

Avoid the **Void**: Why and How to Amplify Your Authenticity

By Scott Weighart, Bates, Director of Learning and Development

Authenticity, one of the 15 facets in our Bates Executive Presence model, has six items that can be broken into three themes:

- Whether you're perceived to be sincere—not fake or phony
- Whether others experience you as transparent—inclined to share thoughts and feelings
- Whether you come across as someone who shares personal stories and life lessons

The vast majority of leaders who have taken the Bates Executive Presence Index (or Bates ExPI™) get high scores on that first theme. When leaders get lower ratings on the facet of Authenticity, it's almost always because they are seen as less transparent or less likely to share more of their personal experiences—or both.

When I ask leaders if they think it matters to have a lower score in Authenticity for these reasons, they usually sense that it does but can't always explain why. My recommendation is to put a three-word reminder up somewhere in their office: Avoid the void!

What does that mean? There can be any number of situations where leaders may not readily share their thoughts and feelings. Likewise, some leaders aren't in the habit of sharing many life lessons in the office. There are understandable reasons why leaders aren't always transparent or don't disclose much of their personal experiences, and I'll go into them shortly.

First, though, what's the impact on others if people don't hear much about your thoughts, emotions, or stories? It creates a *void* in the minds of others—a big blank. Human beings don't like voids; they create ambiguity, uncertainty, and anxiety. So what do we do when there's a void? We tend to fill it with our own assumptions. Unfortunately for all of us, these assumptions almost always turn negative.

Here's an example: Let's say that you email a cross-functional peer with a specific request. You hear nothing back for a week. Are you likely to say to yourself, "Wow, she must be busy doing something very important!" Probably not. More likely, you'll draw one of any number of more ominous conclusions. You might infer that the other party doesn't really care about you or your

function... or that she's too disorganized to stay on top of his emails... or that she doesn't have a clue on what the right answer might be. Any of these assumptions may be incredibly unfair or off target... but the perceptions still exist.

Here's another scenario: Jeff is a member of a leadership team that meets to talk about enterprise-wide challenges and opportunities. Jeff has developed a reputation for saying little during these meetings. As a result, his peers have started filling the void with their own interpretations of his silence. They may believe that Jeff is out of his depth when discussing enterprise-wide matters—he's purely a functional expert. They may think that he can't be bothered to prepare for these meetings or that he's distracted for whatever reason. They may even believe he really didn't want the promotion to his current role.

The void shows up in different ways and leads to all sorts of guesses about what's going on. Here are some actual comments from the ExPI assessments of leaders who received low ratings in the facet of Authenticity:

- “Seems like he is aloof and not approachable—hard to read.”
- “Low-key style causes people to underestimate his strengths and ability to get things done.”
- “Can seem disengaged... Not sure if it is clear in her head and she can't always articulate it or if she is not very clear on the subject matter”
- “Should look for opportunities to share more about personal experiences, not necessarily life-changing events, but smaller things related to both in and outside of the workplace... ____'s leadership ability will be enhanced by a more personal connection to team members.”
- “Because he is such a great thought leader, I often find myself hoping he would expand on his thoughts a bit more with the team.”

I have seen comments like these with dozens of leaders. Leaders with low Authenticity can leave people guessing as to what's really going on—and also wanting more. As you get more senior, people want not only your point of view but also more of what *informs* that point of view. That means sharing the “why behind the what” and the “intent behind the content.” It also can mean revealing a little more about who you really are as a person—the life lessons and personal experiences that give others insight into your values and beliefs.

What Gets in the Way of Authentic Leadership

When I conduct an ExPI insights conversation with senior leaders or high-potential leaders, we dig into the lowest-rated facets to understand what led to the more negative perceptions. Along the way, it becomes clear that there are any number of reasons why leaders find it hard to share more of themselves—thus creating that void. Here are some common reactions that leaders have when they get feedback that they need to be transparent and forthcoming about what they think and feel as well as who they are:

“I’m an introvert: I know I should speak up more, but often the moment comes and goes before I’m ready to speak.”

