
How Genuinely Authentic Are You?



By [Steve Knight](#) , INSEAD Adjunct Professor of Business Communication

Whether you are in conversation with presidents or shopkeepers, the Chairman or those that keep the factory floor running, the same you should show up in all situations.

This article follows on from and goes hand in hand with my [last article](#).

Genuine authenticity is not restricted only to when you are in conversation with your boss or your clients, or aiming to secure that lucrative contract, or being interviewed for your dream job, or when you are presenting at a conference, or participating in a meeting. It is not a tap on, tap off quality.

If you are 100% genuinely authentic and you truly know who you are, the context of where you are and who you are talking to should not change the core of who you are and what you stand for. It should not therefore fundamentally change the way you communicate. You will certainly adopt different tactics in your style of communication, i.e. formal or informal and indeed what you might choose to wear, but it should not change the essence of who you are.

For me, a shining example of someone who is genuinely authentic is First Lady, Michelle Obama. It does not matter if she is in the company of world leaders and monarchs, or delivering a keynote speech, or taking part in sporting activities with children, or supporting charities, or inspiring school children around the world by delivering a speech in their school, or engaging with senior citizens; the same Michelle Obama shows up consistently all the time.

She certainly does adopt tactics in terms of how formal or informally she communicates, what she chooses to wear for those different types of interactions, but the very core of Michelle Obama and what she stands for remain watertight.



People who don't truly know themselves tend to put on a "mask". In ancient Greece, actors (hypokrités) would wear actual masks to portray emotions. As we know the modern definition of the word hypocrite is...

A person who pretends to have virtues, moral or religious beliefs, principles, etc, that he or she does not actually possess, especially a person whose actions belie stated beliefs. A person who feigns some desirable or publicly approved attitude, especially one whose private life, opinions, or statements belie his or her public statements.



The negative impact of "donning a mask" is that others can sense that something is not quite right, they get a gut feeling of uncertainty as to whether the person in front of them is being genuine and authentic. When people feel uncertain about you they will most likely start to distrust you. If they distrust you, how likely are they to respect you as a person, as a leader? How likely will it be for you to truly inspire people if they have an instinctual uneasy gut feeling about you?

So, being genuinely authentic all the time, no matter what the context, is a real test of how well you know your Self, how comfortable you are with your Self, how confident you are about your Self and your abilities. Refer back to the [last article](#).

So here is where your test starts...

To me it is an abhorrent thought that we can be, or aim to be, perfectly powerful, measured, thoughtful and considerate when we communicate to

those we perceive to be valuable to our wellbeing and career progression, i.e. our CEO, or immediate boss, but we might fill up at a petrol/gas station and when it comes to pay, whilst talking on our mobile/cellphone, we stick our credit card in the reader and tap in our PIN, or swish a payWave transaction and then simply walk out of the kiosk, without a single word or any eye contact with the member of staff that has just served us.

If you have ever behaved in this way, or can think of similar circumstances you have been responsible for, ask yourself how might you have contributed to the way that member of staff felt when they received zero eye contact, zero words, zero thought, zero thanks, zero care?

If you have been guilty of such an inconsistency, today's the day you make the change. I personally invite you to make the change.

Whether you are in conversation with Presidents or shopkeepers, Oscar winning actors or train conductors, millionaires or people who are struggling to make a living, the Chairman, or those that keep the factory floor running, the same you should show up in all situations. Everyone is worth it.

A true leader recognises everyone. A true leader expresses themselves with genuine authenticity all of the time. Grace is not something one can just switch on or off when one feels like it. As a leader, grace has to be at the forefront of everything you do 100% of the time.

So, start to retrain your brain and become consciously aware and respectful of all people you come into contact with.

Here is your test...

- Notice people, i.e. in the street, on the train, in a supermarket, in your office complex
- Make eye contact
- Give a kind and thoughtful smile
- Say hello where appropriate
- In shops and gas/petrol stations ask staff at the checkout how they are
- Take a genuine interest in your colleagues, ask questions about them and deeply listen to their answers without interrupting to add in your take on what they are saying or "Oh that happened to me once, blah, blah, blah." When we do that, we hijack their space and we have not

honoured them. More often we do this out of nerves or wanting to fit in, or we are simply unaware that we are doing it, but the other person will feel, depending on their character, either disrespected, irritated, angry, insignificant or not valued. You may already be aware of how you feel when people do that to you.

- With people who have a higher status than you at work or in life, start to notice if you have a “I am less than them” feeling. This is when you might “don your less than mask” without realising it. The person you are talking to will no doubt sense it. They will help you if they are a genuine leader, if they are not they could take advantage of you, or you could end up getting bypassed for that promotion you so want. Start to feel comfortable in your own skin. Be your genuine authentic self. For more tips on that, refer back to the last article.
- Keep a journal with dates and times of your situations, observations, behaviours (yours and others), feelings, emotions, actions (yours and others). Identify traits, habits and patterns.

Set your path and plot your course to becoming genuinely authentic all the time, to all people. Enjoy and celebrate what comes back your way when you become a shining beacon of genuine and authentic kindness, grace, thoughtfulness and true leadership.

For the record, the journey of self discovery and genuine authenticity thankfully never ends. Everyday there is something new to learn, to uncover and to discover. Enjoy the ride.

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Keep us posted with your initial thoughts and observations and then, importantly, your learning journey by commenting below.

Photo of masks: Shutterstock, Elnur

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