

Career Compass No. 112: Can You Show Your True Self at Work?

Given the culture of an organization, you may feel uncomfortable revealing who you really are and what you believe. Is it your leadership responsibility to be authentic?

By Dr. Frank Benest | Dec 09, 2024 | Article - Article



I was recently hired as the planning manager in the Community Development Department for a fairly large city in the northeast. This new position is a big step up for me.

Here's the problem. My boss is the community development director who is very professional, super-analytical, reserved, and at times stern. She is very results-oriented and doesn't spend much time building a relationship with me or other division managers. I'm more informal, social, relaxed, and often outspoken. I'm trying to fit in but it's difficult for me. I'm always mindful of what I wear, what I say, and how I behave. It's quite stressful.

I notice that this all-business, "get-to-the-point" and "get-it-done" organizational culture also seems to inhibit full discussion of how to address major challenges (such as gangs, affordable housing, climate protection) and is not very engaging. As a single dad of two kids, with ample life and professional experience, I think I have some good perspectives to share but feel constrained.

I care deeply about making a positive difference in my new organization and community. To do so, I want to be more of myself but I'm a bit fearful. I particularly would like to lead my division team in a different way but I sense little support for that.

Do you have any suggestions of how to cope?

It seems that you are struggling with how to be more authentic at work and reveal more of your true self.

In many organizational cultures, it is difficult to reveal yourself. According to one HR survey, only 43% of employees believe that they can be their authentic selves at work. (See [Swarnamuki Ganesan, “Do You Bring Your Authentic Self to Work?” LinkedIn.com, Feb 19, 2022.](#))

To explore how you can be more of your true self, let’s start by defining “authenticity.”

What is authenticity?

You are authentic if you reveal yourself (or most of yourself) at work. You let people know about your family, culture, and unique life journey; you talk about and act upon your values; and you share your passions, intentions, ideas, and perspectives.

In addition to sharing yourself, authenticity as a formal or informal leader requires that you allow others to share their life stories, values, and perspectives. For a leader, authenticity requires some vulnerability and an openness to others. (See [Career Compass #32 “The Power of Vulnerability”](#))

Authentic leaders are “seen” for who they are.

What are the benefits to showing up as your true self?

I believe that there are great personal and professional benefits for being truly “seen” at work.

From a personal perspective, showing up as your authentic self removes a lot of stress. You can reveal who you truly are. Otherwise, you are spending a lot of time and energy on monitoring yourself, worrying about what you say, and how you look and act. By being yourself, you can focus on doing the work and adding value.

From a leadership perspective, followers want to be led by someone “real.” Ultimately, people can tell if a leader is being inauthentic. Inauthentic leaders are often characterized as phony, fake, insincere, and disingenuous.

People are attracted to authenticity. In fact, followers now expect their leaders to be authentic. (See [Sylvia Ann Hewlett, “The New Rules for Executive Presence,” Harvard Business Review, Jan-Feb 2024.](#)) Followers associate authenticity with sincerity, honesty, and integrity. It makes them feel comfortable, safe, and respected. (See [Gregory Lantz, “4 Ways to Be a More Authentic Person,” Psychology Today, March 12, 2015.](#))

There is some good news for leaders. Leadership has many voices. There are many ways to lead and exert positive influence. There is simply no profile of an ideal leader. You can exert positive influence by being who you are and not trying to imitate others. (See [Bill George et al., “Discovering Your Authentic Leadership,” Harvard Business Review, Feb 2007.](#))

Research indicates that being yourself leads to:

- A sense of well-being and personal happiness.
- Higher levels of engagement and lower burnout for yourself and team members.

- Feelings of empowerment.
- Enhanced teamwork.

(See [Heather Bussing, “What It Means to Bring Your Authentic Self to Work,” key.com, Oct 2019.](#))

What is the paradox of authenticity?

Sometimes it is inappropriate to reveal all of yourself at work. It may be inappropriate to express a complaint about your mother-in-law, or continually express opposition to a governing board policy or direction by top management, or talk about a team member who irks you. Effective leaders manage their authenticity, even though that may seem paradoxical. They know what traits and opinions to reveal to whom and when. They adapt to the demands of the situations they face and the people they lead or wish to influence. (See [Rob Goffee and Gareth Jones, “Managing Authenticity: The Paradox of Great Leadership,” Harvard Business Review, Dec 2005.](#))

For instance, a leader may feel very uncertain about the future of a homelessness project that is generating a lot of community pushback. She may wonder to herself if she can help the team successfully cross the finish line to complete the effort. Yet the leader must project confidence to team members and key stakeholders and, after hearing different perspectives on how to proceed, must take a few steps forward.

Authentic leaders are aware of their different selves and know which self to present to different audiences at different times.