Introverts typically want and need more processing time before they speak. In a more extroverted crowd, an introvert may be the first to have an idea—only to have someone else come out with it before the introvert feels ready to share it. Sometimes introverts conclude that they would better off if they start to blurt things out faster, but my response is that this sounds both unwise and uncomfortable for an introvert—inauthentic, even!

“I’m a private person, and now people are telling me that I should come in and spill my guts about my personal life! That doesn’t sound ‘authentic’ to me—it sounds painfully uncomfortable.”

A couple of things are usually going on with someone like this. Some leaders are quite guarded about their lives outside of work and find it inappropriate or difficult to share much that’s personal. On top of that, there is a tendency to engage in “all-or-nothing thinking” when it comes to a developmental need: When leaders get rated low on sharing life lessons or personal experiences, they assume that they have to start talking about their most painful childhood memory or some moment of extreme family dysfunction from the recent or distant past. This kind of thinking can turn the developmental theme of Authenticity from a hurdle into Mount Everest.

“In my role, it would be *inappropriate* for me to share what I’m really thinking and feeling.”

I hear this one from people in a variety of roles, most frequently people in HR or independent coach/consultants. When I work with independent coach/consultants or some HR professionals, they often challenge me on Authenticity: “I’m a coach! I *can’t* tell people what I think! My job is to make sure they figure it out for themselves.”

This objection also gets raised by senior business leaders who are privy to sensitive information, including impending layoffs, budget cuts, or reorganizations. One leader recently told me what her predecessor had said to her: “Your role is HR for HR: You can’t have any friends in this job.” As a result, she has been very tight-lipped in her role. In situations like this, leaders may be all too ready to accept their lower ratings in Authenticity as inevitable.

“I really haven’t thought before about this idea of transparency.”

For some leaders, the ExPI results open their eyes about the idea of transparency. They aren’t necessarily opposed to it; they just haven’t really reflected about the degree to which they share. One leader I coached was baffled by his low Authenticity numbers, so I asked him to what degree he shares the “intent behind his content.” He went silent for a good five seconds. “I’m all about the content!” he realized. People were hearing his advice, opinions, and orders but not the rationale behind them.

Six Tips for Avoiding the Void... While Being True to Your Authentic Self

Ultimately, the goal is to not only avoid the void but to do so in ways that are consistent with your character. Don’t “fake it until you make it.” Find ways to share more that are comfortable for you! With that in mind, here are some tips that acknowledge the concerns mentioned above:

- 1. If you need more processing time prior to sharing your thoughts and feelings, become more intentional and deliberate about preparation—and not just for presentations.**

Introverted leaders can benefit from booking time on their calendars to prepare talking points prior to meetings or even in anticipation of informal conversations that are bound to come up. Thinking through the likely questions, concerns, and needs of others in advance—as well as how to address them—really helps.

- 2. If you’re not ready or able to talk about content, you still need to say *something*.**

Whether it’s because of the need for processing time, the sensitivity of the subject matter, or the fact that you’re feeling too emotional to share your thoughts constructively, there may be times when it’s best to not share exactly what’s on your mind. That said, there are many alternatives to going silent. Instead, consider:

- **Sharing the *process* of what will happen rather than the *content*:** “At this point, there has been no announcement about budget cuts for the fourth quarter. But here’s what I can tell you about what will happen. The leadership team plans to meet on September 15, and at that point I expect we will be told whether or not any cuts will be made. I will meet with all of you right after that meeting and give you an update.”
- **Acknowledging a request for information without providing an answer:** “I wanted to acknowledge your email request about the Bartleby Project and let you know that I will get back to you about that next week.”
- **Playing back what you heard and buying some time when you’re angry, upset, unsure, or overwhelmed.** “After hearing all of your comments during this meeting, I want to say that you’ve made me very aware of why you’re so troubled about the recent decision to close our Charlotte office. You’ve given me a lot to think about, and I want to give it careful thought before I give you a response. I will do that by tomorrow at the latest.”

