

Authentic Leadership and Building Trust

DOM MELI

We want leaders who are authentic, leaders of character. Leaders may have superior intellect and a strategic mind, they may be great orators and profoundly experienced but if their constituents do not believe that their behaviour is aligned to their values then they will not be trusted and, they will not be followed. As a leader, what you stand for must be clear and obvious and must be seen to be driving your actions. This defines character. Character is values aligned behaviour, behaviour motivated by your beliefs. When this occurs you can build trust. But if people don't think that your behaviour is aligned to your values then you will not be regarded as having character and will not be able to build trust. In terms of building trust it is not as important that people agree with your values but they must trust that your behaviour is driven by your values.

We see this time and time again in politics and government, where the more successful leader, the one able to get things done, the one with a record of achievement, is not necessarily the one who shares values with us but the one who we regard as more authentic and in turn more trustworthy. This is the leader that people (staff, public service, constituents) are prepared to follow. This is because people who act authentically behave more consistently and transparently. These leaders are often said to behave with integrity. It is when leaders do not behave consistently, when they chop and change direction and policy that we begin to question and doubt their integrity – we don't trust them. We need look no further than the former Australian Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, who came to power with record popularity and approval but was dumped inside of his first, three-year term.

Character is showing your authentic self, modeling your values, that is, values congruent behaviour. It requires a high degree of mindfulness, presence and self-awareness. Leaders must know themselves and have the courage and resilience to be true to their inner compass, to respond appropriately to ambiguous and challenging situations; not reacting in accordance with popular opinion. Without authenticity, leaders will not be seen as having character; they will find it harder to build trust, generate commitment and hard work and cultivate sustained levels of performance from those around them.



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