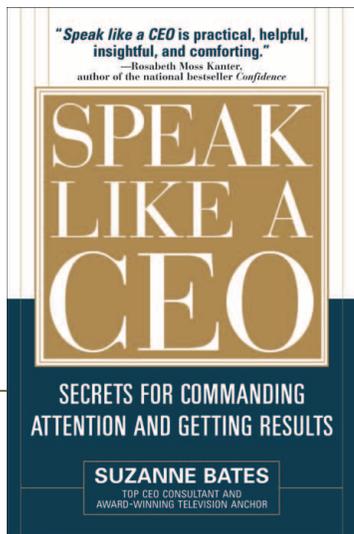


Authentic Leadership:

Eight Strategies to Let the Real You Shine Through

Excerpt from *Speak Like a CEO: Secrets for Commanding Attention and Getting Results*, by Suzanne Bates



Ei World





Jack Welch shook up the culture of GE and became one of the most admired CEOs throughout the world, and a large part of his success was the fact that people regarded him as authentic. Welch grew up as the son of an Irish-American railroad conductor, and he was known to be brutally honest and outspoken. In his autobiography, *Jack, Straight From the Gut*, Welch indicated that when he got promoted, he considered conforming to corporate norms. As a newly minted vice chairman, he showed up at one of his first board meetings wearing a perfectly pressed blue suit, along with a starched white shirt and crisp red tie. A long-time colleague approached Welch after the meeting, touched the perfectly tailored suit, and said, “Jack, this isn’t you. You looked a lot better when you were just being yourself.”

What is Authentic?

“The secret of success is sincerity. Once you can fake that, you’ve got it made.”
Jean Giraudoux (1882 - 1944) French Diplomat, Dramatist, & Novelist

Jean Giraudoux had a pretty cynical view. As Abraham Lincoln said, “You may fool all the people some of the time, you can even fool some of the people all of the time, but you can’t fool all of the people all of the time.” Who really wants to fake it? You never get away with it, anyway. It’s too much work.

Look up authentic in *Webster’s* and you’ll find something like “genuine, or known to be true.” When you authenticate something, such as a painting or an antique, you determine there is evidence of origin and value. Leaders who are authentic project something genuine about themselves. They aren’t afraid to let people see who they really are.



The Authenticity Gap

Leaders who can't be themselves in front of an audience have an authenticity gap. An authenticity gap is a real problem for a leader. If you don't appear or sound genuine, people pick up on it and tend not to trust you or listen to what you have to say.

The authenticity gap creates a disconnect between a leader and the audience. The audience doesn't buy it, so the leader has a hard time building real relationships. People don't like or trust people who don't seem genuine.

How do you close the gap? If you're from Texas, you talk like a Texan. If you're a bank CEO, you wear a conservative suit. If you're a family person, you put photos of the kids on your desk. There is no formula; you just have to let a little of you shine through.

CEOs come in all backgrounds and personas; the authenticity is to allow people to "see" that background and persona. And you have to be consistent. You have to let them "see" the same thing all the time. You shouldn't be a chameleon or adapt your persona to an audience; you only need to adapt your message to the interests of the audience.

The best advice in absolutely any situation is to be you. If you have a hearty laugh, then laugh. If you love loafers, wear them. If you would rather play squash than golf, then don't play golf. Being you always works. Being somebody else never does. To be authentic, you have to bring yourself to the role of CEO.

It also helps to give everything your personal touch. Your office, your clothing, the way you entertain or do an event should all be yours. If you're buying a desk, make it your taste. If you like barbeque, serve that when you entertain at home. Authenticity is about honoring your uniqueness and sharing it with others.

“Our character is what we do when we think no one is looking.”
-H. Jackson Brown, Jr., Author, *Life’s Little Instruction Book*

One CEO says, “What works for me is to have my stuff around the office – family pictures, and model cars on top of the filing cabinets because people know I like NASCAR...If people know something about you, they feel you are genuine, and it makes everything you do more believable.”

What People Really Think

Have you ever noticed that people don’t always say what they really think? I was riding up on an elevator to a fancy downtown lunch with a well-dressed professional man who appeared to be in his sixties. A young woman in extremely tight black pants, three-inch heels, and a low-cut red satin blouse stepped on at a middle floor. He smiled in her direction. “That’s quite a stunning outfit,” he said. She gave him a big smile back. But when she exited at the next floor, and the elevator door closed, he turned to me and looked stricken. “I didn’t really mean that,” he said. “She looked like a tramp. How could a woman dress like that in a professional office building?”

People rarely tell you what they really think, unless you insist. When you’re the boss and you’ve just given a presentation, some will say, “Great job,” and then they’ll slice and dice the speech when you’re out of sight. People won’t risk candor if there is nothing in it for them. So, if you want to know, you have to ask and show that you really want to know.

