



The Quest for Authenticity

After writing books on business and leadership for years, Manfred Kets de Vries has turned his attention to four of the main tenets of life, which have a profound impact on each of us.

The INSEAD professor's latest book, 'Sex, Money, Happiness, and Death,' outlines his personal meditations or thoughts on each of the four.

But at the heart of the book - beyond the attention-grabbing title - is the more subtle sub-heading: The quest for authenticity.

"I think what's coming back again and again is the search for authenticity," says Kets de Vries, the Raoul de Vitry d'Avaucourt-chaired Professor of Leadership Development and Clinical Professor of Leadership at INSEAD. "And we've had some very bad examples of leadership lately."

He says that at the World Economic Forum's annual summit in Davos in Switzerland earlier this year "the repetitive theme was authenticity: how to be an authentic leader, not to be presenting something else in front."

"And I think those issues are really ... extremely important to every executive."

"Now maybe I should have been more subtle and not used the word sex or death or things like that. But we keep on pushing (these) away," Kets de Vries says.

In his book, Kets de Vries writes: "I realise the

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importance of authenticity in my own life and the lives of others. I have seen how easy it is for someone to follow a route to self-deception and illusion. Fooling ourselves, as many of us learn the hard way, isn't sustainable in the long run."
Manfred Kets de Vries - INSEAD Knowledge

He continues: "To me, being authentic implies being honest, truthful with myself and others, living ... with my own values and principles, and experiencing a sense of meaning in what I'm doing. Authenticity implies a willingness to accept what I am and not attempt to pass for something or someone else. Authenticity means not only trusting my strengths but also my weaknesses and being patient with my imperfections. It has to do with having the courage to say how things are, to say no, to face the truth, and to do the right thing because it is right."

The INSEAD professor has been running a programme for senior executives for nearly 20 years. Many of those taking part in the year-long 'Challenge of Leadership' programme are CEOs. Kets de Vries says the executives normally start by talking about their businesses but end up talking in the last module about their grandmothers. "So you see the progression," he says.

"After talking about their problems with their boss, their chairman or after a merger and things like that,

they slowly start to talk about other things which are really meaningful for them. They realise they don't want to be the richest person in the graveyard. So meaning becomes important and they start to think also about what to leave behind."

"In searching for the meaning of life," he writes, "we're really aiming to feel alive. We want our experiences, the external reality, to resonate with our internal reality. Only when our personal activities are consistent with our values, commitments, and other important elements of our concept of ourselves will meaning be attained."

Sexual desire is also an important part of our lives, especially in terms of relationships and finding a partner.

"We don't talk about sex really, but it's there," he says. "Sex is a very important driver of our existence: how do we choose a partner? What is the nature of our relationship? Why do we get divorced? These are things they also struggle with. You know, some have been divorced and will make the same mistakes ... All those kinds of things are interwoven."

"So in the end, I wanted to write a book which really talks about some of the main issues people deal with."

The section on money, he says, was the easiest to write. In it, he considers the symbolic meaning of money and why people fantasise about it.

"A senior executive in the programme, who was the highest paid person in his company, once ran after me in the hallway. He must have made tens of millions. He said: 'Manfred, how much is enough?' and I felt that was so bizarre."

Happiness is related to success, as is usefulness. But, again at the core of the issue, are our relationships.

"Happiness is to do with the quality of your relationships - who do you want to be with, what is the quality of your relationship with your parents, with your spouse and specifically with your children. And many executives have ignored that."

He says some of the executives on his leadership programmes, who are in their forties and fifties, are struggling not just with questions about the choice of their partners, divorce or separation. "They struggle with what's the meaning of their life," he says. "It becomes very empty - they're on automatic pilot: 'How can I renew myself? How can I rejuvenate myself? How can I let go?'"

He told INSEAD Knowledge he wants the executives to ask themselves questions rather than for him to

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provide all the answers. "I want people to have a life. I want them to think about their life and make certain decisions before it's too late."

"This is a book which asks questions: questions about what am I running for, what am I running to? What do I expect out of life? What makes for a good relationship? That's what I'm interested in. Those are the questions which I raise and (which) start people thinking. And it creates tipping points for the people in my programmes."

It's in these programmes that Kets de Vries says he aims to have 'oomph'. "Too many times you have seminars and people come out and they have a temporary, glorious feeling but then they go on automatic pilot. I want them to do something with their life and make changes for the better."

In addition to considering money and relationships, Kets de Vries says we start thinking about our own mortality once we reach the age of 35. Death, he says, is "going to happen with 100-per cent probability". Imagine then yourself "somewhere in the sky, looking down at your own funeral, and consider what you want people to say about you."

"I think one lesson you learn from this book is *carpe diem* ('seize the day'). Ask yourself every day: 'Was it worth it? What have I done today which was meaningful?' And I think too many people say: 'I'm going to do it next week, next year.' You need to start to see if what you've done today, really was worthwhile."

'Sex, Money, Happiness, and Death: The Quest for Authenticity' is published by Palgrave Macmillan.

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