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# The Advantages of Being (Seen as) Authentic



By Natalia Karelaia , INSEAD Associate Professor of Decision Sciences

**Feeling authentic, acting authentically and coming across as authentic are very different things, but are equally important.**

The concept of authenticity has attracted a lot of attention, and the pressure is on for organisations to allow individuals to be more authentic at work. What exactly does it mean to be authentic and how do we move towards it?

**Authenticity: When one's self-expression is in alignment with one's internal sense of self**

During our formative years, we learn to create different, compartmentalised versions of ourselves to fit into different situations. This shifting of our personas is perhaps most obvious in our educational or work environments. To be authentic, on the other hand, is to integrate these different versions of ourselves and to just act like ourselves, in accord with our core values, beliefs and motivations, regardless of the situation.

Acting authentically promotes personal well-being and overall fulfilment, and leads to stronger interpersonal relationships. In the workplace, authenticity

improves employee engagement, which leads to an increase in motivation and job satisfaction. However, 'just be yourself' still leaves us with many unanswered questions, specifically in regards to authenticity at work. For instance, what triggers authenticity in an organisational context? While it takes integrity and a healthy self-esteem to feel comfortable enough to act authentically, is there a way that organisations can promote authenticity at work? When specifically, and why, is authenticity an asset in the workplace? Why are some people perceived as authentic, and does perceived authenticity matter?

To address these questions, *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* featured **a special section, which I co-edited**, consisting of four diverse articles, each backed up by experiments and field studies, to uncover triggers and consequences of authenticity in the work context.

### **To be or not to be your authentic self?**

Does behaving authentically, as opposed to catering to others' expectations and interests, during interpersonal first encounters such as job interviews or entrepreneurial pitches pay off in terms of performance? When wanting to make a good first impression, we focus heavily on what we believe others want or need us to be and try to anticipate and fulfil these expectations by self-correcting and adapting the impression we intend to put across. The authors of this article conclude that catering to others' expectations and interests to create a good impression is ineffective compared to acting authentically as it takes up mental energy, increases anxiety and ultimately jeopardises our performance.

People often worry that their real selves are inadequate or unacceptable and, consciously or subconsciously, imitate those around them to fit in. In the context of work, many people rely heavily on their work personas to fit into the established culture of their organisations. However, going against our true selves by forcing ourselves to conform is exhausting and hinders our ability to perform well and fulfil our potential. In contrast, acting authentically frees up mental energy so that we can focus on our strengths.

### **Juggling work and home selves: Low identity integration feels less authentic and increases unethicity**

This article argues that individuals feel more authentic when their multiple identities overlap so that their real selves and their work personas are similar

or compatible enough that they form a highly integrated persona. Ultimately, low identity integration may result in unethical behaviour such as interpersonal and organisational deviance.

The larger the gap between our “work persona” and our “home persona”, the more alienated we feel from what we personally value as worthwhile and important. This self-alienation increases the pressure and anxiety we feel to perform and makes it difficult to make decisions that align with our values. Consequently, we are more likely to engage in unethical or ego-inflating behaviour, such as undermining our colleagues to cover up our own weaknesses, or manipulating circumstances to get what we want.

### **Humility breeds authenticity: How authentic leader humility shapes follower vulnerability and felt authenticity**

This article points to the crucial role that social context plays in determining whether individuals feel authentic and suggest that authenticity could be socially contagious. In particular, the authors report evidence that employees feel more authentic at work when they perceive their leaders to be authentically humble.

When leaders authentically display a willingness to view themselves accurately, to admit mistakes and to be open-minded enough to appreciate and learn from others, they engender trust. They also inspire employees to feel safe enough to connect to those around them and act authentically. In short, the perception of authenticity in a leader who displays humility inspires loyalty and engagement and triggers a sense of authenticity in others.

### **Do status incentives undermine morality-based status attainment?**

When do others see us as authentic and does it matter? This article reports evidence that the perception of authenticity confers higher status. In other words, when we strive to behave authentically, and encourage the perception of our authentic selves in others, we are more likely to advance our social standing at work. The key is to understand what it takes to *be seen* as authentic. In this vein, this research shows that we tend to perceive individuals as more authentic when we believe that their altruistic or generous deeds are not motivated by status attainment, such as attention seeking or self-promotion. This finding resonates with the idea that people believe that the authentic self is morally good.

Essentially, as social creatures, we innately know, even if only on a subconscious level, when someone is being genuine with us or trying to manipulate us. Authenticity engenders respect and confidence and we are more likely to confer status to individuals we can trust.

### **Authenticity at work: A people-led initiative**

In an ideal authentic organisation, individuals respect and trust each other enough to reveal their real selves without repressing what makes them unique in order to fit in. Without the pressure to appear flawless and perfect, they feel safe admitting and addressing their weaknesses or mistakes. They feel encouraged to contribute their opinions without fear of judgement or censorship and are more confident with the work that they produce.

In reality, there is no simple formula for creating an authentic organisation as being authentic takes courage and confidence and is an inside job for every individual. In addition, so many questions remain, such as how we can encourage authenticity in the workplace while simultaneously promoting our company's unique identity, or how to find and maintain the balance between authenticity and professionalism. However, the articles featured here, while diverse in their approaches to furthering our understanding of authenticity, all emphasise the benefits for organisations to encourage authenticity at work, and demonstrate how inauthentic behaviour can cost both employees and the organisations they work for. Authenticity is clearly an aspiration worth working towards.

***Natalia Karelaia** is an Associate Professor of Decision Sciences at INSEAD.*

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## About the author(s)

**Natalia Karelaia** is an Associate Professor of Decision Sciences at INSEAD.