteristics not have to wait for a tap on the shoulder. You do not have to be at the top of your organization. Its potential right now. As one of our interviewees, Young & Rubicam chairman and CEO Ann Fudge, s spark of leadership in us, whether it is in business, in government, or as a nonprofit volunteer. The c ourselves well enough to discover where we can use our leadership gifts to serve others.”

Discovering your authentic leadership requires a commitment to developing yourself. Like musician devote yourself to a lifetime of realizing your potential. Most people Kroger CEO David Dillon has s were self-taught. Dillon said, “The advice I give to individuals in our company is not to expect the cc development plan. You need to take responsibility for developing yourself.”

In the following pages, we draw upon lessons from our interviews to describe how people become a most important, they frame their life stories in ways that allow them to see themselves not as passive but rather as individuals who can develop self-awareness from their experiences. Authentic leaders practicing their values and principles, sometimes at substantial risk to themselves. They are careful so that they are driven by these inner values as much as by a desire for external rewards or recogn keep a strong support team around them, ensuring that they live integrated, grounded lives.

Learning from Your Life Story

The journey to authentic leadership begins with understanding the story of your life. Your life story p experiences, and through it, you can find the inspiration to make an impact in the world. As the novel “The story of your life is not your life. It is your story.” In other words, it is your personal narrative the facts of your life. Your life narrative is like a permanent recording playing in your head. Over and ov and personal interactions that are important to your life, attempting to make sense of them to find y

While the life stories of authentic leaders cover the full spectrum of experiences—including the posi athletic coaches, teachers, and mentors—many leaders reported that their motivation came from a lives. They described the transformative effects of the loss of a job; personal illness; the untimely de relative; and feelings of being excluded, discriminated against, and rejected by peers. Rather than s victims, though, authentic leaders used these formative experiences to give meaning to their lives. 7 to rise above their challenges and to discover their passion to lead.

Let’s focus now on one leader in particular, Novartis chairman and CEO Daniel Vasella, whose life s difficult of all the people we interviewed. He emerged from extreme challenges in his youth to reach pharmaceutical industry, a trajectory that illustrates the trials many leaders have to go through on th leadership.

Vasella was born in 1953 to a modest family in Fribourg, Switzerland. His early years were filled wit stoked his passion to become a physician. His first recollections were of a hospital where he was a suffered from food poisoning. Falling ill with asthma at age five, he was sent alone to the mountains two summers. He found the four-month separations from his parents especially difficult because his

problem and was unresponsive to his needs.

At age eight, Vasella had tuberculosis, followed by meningitis, and was sent to a sanatorium for a year. He suffered a great deal that year, as his parents rarely visited him. He still remembers the pain and being held down during the lumbar punctures so that he would not move. One day, a new physician arrived to perform each step of the procedure. Vasella asked the doctor if he could hold a nurse's hand rather than be held down. "An amazing thing is that this time the procedure didn't hurt," Vasella recalls. "Afterward, the doctor asked me to hold his hand. He reached up and gave me a big hug. These human gestures of forgiveness, caring, and compassion on me and on the kind of person I wanted to become."

Throughout his early years, Vasella's life continued to be unsettled. When he was ten, his mother was suffering from cancer for two years. Three years later, his father died in surgery. To support the family, he moved to a distant town and came home only once every three weeks. Left to himself, he and his friends had frequent fights. This lasted for three years until he met his first girlfriend, whose affection changed his life.

At 20, Vasella entered medical school, later graduating with honors. During medical school, he sought to come to terms with his early experiences and not feel like a victim. Through analysis, he realized that he wanted to help a wider range of people than he could as an individual practitioner. In his residency, he applied to become chief physician at the University of Zurich; however, the search committee was too young for the position.

Disappointed but not surprised, Vasella decided to use his abilities to increase his impact on medicine. He grew a growing fascination with finance and business. He talked with the head of the pharmaceutical division and was given him the opportunity to join the company's U.S. affiliate. In his five years in the United States, Vasella worked in a stimulating environment, first as a sales representative and later as a product manager, and advanced his career in the Sandoz marketing organization.

