

# Artificial Versus Authentic Leadership

Tuesday, April 08, 2014 - by *Matthew J. Painter*

**Assess whether your leadership style is tainting your effectiveness.**

Don't be fooled by your title. Leadership, although not necessarily complicated, isn't exactly simple either. There are some telltale signs that you or your supervisor is an artificial leader. So what exactly is artificial leadership?

It is a state of delusion that occurs when a person believes that he is a good leader when in fact he is not. Some key traits of artificial leaders are rooted in an inflated sense of expertise and egoism. It's easy to be victimized by our own knowledge and experience when we let it alienate our colleagues, with the business suffering as a result. There's only one thing worse than working for or with an artificial leader—being one yourself.

## **Warning signs**

Are you the manager disguised as a leader? Have you become delusional about your level of genuine, positive leadership? Here's a self-check list to help you maintain a sense of authentic, rather than artificial, leadership.

**Humility.** Artificial leaders believe they have the right answer, even when they don't verbalize it. Artificial leaders rarely apologize and when they do, it is orchestrated in a way to draw attention to them for being humble. Similarly, artificial leaders may broadcast their weaknesses as an attempt at being authentic.

Authentic leaders, on the other hand, realize they don't have all the answers, always apologize when it's appropriate, and don't need to be seen and heard.

**Respect.** Artificial leaders tend to show respect only when it's convenient to, or do so for show. Only artificial leaders will take cheap shots in meetings by pointing fingers, rolling eyes, or making condescending remarks to a person or to the group. Discrediting and interrupting others during a presentation or a meeting to prove a point is another sign of artificial leadership.

Authentic leaders consistently respect others. This means giving credit to others, correcting someone in private when warranted, and waiting until someone is finished speaking to summarize or shed light on a matter.

**Partnership.** Artificial leaders don't want to partner with others because they like to believe they have all the answers and don't want to waste their time. This delusion manifests itself when the artificial leader fails to pay the proper respect to others, and thus neglects the real experts or project owners. This stifles productivity and jeopardizes outcomes. If the artificial leader is more powerful, this becomes a misuse of her power, and certainly alienates existing and potential future working relationships.

Authentic leaders welcome dialogue. Even if an authentic leader believes he is more knowledgeable or experienced, he can at least conduct a dialogue about the situation to

reach common ground. That way, all voices are heard and the potential to reach an agreement is greater. At the same time, this opens the door for ongoing communication and partnerships. This type of partnership engages, rather than alienates, staff.

### **Objective reality**

If a lack of consistency exists in these areas, it means that you're not completely authentic. You might be on the road toward authentic leadership, but you haven't yet arrived. Colleagues in the organization can smell inconsistency, and this leads to an artificial leader being viewed as two-faced and manipulative. Would you want to work for or with this kind of leader? Do you want to be this kind of leader? Authentic leaders are consistent in being humble, showing respect, and wanting to partner because it's who they are.

Artificial leaders create artificial followers. This means that the employees who you think are following you due to your perceived leadership skills are really following out of compliance, moral obligation, organizational allegiance, fear, or a combination thereof. Inwardly the follower is resentful. He doesn't want to engage in meaningful partnership with the artificial leader and often avoids it. Earlier in my career I once avoided my boss so much that if I heard him coming, I would go in the other direction.

Consistent authentic leadership fosters a trusting relationship with colleagues, which is necessary for authentic followership. For example, this type of leadership creates genuine followership where one's legitimate power—her title—becomes secondary to her followers' genuine desires to follow.

If you're faced with dealing with an artificial leader, consider using this list as a 360-improvement tool for your own development. Asking for the artificial leader's feedback on your own development could be a springboard to a wider use of a genuine leadership assessment. It may spark interest in the leader using the tool. The problem with this approach is that the artificial leader is less likely to feel he needs to be evaluated because he feels he has already arrived. You may have to be a bit bold to gain some traction. Remember, however, that you can't change others; you can only change yourself.

Although it may be easier to identify artificial and authentic leadership in others, it is as important to discover the positive traits of humility, respect, and partnership in oneself. A genuine assessment is a crucial step in any leader's development. Few leaders reach their highest potential, in part because they don't maintain an objective reality by leveraging the brutal honesty of those around them.

Consider using this checklist as a 360 tool for yourself. Ask folks around you at all levels to gauge you on each of the criteria. In the September 2013 *T+D* article "'Less Is More' Leadership Development," authors Karen Voloshin and Julie Winkle Giulioni point out that a leader's staff have the best vantage point in providing feedback. Employee feedback will be critical, so be careful to not only enlist their input, but to do so in a way that is safe for them to be honest. During this process, consider additional criteria that might characterize an authentic leader.

Leaders can taint their entire effectiveness as a result of any one trait of artificial leadership. What this means is that no matter how well-intentioned and smart a leader is, if she fails on any of these items, her efficacy will be curtailed.