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 styles, characteristics, or personality traits of great leaders. None of these studies has produced a cookie-cutter leader. Thank goodness. If scholars had produced a cookie-cutter leadership style, individuals would try to 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, can be successful when you are trying to be like them. People trust you when you are genuine and someone else. Amgen CEO and president Kevin Sharer, who gained priceless experience working in the 1980s, saw the downside of GE’s cult of personality in those days. “Everyone wanted to be like Jack Welch,” he said. “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 of business leader in the twenty-first century. In 2003, Bill George’s book, Authentic Leadership: Re Creating Lasting Value, challenged a new generation to lead authentically. Authentic leaders demonstrate 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 hunger to be 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 the habit of being authentic leaders. These interviews constitute the largest in-depth study of leadership development ever undertaken. The people we talked with ranged in age from 23 to 93, with no fewer than 15 per decade. They had reputations for authenticity and effectiveness as leaders, as well as our personal knowledge of them. We added recommendations from other leaders and academics. The resulting group includes women and men of all racial, religious, and socioeconomic backgrounds and nationalities. Half of them are CEOs, and the 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 describe characteristics, traits, skills, or styles that led to their success. Rather, their leadership emerged from who they were at their core. In doing so, they discovered the purpose of their lives.
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. Ins potential right now. As one of our interviewees, Young & Rubicam chairman and CEO Ann Fudge, said, “spark of leadership in us, whether it is in business, in government, or as a nonprofit volunteer. The others 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 seen were self-taught. Dillon said, “The advice I give to individuals in our company is not to expect the c

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 passiv 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 novo “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 over 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. 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 is 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 as 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 him down during the lumbar punctures so that he would not move. One day, a new physician arrived. He reached up and gave him 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 18-year-old was suffering from cancer for two years. Three years later, his father died in surgery. To support the family, he and his friends had frequent fights. This lasted for three years until he met his first girlfriend, whose affection changed him.

At 20, Vasella entered medical school, later graduating with honors. During medical school, he realized that he wanted to help a wider range of people than he could as an individual practitioner. In his five years in the United States, Vasella enjoyed a stimulating environment, first as a sales representative and later as a product manager, and advanced his 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 opportunity to build a great global health care company that could help people through lifesaving new which has proved to be highly effective for patients with chronic myeloid leukemia. Drawing on his youth, he built an entirely new Novartis culture centered on compassion, competence, and competitiveness, and 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 inspiration stories. Asked what empowered them to lead, these leaders consistently replied that they found the transformative experiences. Those experiences enabled them to understand the deeper purpose of

**Knowing Your Authentic Self**

When the 75 members of Stanford Graduate School of Business’s Advisory Council were asked to identify a capability for leaders to develop, their answer was nearly unanimous: self-awareness. Ye those early in their careers, are trying so hard to establish themselves in the world that they leave little time to think about their values. They strive to achieve success in tangible ways that are recognized in the external world—money, f
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 lightr 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 a 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 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 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—personally, professionally, and in your 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 convictions. Discovering your true values is important, especially when things are going well. When your success, your career, or even your life hangs in the balance, you need to know 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 in real-life situations helps you develop the principles you will use in leading. For example, a value such as “concern for others” can be translated into a leadership principle such as “create a work environment where people are respected for their contributions 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 from someone who didn’t have a moral or ethical code.” He explained, “We had a few clashes, as plenty of things that Haldeman did were ethically or morally right.”

One day, Haldeman directed Huntsman to help him entrap a California congressman who had been involved in a political initiative. The congressman was part owner of a plant that reportedly employed undocumented workers. In order 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 recalled. “There was one of those times when I didn’t think it through. I knew instinctively it was wrong, but it took a while for my inner moral compass 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 person in the country. He didn’t appreciate responses like that, as he viewed them as signs of disloy 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, them to understand what drives them. There are two types of motivations—extrinsic and intrinsic. A admit it, many leaders are propelled to achieve by measuring their success against the outside wor the recognition and status that come with promotions and financial rewards. Intrinsic motivations, or derived from their sense of the meaning of their life. They are closely linked to one’s life story and Examples include personal growth, helping other people develop, taking on social causes, and mak world. The key is to find a balance between your desires for external validation and the intrinsic mot fulfillment in your work.