When Sandoz merged with Ciba-Geigy in 1996, Vasella was named CEO of the combined company despite his young age and limited experience. Once in the CEO's role, Vasella blossomed as a leader and saw a great opportunity to build a great global health care company that could help people through lifesaving new drugs, which has proved to be highly effective for patients with chronic myeloid leukemia. Drawing on the passion of his youth, he built an entirely new Novartis culture centered on compassion, competence, and competition. He established Novartis as a giant in the industry and Vasella as a compassionate leader.

Vasella's experience is just one of dozens provided by authentic leaders who traced their inspirational stories. Asked what empowered them to lead, these leaders consistently replied that they found the most transformative experiences. Those experiences enabled them to understand the deeper purpose of their work.

Knowing Your Authentic Self

When the 75 members of Stanford Graduate School of Business's Advisory Council were asked to identify the most important capability for leaders to develop, their answer was nearly unanimous: self-awareness. Yet many of those early in their careers, are trying so hard to establish themselves in the world that they leave little room for reflection. They strive to achieve success in tangible ways that are recognized in the external world—money, fame,

rising stock price. Often their drive enables them to be professionally successful for a while, but the success. As they age, they may find something is missing in their lives and realize they are holding they want to be. Knowing their authentic selves requires the courage and honesty to open up and e As they do so, leaders become more humane and willing to be vulnerable.

Of all the leaders we interviewed, David Pottruck, former CEO of Charles Schwab, had one of the n self-awareness. An all-league football player in high school, Pottruck became MVP of his college te Pennsylvania. After completing his MBA at Wharton and a stint with Citigroup, he joined Charles Sc moving from New York to San Francisco. An extremely hard worker, Pottruck could not understand resented the long hours he put in and his aggressiveness in pushing for results. “I thought my acco for themselves,” he said. “It never occurred to me that my level of energy would intimidate and offer my mind I was trying to help the company.”

Pottruck was shocked when his boss told him, “Dave, your colleagues do not trust you.” As he reca like a dagger to my heart. I was in denial, as I didn’t see myself as others saw me. I became a light had no idea how self-serving I looked to other people. Still, somewhere in my inner core the feedba Pottruck realized that he could not succeed unless he identified and overcame his blind spots.

Denial can be the greatest hurdle that leaders face in becoming self-aware. They all have egos that insecurities that need to be smoothed, fears that need to be allayed. Authentic leaders realize that t listen to feedback—especially the kind they don’t want to hear. It was only after his second divorce able to acknowledge that he still had large blind spots: “After my second marriage fell apart, I thoug problem.” Then he worked with a counselor who delivered some hard truths: “The good news is you wife-selection problem; the bad news is you have a husband-behavior problem.” Pottruck then mad change. As he described it, “I was like a guy who has had three heart attacks and finally realizes he lose some weight.”

These days Pottruck is happily remarried and listens carefully when his wife offers constructive fee that he falls back on his old habits at times, particularly in high stress situations, but now he has de stress. “I have had enough success in life to have that foundation of self-respect, so I can take the c have finally learned to tolerate my failures and disappointments and not beat myself up.”

Your Development as an Authentic Leader

As you read this article, think about the basis for your leadership development and the path you ne authentic leader. Then ask yourself these questions:

- 1. Which people and experiences in your early life had the greatest impact on you?**
- 2. What tools do you use to become self-aware?** What is your authentic self? What are the mor yourself, this is the real me?
- 3. What are your most deeply held values?** Where did they come from? Have your values chan childhood? How do your values inform your actions?