In her book *The Art of Authenticity* (2016), Karissa Thacker talks about “selves-awareness.” You exert different selves in different situations. (See [Dan Rockwell, “Authenticity Is At Least 4 Things,” Leadership Freak, March 9, 2016.](#))

Authentic leaders are aware of their different selves and know which self to present to different audiences at different times. Depending on what is demanded in the moment, a confident leader may share with team members his insecurities about an endeavor and ask for help. Both selves are true to the person.

Given the demands of the situation and those involved, authentic leaders try to bring their best selves (not particularly their whole selves) to the endeavor.

Even when “managing” one’s authenticity, an authentic leader is unwavering in adhering to a few core values and achieving a small select number of goals. (See [Rob Goffee and Gareth Jones, “Managing Authenticity: The Paradox of Great Leadership,” Harvard Business Review, Dec 2005.](#))

When did Frank reveal himself amid criticism?

When I was city manager of Brea, California, I told the planning staff that I didn’t want them to recommend any new residential development that featured security gates. Based on my values, I felt that security gates were antithetical to promoting a sense of community in Brea. Several planning staff members pushed back and pointed out that the developers strongly felt that the new residential developments would be more marketable and higher-selling with the security gates. They also expressed criticism that I was forcing my values on certain planning decisions.

I provided my rationale and told them I hadn't worked so hard over many years to become a city manager if I couldn't exert my values. We agreed to disagree but staff never recommended any development with security gates while I was the city manager.

Can people of color really reveal all of themselves?

Because many of our organizational cultures are not particularly inclusive, a lot of people of color do not feel comfortable revealing their true selves or most of their selves. It is simply too uncomfortable and costly. It is too difficult to have all your actions, thoughts, and feelings under a microscope. The risk of not fitting in is too high. (See [Marcos Goldstein, "Why asking minority employees to be fully authentic at work is an impossible request," LinkedIn, April 7, 2021.](#))

We need more inclusive organizational cultures in which all employees can reveal themselves or at least most of themselves.

Minority employees may feel the need to cover up or downplay aspects of their identity in order to blend into the dominant white organizational culture. Consequently, many employees of color utilize "code-switching." Code-switching in the workplace refers to the practice of adjusting one's style of speech, expression, appearance, and behavior to fit into the dominant organizational culture. (See [Kimberly Harden, "Bring Your Authentic Self to Work," diverseeducation.com, Oct 28, 2019.](#))

To foster a more inclusive and comfortable environment for all employees, well-planned and executed DEI efforts need to continue even if there is pushback from any number of sources. We need more inclusive organizational cultures in which all employees can reveal themselves or at least most of themselves. See below for some general suggestions for how individual leaders can make it safer for everyone to show their true selves.

What are some ways to reveal yourself (and help others do the same)?

Leading is always high stress work. It is especially so if you find it uncomfortable to reveal who you are. Therefore, you must prioritize "self-care." Take a walk during the workday, retreat to a café for a mid-day break, exercise, enjoy a hobby, and leave work at a decent hour to spend time with loved ones. (See [Graci Harkema, "How to Bring Your Authentic Self to Work," hbr.org, Dec 15, 2023.](#))

However, self-care does not address the fundamental issue. If you want to be "seen" at work, I suggest some of these actions:

1. Become keenly self-aware

To reveal yourself, you have to know who you truly are and spend some time reflecting on your life story, culture, values, passions, and intentions. Reflect upon situations in which you feel comfortable and those in which you feel uncomfortable. Ask yourself what are the nonnegotiables that you are compelled to share with others. For instance, what values are you compelled to articulate and act upon? What are some other issues or trade offs that are negotiable? (See [Career Compass #108 "Leadership Starts with Self-Awareness"](#) and [Career Compass #57 "Leading By Living Your Values."](#))

2. View your identity as a strength (as well as the identities of others)

Your identity and background give you a viewpoint that may add value to any discussion and help solve organizational and community challenges. Share your opinions and be clear about where views stem from. Encourage others to do the same.

For example, I was raised by a single mom who was an immigrant from an Arab country. I have strong views about the positive benefits of immigration and how we should treat and support immigrants. I often share those views on immigration and encourage others to share their origin stories and perspectives.

Therefore, to help share your identity as a person and leader, talk about your family and kids, and have your son and daughter come after school to the office and introduce them to your colleagues. Every year at Halloween, my wife Pam and I would bring our young children Noah and Leila to the office in their costumes and they would hand out candy to the staff.

Diverse and inclusive environments promote more innovation as well as enhance teamwork. (See [Graci Harkema, “How to Bring Your Authentic Self to Work,” hbr.org, Dec 15, 2023.](https://hbr.org/2023/12/how-to-bring-your-authentic-self-to-work))

3. Start small, move slowly

Self-awareness must be matched with some self-disclosure.