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

Moving away from the external validation of personal achievement is not always easy. Achievement accustomed to successive accomplishments throughout their early years that it takes courage to pu motivations. But at some point, most leaders recognize that they need to address more difficult que truly meaningful success. McKinsey’s Alice Woodwar, who at 29 has already achieved notable suc of achievement was pretty naive, born of things I learned early in life about praise and being valued 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: New York Stock Exchange, said, “I am motivated by doing a really good job at whatever I am doing impact on society through a group of people.” Or as Ann Moore, chairman and CEO of Time, put it, solely because I loved magazines and the publishing world.” Moore had a dozen job offers after bu 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 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 cou comfort in being with people on whom they can rely so they can be open and vulnerable. During the the friends who appreciate them for who they are, not what they are. Authentic leaders find that the 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 system that includes 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 needed to handle trial 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, warts and all, accepted unconditionally. Often that person is the only one who can tell you the honest truth. Most leaders build these bonds with their spouses, although some develop these bonds with another family member, a mentor. When leaders can rely on unconditional support, they are more likely to accept themselves as they really are.

Many relationships grow over time through an expression of shared values and a common purpose. Capital firm Kleiner Perkins Caufield & Byers said his marriage to Hewlett-Packard’s Debra Dunn is in similar values. “Debra and I are very independent but extremely harmonious in terms of our personal and principles. We have a strong resonance around questions like, ‘What is your legacy in this world? What 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 respect and shared enjoyment. If people are only looking for a leg up from their mentors, they are not likely to develop deep, meaningful relationships. When leaders can rely on unconditional support, they are more likely to accept themselves as they really are.

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

Bill George’s experiences echo Piper’s: In 1974, he joined a men’s group that formed after a week. 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 selects 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 understanding, serving 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 ensure that the constituent elements—work, family, community, and friends—are in balance. It’s about being the same person in your life as a house, with a bedroom for your personal life, a study for your professional life, a far and a living room to share with your friends. Can you knock down the walls between these rooms and make them a part of each other?

As John Donahoe, president of eBay Marketplaces and former worldwide managing director of Bain...
means maintaining a sense of self no matter where you are. He warned, “The world can shape you 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 week and another the next. Integration takes discipline, particularly during stressful times when it is easy to become reactive and develop new habits. Donahoe feels strongly that integrating his life has enabled him to become a more effective leader. “Life is not nirvana,” he said. “The struggle is constant, as the trade-offs don’t get any easier as you get older.”

Personal and professional lives are not a zero-sum game. As Donahoe said, “I have no doubt today 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 footprint of destiny but also the higher the degree of stress. The question is not whether you can avoid stress but how you 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 visit the places where they grew up. All are essential to their effectiveness as leaders, enabling them to sustain a sense of calm in the midst of chaos.

**Empowering People to Lead**

Now that we have discussed the process of discovering your authentic leadership, let’s look at how authentic leaders empower others 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 to do what they want. They know the key to a successful organization is having empowered leaders at all levels, including those who don’t have direct reports. 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 chairman and CEO Ann Mulcahy’s stunning turnaround of Xerox. WhenMulcahy was asked to take the company’s reins from her failed predecessor and manage a $18 billion in debt, and all credit lines were exhausted. With the share price in free fall, morale was at an all-time low. 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 who had been in sales and on the corporate staff for 25 years, but not in finance, R&D, or manufacturing. How could she succeed in a crisis when she had had no financial experience? She brought to the CEO role the relationships she had built over the years, 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 how they would lead the company despite the challenges ahead. “I knew there were people who weren’t supportive of me,” she said. “So I went to a couple of them and said, ‘This is about the company.’” The first two people Mulcahy talked with, both high-level executives, 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 restore 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 products 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 enable the team to lead by taking on greater challenges. Indeed, superior results over a sustained period of time enable the authentic leader. It may be possible to drive short-term outcomes without being authentic, but authentic leadership is the only way we know to create sustainable long-term results.

For authentic leaders, there are special rewards. No individual achievement can equal the pleasure of 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 taken 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 at Harvard Business School in Boston.

Peter Sims established “Leadership Perspectives,” a class on leadership development at the Stanford Graduate 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