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Authentic leadership in the digital age

Richard R. Smith

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Artificial intelligence algorithms are actively assessing our personality and behaviour based on our social media footprint with amazing accuracy – even after we have retired or died.

If you are looking for insight on leadership and do a quick search on leadership books, you will suddenly find that there are not hundreds of books... but thousands of titles on leadership from historic accounts, modern business heroes, individual perspectives, and researched theories! While we do not lack for perspectives on leadership, we do seem to lack clarity on what is expected of leaders - especially as the complexities of leading organizations has increased due to the impact of our digital world.

The digital tools available (especially the social media platforms) have made it easier to share messages, communicate ideas, and openly showcase our interests, accomplishments, and milestones. However, as we consider the transparency created by digital platforms as our tweets, posts, photos, videos, and messages can all be viewed by others, the stakes of leadership have somehow been raised in recent years. In addition, the footprint of our early years and mistakes are somehow now quite discoverable – imagine a hot-headed message you wrote in your 20's being reviewed as a character question when you are being considered for a top executive job in your 40's! To top it off, artificial intelligence algorithms are actively assessing our personality and behavior based on our social media footprint with amazing accuracy – even after we have retired or died!

Gone are the days of having a “Public Face” of leadership and a “Private Life” that is inconsistent with our leadership brand. In fact, our leadership brand is already being formed at a young age thanks to our digital footprint and image that we may (or may not) have intended to create. This is perhaps a bit unnerving if you're wondering about those Facebook posts from your university years or how your friends tagged you in their posts or photos that are now inconsistent with your more mature and business executive self. After all, we cannot easily “un-post” items that have been captured by others or shared around the world. The images, videos, posts, comments, and innocent replies have been captured on servers, replicated on various accounts, and even downloaded to private spaces making difficult to have a fresh start in creating your leadership brand and image.

What do we do in this digital age?

Should we avoid the digital world? Of course not, we must embrace the power of social media, leverage the convenience of digital, and be prepared to lead in today's context. As we consider leading in the age of AI, machine learning, and an increasingly connected world, it seems even more important that we embrace the idea of being an authentic leader. Bill George popularised the idea of authentic leadership with his 2003 book, *Authentic Leadership: Rediscovering the Secrets to Creating Lasting Value*. George outlines five clear principles that can be revisited in light of our digital reality today.

1. **Values** – The idea operating with good values is not new or innovative, clearly showing the values through behavior, words, and ideas. While many organizations have clear stated values, how many of us have defined values that we choose to live by? The challenge of

course, is it is easy to say that we agree with the idea of operating with integrity, but perhaps more difficult to practice integrity in the complexity of our business environment today. In our modern digital world, it is not only important to define our values, but equally important to consider what values we are actively building in our leadership brand. If you examine your digital footprint, how does it reflect on your values? What would others say about what you stand for? As leaders in the digital era, it is critical that we think about how we communicate and relate to the world around us.

2. **Purpose** – Bill George suggests that we should understand and demonstrate our purpose through our passion for what we do. In social media there are a variety of topics that we are all bombarded with and a variety of business, family, and personal interactions. What are the topics that we choose to focus on or use to engage others. If we take a step back from our digital footprint, would others recognize our purpose? Is our digital image consistent with the actions of our physical self? Authentic leaders have a clear sense of purpose and it is clear from their actions and their interactions.
3. **Trusting Relationships** – We may not think about trusting relationships when it comes to digital connections, but the quality of our relationships to others can be seen. As we think about our how we show and create relationships with others as a part of our digital brand, it may be important to reinforce others and build a sense of community on line. It is also important to note that we must also put away our digital life when we want to be truly present with someone else. How many times are important conversations interrupted by a ring, ping, or buzz? Being present on-line as well as off line can help build the trusting relationships we need as leaders.
4. **Self-Discipline** – Demonstrating consistency in our behaviors, actions, and decisions can be a challenge given the complexity of situations and varying context of business around the world. With demands on our time from all aspects of our lives, the digital world can make self-discipline more difficult – after all, we cannot turn off the constant stream of information coming at us and the increasing expectation that we will provide instant responses to others. What is your self-discipline when it comes to digital interaction? Are you a slave to your mobile device or do you keep it in check with a defined place in your life? Authentic leaders in the digital age will demonstrate their self-discipline both on-line and off-line.
5. **Heart** – Too often, we see professionals using social media to broadcast their accomplishments. While it is great to share successes, how much of what we communicate shows a genuine caring of others? Do we demonstrate compassion for others and the world around us? Authentic leaders gain the respect of others as they demonstrate caring of others... in other words, their digital footprint is not a “Show about me.” Supporting others, highlighting the accomplishments of others, and giving of our own talents (without expecting anything in return) can eventually build a sense of heart. But trying to create an image of compassion without actually having it can clearly backfire in this age of transparency. Authentic leaders lead with a sharing heart.

There are many interesting ideas on leadership to explore and several different theories about how to be effective. Before you pick up the next leadership book or start searching for leadership techniques and ideas, you may want to reflect on your current leadership brand. What does your digital footprint say about your values, purpose, relationships, self-discipline and heart? To be an authentic leader in the digital age, you will need to be authentic in both the physical world as well as the digital world.