- 4. What motivates you extrinsically?** What are your intrinsic motivations? How do you balance extrinsic motivation in your life?
- 5. What kind of support team do you have?** How can your support team make you a more authentic leader? How do you diversify your team to broaden your perspective?
- 6. Is your life integrated?** Are you able to be the same person in all aspects of your life—personal, professional, and community? If not, what is holding you back?
- 7. What does being authentic mean in your life?** Are you more effective as a leader when you are authentic? Have you ever paid a price for your authenticity as a leader? Was it worth it?
- 8. What steps can you take today, tomorrow, and over the next year to develop your authentic leadership?**

Practicing Your Values and Principles

The values that form the basis for authentic leadership are derived from your beliefs and conviction about what your true values are until they are tested under pressure. It is relatively easy to list your values when things are going well. When your success, your career, or even your life hangs in the balance, you list what is most important, what you are prepared to sacrifice, and what trade-offs you are willing to make.

Leadership principles are values translated into action. Having a solid base of values and testing them to develop the principles you will use in leading. For example, a value such as “concern for others” translates into a leadership principle such as “create a work environment where people are respected for their contributions, their security, and allowed to fulfill their potential.”

Consider Jon Huntsman, the founder and chairman of Huntsman Corporation. His moral values were tested when he worked for the Nixon administration in 1972, shortly before Watergate. After a brief stint in the U.S. Department of Education, and Welfare (HEW), he took a job under H.R. Haldeman, President Nixon’s powerful chief of staff. He found the experience of taking orders from Haldeman “very mixed. I wasn’t geared to take orders that weren’t ethically or morally right.” He explained, “We had a few clashes, as plenty of things that I thought were questionable. An amoral atmosphere permeated the White House.”

One day, Haldeman directed Huntsman to help him entrap a California congressman who had been a vocal opponent of a new initiative. The congressman was part owner of a plant that reportedly employed undocumented workers. To embarrass the congressman, Haldeman told Huntsman to get the plant manager of a company that employed some undocumented workers at the congressman’s plant in an undercover operation.

“There are times when we react too quickly and fail to realize immediately what is right and wrong,” Huntsman said. “That was one of those times when I didn’t think it through. I knew instinctively it was wrong, but it took a while for it to percolate. After 15 minutes, my inner moral compass made itself noticed and enabled me to recognize what I had to do. Values that had accompanied me since childhood kicked in. Halfway through my conversation with the plant manager, I said to him, ‘Let’s not do this. I don’t want to play this game. Forget that I called.’”

Huntsman told Haldeman that he would not use his employees in this way. “Here I was saying no to a person in the country. He didn’t appreciate responses like that, as he viewed them as signs of disloyalty. I had been saying farewell. So be it. I left within the next six months.”

Balancing Your Extrinsic and Intrinsic Motivations

Because authentic leaders need to sustain high levels of motivation and keep their lives in balance, they need to understand what drives them. There are two types of motivations—extrinsic and intrinsic. Admittedly, many leaders are propelled to achieve by measuring their success against the outside world, such as the recognition and status that come with promotions and financial rewards. Intrinsic motivations, on the other hand, are derived from their sense of the meaning of their life. They are closely linked to one’s life story and their values. Examples include personal growth, helping other people develop, taking on social causes, and making a positive impact on the world. The key is to find a balance between your desires for external validation and the intrinsic motivation for fulfillment in your work.

Many interviewees advised aspiring leaders to be wary of getting caught up in social, peer, or parental expectations. Dunn, who has worked in Silicon Valley for decades as a Hewlett-Packard executive, acknowledged the pull of external sources: “The path of accumulating material possessions is clearly laid out. You know you don’t pursue that path, people wonder what is wrong with you. The only way to avoid getting caught up is to understand where you find happiness and fulfillment.”

Moving away from the external validation of personal achievement is not always easy. Leaders who are accustomed to successive accomplishments throughout their early years that it takes courage to pursue their own motivations. But at some point, most leaders recognize that they need to address more difficult questions to achieve truly meaningful success. McKinsey’s Alice Woodward, who at 29 has already achieved notable success, said, “I was so naive, born of things I learned early in life about praise and being valued. You get carried around the rabbit around the course, you’re not running toward anything meaningful.”

