
When Authenticity Doesn't Translate



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Attempts to cultivate authenticity can backfire if you are seen to project the wrong values.

Authenticity has become a prized commodity, in and out of the office. At first glance, this makes perfect sense: People who are true to their own moral compass, for whom “what you see is what you get”, are inherently more predictable and trustworthy than those who act based on which way the wind is blowing.

However, some people’s authenticity is apparently valued higher than others’. Take U.S. presidential candidate Hillary Clinton, who once said of her campaign, “I couldn’t do it if I didn’t passionately believe it was the right thing to do.” A textbook statement of authenticity—yet pundits have pointed to an “authenticity gap” between Mrs. Clinton and her rival for the Democratic Party nomination, Sen. Bernie Sanders.

There appears to be more to being considered authentic—and reaping the social benefits thereof—than merely representing one’s true self to others.

And if there is a secret ingredient that explains the authenticity gap, then those lacking it may actually pay a price for being true to themselves, as doing so may signal a genuine social incapacity.

My [recent working paper](#) (co-written by Laura Guillén of ESMT and Hannes Leroy of Erasmus University) finds that authenticity is recognised and rewarded when it aligns itself with the common good, as with Sen. Sanders's fiery speeches on inequality and racism. In the public mind, authenticity is so intertwined with "prosocial" moral values that they have almost blended together. If authenticity is the enemy of mendacity, and mendacity is a great social ill, then authenticity must be socially beneficial. Anything that is not perceived as such is inauthentic, or so goes the chain of associations. This could put the circumspect Mrs. Clinton at a disadvantage in the authenticity wars.

Felt vs. perceived authenticity

For our study, we had 257 computer engineers at a multinational software development company complete an online survey about how authentic they felt at work. We also polled their colleagues and collaborators (810 in total) on whether they felt the engineers were authentic, cared for others, and were generally likeable.

One year later, we asked the engineers' direct supervisors to evaluate their job performance, so we could explore possible career implications of the above factors.

Analysing the survey responses from the engineers and their contacts, we found no correlation between felt authenticity (how authentic the engineers felt they were) and perceived authenticity (whether they came across to others as authentic). Rather, the perception of authenticity was strongly linked to how "prosocially oriented" the engineers were seen to be—i.e., how much caring for and consideration of others they displayed, according to their colleagues. Those with high levels of felt authenticity but who ranked low for prosocial orientation actually were judged to be less authentic, not more, by their colleagues. In fact, felt authenticity didn't make much difference even when prosocial orientation was high, implying that, contrary to prevailing opinion, "being true to yourself" has little to do with being perceived as authentic.

As you might expect, perceived authenticity was also highly correlated with how well-liked the engineers were among their colleagues. And this, in turn, had a positive and significant effect on job performance evaluations.

In sum, we argue that the career benefits of authenticity accrue to people whose behaviour evinces the *right* values—meaning prosocial ones—no matter whether that behaviour is actually authentic.

The hierarchy of values

Our findings indicate the dominant place that selflessness occupies in the hierarchy of human values. It is as if paying homage to prosocial values helps confirm one's right to belong to the human family. Elevating personal interests above the social group, e.g. by not appearing to care enough for others' welfare, makes one appear less human and therefore less authentic.

The universality of self-transcendent values is further reflected in the gender-neutrality of our findings. Despite the fact that women encounter **greater social pressure** to display such values as **kindness, compassion, and self-sacrifice**, the emphasis on prosocial orientation held true for both genders.

Also, please note that our test group was composed of engineers, a cohort not generally known for their people skills. Had we administered the same study to a group of, say, salespeople or customer-facing staff, the social effects we observed may have been even stronger.

Overall, our research would seem to add to a **burgeoning body of evidence** opposing the cult of authenticity. For example, **one oft-cited study** found that so-called “social chameleons” were better able to position themselves for success within their social environment than highly authentic people. But violating social norms isn't the only costly error that authenticity can inspire in the workplace. There is also a socially constructed ideal self that one deviates from at one's peril.

For Hillary Clinton no less than managers, signalling prosocial concern might be an effective impression management strategy to increase the chances to be perceived as authentic, liked, and gain professionally as a result.

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