There are certain behaviors and qualities associated with authenticity. Among those are the ability to share information about yourself, including challenges you have faced, your roots, your interests, and your beliefs and values. Candor



and consistency are also important qualities.

Eight Strategies for Letting the Real You Shine Through as a Leader:

1) Share Your Beliefs

Audiences know when you are saying what you really believe, and when you believe what you're saying. All the acting in the world won't convince people if you are not speaking your truth.

What do you really believe in or feel passionate about? It doesn't hurt, once a year, to take time to write down the things that really matter to you. Your beliefs are your core, and when you allow others to see those inner beliefs, you win friends and build trust. Sharing your beliefs is one of the most authentic things you can do.

2) Talk About Your Values

Sharing your values is a surefire way to build bridges. People prefer a leader with the courage to talk about convictions over one who says what everyone wants to hear. This is true in politics and business. It's really pretty simple. Express your values, and act on your values, and people will respect you and believe that you are genuine.

3) Be Candid

Candor is essential to authentic leadership. You have to speak your mind. You have to convey your opinion without pretty language and qualifiers. Authenticity is about truth. Truth requires candor. Leaders know when and how to use candor, and they don't avoid it.



4) Reveal Professional Challenges

People want to know what you're all about. You need to tell people about your mistakes and talk about all the successes that came about from them. Share your "lessons learned" with audiences.

5) Be Consistent

Inconsistency is the Achilles' heel of political leaders, and business leaders can learn from them. When people see something significantly "different" about you, they tend to question all that they believe they know. You have to be consistent. Consistency is reassuring. The world is too unpredictable. Leaders should not be.

6) Share

What about you is appropriate to share with others when you are a CEO? Certainly you don't want to make people uncomfortable. Beyond that, you can share quite a bit. That means you don't always have to be a CEO. You need to be a person. You need to share a little bit about you, beyond who you are on the job.

Corporate life can be consuming. Intense demands give us less time for personal pursuits. It's important to get in touch with yourself. This isn't about being authentic. It's about having a healthy personal life. Family and friends, interests, travel, entertainment, hobbies, and sports are all important. When you're living a life you are not only a better person but also a person whom others relate and someone they want to know.

CEOs who make time for friends and family, leisure activities, vacations, sports, reading, entertainment, and fun are able to connect with others. One CEO ran for selectman in his town and won. He didn't have time, but he did it anyway.



Those who know him well say he did it because he genuinely believes in family, community, and living a well-rounded life. This aspect made his admirers appreciate him even more.

Living a life is not a three-month project. It's a journey. Make time to bring old or new people and interests back into your life. Stay in touch with friends. Meet new people. Go to new places. Get off the treadmill and relax. Make a list of things you would like to do before you die, and start doing them. And share what you're doing with others.

7) Honor Your Roots

Another way to connect authentically with others is to honor your roots – to be the person you have always been. You are a product of your hometown, family, friends, schools, previous jobs, and places you've lived. If you leave it all behind, you lose touch with an integral part of you. That's why it helps to reconnect from time to time with the people and places you've known.

8) Have Fun

One of the best CEO speakers I've ever heard is Richard Branson of Virgin Management Ltd. His larger-than-life persona fills a room, and audiences love stories he tells about his business and life adventures. From racing hot air balloons to building his airline and other companies, Branson enjoys life, and it's one of the reasons for his success. People are attracted to the fun. Branson makes speaking, like everything else, fun. You can tell he enjoys recounting stories and talking to people.

Having fun is one of the best means to connect in a real way. You don't have to race hot air balloons to have some fun and share it with others. Having fun also attracts fun people into your life—employees, colleagues, mentors, investors, and

everyone else important to you in business. Believe it or not, you're not just put on this earth to work! You are here to discover yourself and connect with others, and you can do both by having more fun.

Remember, leaders are authentic when they project genuine, bona fide qualities that tune other people in to what they're really like. You're creating valuable connections by honoring your uniqueness and sharing it with others. So don't be afraid to let a little of you shine through—you will win trust and respect from colleagues, clients, audiences, and employees with your authenticity.



Suzanne Bates is an executive coach, author, Certified Speaking Professional (CSP), former award-winning television news anchor, and CEO of Bates Communications, Inc.

Bates Communications helps executives and organizations tackle urgent challenges and drive real-world business results through powerful communication. The firm offers strategic communications consulting, executive coaching, workshops, and keynote speeches.

Suzanne is author of three bestselling business books published by McGraw Hill; *Speak Like a CEO*, *Motivate Like a CEO*, and *Discover Your CEO Brand*.

About Suzanne Bates