Intrinsic motivations are congruent with your values and are more fulfilling than extrinsic motivations. Alice Woodward, New York Stock Exchange, said, “I am motivated by doing a really good job at whatever I am doing and making a positive impact on society through a group of people.” Or as Ann Moore, chairman and CEO of Time, put it, “I stayed solely because I loved magazines and the publishing world.” Moore had a dozen job offers after business school, but she chose the lowest-paying one with Time because of her passion for publishing.

Building Your Support Team

Leaders cannot succeed on their own; even the most outwardly confident executives need support. Building strong relationships to provide perspective, it is very easy to lose your way.

Authentic leaders build extraordinary support teams to help them stay on course. Those teams can provide a safe space of uncertainty, help them in times of difficulty, and celebrate with them in times of success. After their initial success, they find comfort in being with people on whom they can rely so they can be open and vulnerable. During the process, they find the friends who appreciate them for who they are, not what they are. Authentic leaders find that the support team provides affirmation, advice, perspective, and calls for course corrections when needed.

How do you go about building your support team? Most authentic leaders have a multifaceted support team consisting of their spouses or significant others, families, mentors, close friends, and colleagues. They build their experiences, shared histories, and openness with people close to them create the trust and confidence and uncertainty. Leaders must give as much to their supporters as they get from them so that relationships can develop.

It starts with having at least one person in your life with whom you can be completely yourself, wanted, accepted unconditionally. Often that person is the only one who can tell you the honest truth. Most leaders have relationships with their spouses, although some develop these bonds with another family member, friend, or mentor. When leaders can rely on unconditional support, they are more likely to accept themselves and their lives.

Many relationships grow over time through an expression of shared values and a common purpose. For example, a partner at the capital firm Kleiner Perkins Caufield & Byers said his marriage to Hewlett-Packard's Debra Dunn is built on similar values. "Debra and I are very independent but extremely harmonious in terms of our personalities and principles. We have a strong resonance around questions like, 'What is your legacy in this world?' and 'How do we sync about what we do with our lives.'"

Many leaders have had a mentor who changed their lives. The best mentoring interactions spark mutual growth of similar values, and shared enjoyment. If people are only looking for a leg up from their mentors, it is not in their mentors' lives as well, the relationships will not last for long. It is the two-way nature of the connection that makes the difference.

Personal and professional support groups can take many forms. Piper Jaffray's Tad Piper is a member of an Anonymous group. He noted, "These are not CEOs. They are just a group of nice, hard-working people who are sober, lead good lives, and work with each other about being open, honest, and vulnerable. We recommit to each other by talking about our chemical dependency in a disciplined way as we go through the 12 steps. I feel supported by people who are thinking about those kinds of issues and actually doing something, not just talking about it."

Bill George's experiences echo Piper's: In 1974, he joined a men's group that formed after a week of meetings. Years later, the group is still meeting every Wednesday morning. After an opening period of catching up and dealing with any particular difficulty someone may be facing, one of the group's eight members presents a topic he has selected. These discussions are open, probing, and often profound. The key to their success is that they really believe without fear of judgment, criticism, or reprisal. All the members consider the most important aspects of their lives, enabling them to clarify their beliefs, values, and understandings. The group serves as a source of honest feedback when they need it most.

Integrating Your Life by Staying Grounded

Integrating their lives is one of the greatest challenges leaders face. To lead a balanced life, you need to balance the constituent elements—work, family, community, and friends—so that you can be the same person in all of your life as a house, with a bedroom for your personal life, a study for your professional life, a family room, and a living room to share with your friends. Can you knock down the walls between these rooms and live in each of them?

As John Donahoe, president of eBay Marketplaces and former worldwide managing director of Baird

means maintaining a sense of self no matter where you are. He warned, “The world can shape your sense of yourself as you live, you must make conscious choices. Sometimes the choices are really mistakes.”

Authentic leaders have a steady and confident presence. They do not show up as one person one day and the next. Integration takes discipline, particularly during stressful times when it is easy to become reactive habits. Donahoe feels strongly that integrating his life has enabled him to become a more effective leader. “The struggle is constant, as the trade-offs don’t get any easier as you get older.” Donahoe said, “The personal and professional lives are not a zero-sum game. As Donahoe said, “I have no doubt today that my personal life has made me a far more effective leader in the workplace. Having a strong personal life has made the difference.”

