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# How to Author Authenticity



By Patricia Gibin , Partner, Consulting and Coaching for Change (INSEAD EMCCC '15)

## **How someone reflects upon and describes their journey can determine how much they stand out.**

Throughout my career in human relations, I interviewed many executives who had real success stories to share. Yet, time and again, the way they told the story of their careers, their success didn't shine through. Repeatedly, they seemed to just recite their résumés. I wanted to understand why professionals are unable to express their success and what lies behind career narratives.

As part of my EMCCC thesis, I selected executives in Brazil, men and women of different nationalities, to help me understand how people formulate their career narratives. Beyond the content of each interview, in an attempt to identify what made certain narratives stand out, I began to pay attention to the way each person connected the facts of their lives.

I noticed that some people touched me in a different way. These interviews would end with me thinking, "Wow, what a story!" It was then that I discovered the first difference: The person who narrates his or her career with emotion, including its ups and downs as if it were the life of any ordinary person, tells a memorable story. Months or years later, I still

remembered pieces of these stories, a scene described or some spoken phrase evoking their protagonists. I “archived” these stories in my mind and wondered if there was a way I might be able to help their authors fulfil their desires, or even better, accomplish their goals. Well-told stories connect and inspire.

A career narrative also depends on how much people understand and reveal about themselves as they tell their stories, taking off some of the “masks” they wear to play their social roles. This conclusion led me to the concept of authenticity.

Often associated with the process of discovering one’s inner truth, authenticity has deep and strong roots in existential philosophy and psychology. It is directly linked to the search and expression of thoughts, feelings, values and motivations, and the ability to make life choices accordingly. But most of these (thoughts, feelings, values and motivations) rest below the waterline of personality, like the submerged part of an iceberg.

### **Essentials for an authentic career narrative**

Analysing narratives through the lens of authenticity, I found that those who reflected on the “why” of their choices, revealing motivation in their stories, were perceived as more authentic. I dubbed this process of reflection on the meaning of personal career experiences and choices, reflective thinking. It became the first of the three elements of an authentic career narrative. The concepts of emotional presence, being fully present in the moment, and authoring, taking the author’s role, emerged from the course of my thesis research and completed the tripod of authenticity.

### **Reflective thinking**

Reflective thinking is an analysis that draws the meaning behind one’s career experiences and choices, aiming for continuous personal development. Authenticity requires reflection to gain self-awareness. For a career narrative to be authentic, storytellers need not only to engage in self-reflection, but also to express knowledge by sharing their values, beliefs and motivations. The process of reflection, therefore, demands discipline in both cognitive and emotional aspects. It involves not jumping to conclusions and exploring meaning through observing one’s thoughts, feelings and behaviours related to career experiences, decisions and choices.

## **Emotional presence**

As an outward expression of authenticity, emotional presence is the inner state of being completely in the moment. It allows the expression of thoughts and feelings with words, face, body and voice all congruently employed to truly connect with others. When a narrator employs emotions in the process of storytelling, the listener empathises with and will better remember the teller.

## **Authoring**

Authoring, also vital to authenticity in career narratives, is a process that concerns how individuals engage in the construction of their work stories, forge their career identities and tell the tale with a sense of ownership.

It is important to emphasise that the construction part is the continuous effort involved in telling, editing and retelling one's career narrative. Every situation that allows a person to talk about their career pushes that teller into conscious or unconscious meaning-making analysis of past and present experiences that serves as a bridge towards future career possibilities.

## **Authenticity is for the brave**

Using these three elements, what can you do to create an authentic career narrative?

Develop a regular practice for reflection and introspection. As you continuously expand your awareness of your behaviours, thoughts and feelings, you will understand, non-judgementally, your career journey and learn from the stories within. Such a practice can increase empathy and show you how to be compassionate to yourself and consequently to others, while fostering deeper-level connections. Meditation, **mindfulness**, **metacognition** or even journaling can all to a different degree contribute to extend your awareness.

Growing a self-authoring mind – the internal capacity to define one's beliefs, identity and social relations – allows individuals to express with confidence their intrinsic values when telling their career narratives and thus be perceived as being more authentic. In contrast, individuals who can't differentiate the extrinsic and intrinsic forces driving their careers can cloud who they are.

Finally, embrace vulnerability thoughtfully. Self-disclosure can range in breadth and depth. It may include thoughts, feelings, aspirations, goals, failures, successes, fears and dreams, as well as your likes, dislikes and favourites. As it is common to feel vulnerable after a self-disclosure, the decision to risk vulnerability is a complicated one. Having the confidence to allow for the vulnerability of self-disclosure is a powerful way to show up and choose authenticity.

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