I suggest that you move slowly as you demonstrate who you are. For instance, as the new city manager of Palo Alto, California, I wanted to dress more casually and model a less constrained approach to doing business. At the beginning of my tenure, I dressed for city council meetings in a coat and tie and slacks. Then I began to jettison the tie and eventually the coat. I eventually attended council meetings in a dress shirt and slacks.

In sharing your history and culture, start with just a vignette from your life story, not the whole story.

4. Find your safe people

To slowly reveal yourself, identify colleagues who are open to who you are and value you. You feel comfortable with them and, therefore, can be truly seen. (See [Graci Harkema, “How to Bring Your Authentic Self to Work,” hbr.org, Dec 15, 2023.](https://hbr.org/2023/12/how-to-bring-your-authentic-self-to-work))

5. Help make it safe for others

As a leader, you can help create a safe environment for yourself and others so everyone is not afraid to share themselves. For example, you can start team meetings with a “take 5” or “take 10” ritual where people can share what is happening in their personal lives.

Another occasional connection exercise is asking people to bring their favorite coffee or tea mug to the meeting and asking them why that mug is important to them.

Such connection activities not only make it safer to share, but they also enhance team productivity. High-performing teams spend 25% more time talking about non-work items than lesser-performing teams. (See [Ron Friedman, “5 Things High-Performing Teams Do Differently,” hbr.org, Oct 21, 2021.](https://hbr.org/2021/10/5-things-high-performing-teams-do-differently))

One way to make it safe for others to express their values and opinions is to ask open-ended questions and listen intently to what is revealed:

- Why is this issue or project important to you?
- For you, what would success look like?
- How do you think we should proceed?
- What concerns you?
- How might we address your concerns?
- What is most important to you as we address this challenge?

Ask these questions with a “curious mind.” Follow up a response to a question by saying “tell me more.” This “listen and learn” orientation demonstrates an openness to different perspectives and allows people to be themselves. (See [Sylvia Ann Hewlett, “The New Rules for Executive Presence,” Harvard Business Review, Jan-Feb 2024.](#))

Authentic leaders share and act upon their values and they encourage others to do the same.

6. Incorporate the thinking of others

Leaders can’t force people to follow. Followers choose to follow (or not). Therefore, not only encourage people to express their values and opinions, but find opportunities to blend their ideas with yours. Once you incorporate some of the thinking of others, your ideas tend to become more robust and often more elegant. When people get their “fingerprints” on the plan, your ideas become “our” ideas.

7. Practice vulnerability

Dynamic leaders have great strengths and great weaknesses. Leverage your strengths and acknowledge (but don’t dwell) on your weaknesses. ([Dan Rockwell, “The Leadership Question No One Ever Mentions,” Leadership Freak, Sept 20, 2011.](#))

Followers tend to follow if they feel connected to you. Vulnerability creates connection. As a leader, you can show vulnerability by telling others:

- “I screwed up.”
- “I was mistaken.”
- “This is what I learned.”
- “I don’t know how to proceed. What do you suggest?”
- “I need your help.”

Authentic leaders emphasize learning and growing—for themselves and others. They acknowledge that there is plenty of room to grow. They are not perfect.

Authenticity requires some measure of vulnerability. (See [Career Compass #32 “The Power of Vulnerability.”](#)) Only strong leaders can show vulnerability. It is another leadership paradox.

8. Model the way

People learn and change behavior through the modeling by others. If you share your life story, express your values and perspectives, and practice vulnerability, it encourages others to do the same.

9. Focus your efforts within your sphere of influence

To create a safe environment for yourself and others, focus on creating safety and inclusion within your sphere of influence. You are a division manager, so spend time and effort in helping people be themselves in your one-to-one interactions with division staff and in division team meetings. It will take more time, energy, and support to have the same positive impact with the department top management group led by the community development director.

10. Access supportive resources

You need support, encouragement, and feedback as you share yourself and disclose who you are. A formal or informal coach or two may be helpful as you navigate your organizational culture. (Go to the [ICMA Coaching Program](#) page and click on “CoachConnect” to secure a free coach.)

You might also want to join an Employee Resource Group of single parents or other employees who share your identity. (See [Career Compass #107 “The Business Case for Promoting Workplace Belonging.”](#))

Shaping the culture

When I started as the city manager of Palo Alto, I recognized that it was a rules- and process-oriented organizational culture. I had to adhere to certain rules and protocols and minimize my inclination to “just do it.” However, I also wanted the organization to become less bureaucratic and more risk-taking in the pursuit of our goals. As a leader, I wanted to be truly seen and model new attitudes and behaviors. So, with the support of a small cadre of colleagues, I proceeded with self confidence. In doing so, I discovered an important truth. You can shape the organizational culture over time. But it also shapes you.

As an organizational member and hopefully as a leader, you need to conform. . . but not too much. By slowly and bravely revealing yourself, sharing your perspectives, acting upon your values and pursuing your goals, you will become more energized and engaged, and help others do the same. There is great fulfillment and satisfaction in doing so.



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