Leading is high-stress work. There is no way to avoid stress when you are responsible for people, and managing the constant uncertainties of the environment. The higher you go, the greater your freedom but also the higher the degree of stress. The question is not whether you can avoid stress but how to maintain your own sense of equilibrium.

Authentic leaders are constantly aware of the importance of staying grounded. Besides spending time with close friends, authentic leaders get physical exercise, engage in spiritual practices, do community service, and spend time in places where they grew up. All are essential to their effectiveness as leaders, enabling them to sustain their leadership over the long term.

Empowering People to Lead

Now that we have discussed the process of discovering your authentic leadership, let’s look at how to empower people in their organizations to achieve superior long-term results, which is the bottom line for all leaders.

Authentic leaders recognize that leadership is not about their success or about getting loyal subordinates. They know the key to a successful organization is having empowered leaders at all levels, including those who report to them. They not only inspire those around them, they empower those individuals to step up and lead.

A reputation for building relationships and empowering people was instrumental in the successful turnaround of Xerox. When Mulcahy was asked to take the company’s reins from her failed predecessor, she found a company with \$18 billion in debt, and all credit lines were exhausted. With the share price in free fall, morale was at a low, and matters worse, the SEC was investigating the company’s revenue recognition practices.

Mulcahy’s appointment came as a surprise to everyone—including Mulcahy herself. A Xerox veteran in sales and on the corporate staff for 25 years, but not in finance, R&D, or manufacturing. How could she lead through a crisis when she had had no financial experience? She brought to the CEO role the relationships she had built, an impeccable understanding of the organization, and, above all, her credibility as an authentic leader. Everyone knew it. Because of that, they were willing to go the extra mile for her.

After her appointment, Mulcahy met personally with the company’s top 100 executives to ask them to stay with the company despite the challenges ahead. “I knew there were people who weren’t supportive of me,” she said. “I talked to a couple of them and said, ‘This is about the company.’” The first two people Mulcahy talked with, both of whom had been with the company for 20 years, decided to leave, but the remaining 98 committed to stay.

Throughout the crisis, people in Xerox were empowered by Mulcahy to step up and lead in order to former greatness. In the end, her leadership enabled Xerox to avoid bankruptcy as she paid back \$ restored revenue growth and profitability with a combination of cost savings and innovative new pro tripled as a result.

•••

Like Mulcahy, all leaders have to deliver bottom-line results. By creating a virtuous circle in which the effectiveness of their leadership, authentic leaders are able to sustain those results through good times enables them to attract talented people and align employees' activities with shared goals, as they encourage a team to lead by taking on greater challenges. Indeed, superior results over a sustained period of time authentic leader. It may be possible to drive short-term outcomes without being authentic, but the way we know to create sustainable long-term results.

For authentic leaders, there are special rewards. No individual achievement can equal the pleasure people to achieve a worthy goal. When you cross the finish line together, all the pain and suffering quickly vanishes. It is replaced by a deep inner satisfaction that you have empowered others and their place. That's the challenge and the fulfillment of authentic leadership.

Bill George, the former chairman and CEO of Medtronic, is a professor of management practice School in Boston.

Peter Sims established "Leadership Perspectives," a class on leadership development at the Stanford School of Business in California.

Andrew N. McLean is a research associate at Harvard Business School.

Diana Mayer is a former Citigroup executive in New York. This article was adapted from *True North: Authentic Leadership* by Bill George with Peter Sims (Jossey-Bass, forthcoming in March 2007).

WHAT TO READ NEXT

In Praise of the Incomplete Leader

Why Should Anyone Be Led by You?

Managing Authenticity: The Paradox of Great Leadership

Putting the Balanced Scorecard to Work

Managing Oneself

Your Use of Pronouns Reveals Your Personality

Recommended by