3. **Remember that you can be very selective about what you choose to share in the form of life lessons or personal experiences.**

There is no requirement to share anything that feels too personal or private for you. However, I’ve found that even the most guarded leader can find some stories or experiences that are comfortable to share:

- Sharing stories about the successes of others on your team or in your organization is a very easy way to bring some of your values and beliefs to life.
- It usually feels more comfortable to share stories about challenges, mistakes, or turning points from earlier in your career rather than from outside of work—and these anecdotes can still be very useful in helping others to “get you” in your current role.
- When sharing a more personal story, brainstorm to come up with some ideas, rejecting those that make you feel too exposed or vulnerable. For example, a story about an experience at college or in high school at a job or with a teacher may feel more comfortable than a family story, as it’s literally less “close to home.”

4. If your job or role requires you to withhold your thoughts and feelings to some degree, reflect on whether you're overusing this tendency.

Yes, there are times when an HR professional, business leader, or independent coach may be required to hold back information. But is that really true *all* or even most of the time? There may be times when you're withholding the very practical wisdom that is called for in a given moment. Here are some useful steps to consider:

- **Make a list of situations where putting your opinion out there would be counterproductive or just plain wrong... but then make another list of situations where it would be the better thing to do.** You should end up with things on both lists. For example, independent coaches and consultants who want to be seen as strategic partners will need to be able to deliver points of view and insights at times in order to make great keynote speeches, close deals, or to model great leadership behaviors for their clients.
- **Try wearing two different hats more explicitly.** “If I put on my hat as an impartial coach, I would probably just tell you that this is your decision and let you work it out for yourself. But if I put on my hat as a consultant, I really would have to say that we can save a lot of time by having me tell you that I have seen many others make the wrong choice here, and I think you need to focus more on the downstream consequences rather than choosing impulsively here.”
- **Think of sharing as a continuum between “need to know” and “total transparency”—and then decide where you want to fall.** When it comes to sharing information, one extreme is only sharing what others absolutely need to know. On the other end, you would be sharing every thought and feeling without reservation. If you're too much on either extreme, you may run into issues—especially if your degree of sharing is much higher or lower than other leaders at your level. Be more deliberate about when you want to be more or less transparent, and discuss the continuum with other leaders at your level. The more you can be in sync with others, the more you will be seen as sharing appropriately while keeping your messaging aligned with your peers.

5. **Be more deliberate about sharing feelings as well as thoughts.**

Some leaders are more thinkers, while others are more on the feeler side of the spectrum. I've found that leaders who are thinkers can be wary about sharing or even acknowledging emotions. But talking about your emotions—even if you're doing so in a relatively unemotional way—serves several important purposes:

- It humanizes you when you acknowledge that you're concerned, upset, happy, energized, etc.
- In times of change, churn, or crisis, people won't have to wonder if you really "get" the fact that there is an emotional impact on everyone.
- When people hear you share about what's exciting or disappointing to you, it creates more clarity around the vision you're trying to drive.

We often see a link between leaders' Authenticity scores and their scores on the social-emotional items in Vision. When you share more emotion, it's easier to inspire.

6. **Be sure to share the intent behind the content.**

As mentioned earlier, some leaders fail to share the intent behind the content—the why behind the what. Why is this a problem? Here's one analogy: When you were a kid or a teenager, did you ever ask your parents why you couldn't do something, only to be told "Because I say so." That wasn't a satisfying explanation then, and the same or the equivalent won't work well now either. Research has shown that sharing the intent behind the content—even when you're frustrated or upset—leads to more favorable perceptions in the eyes of others. Your stakeholders are not going to agree with every decision you make or opinion you share, but if you explain your rationale, then they at least will have a better sense of where you're coming from.

Final Thoughts on Avoiding the Void

When you "avoid the void" and take some steps to increase your Authenticity in the eyes of others, you'll also be very likely to improve how others perceive you in several other facets in the Bates Model of Executive Presence:

- When you share more of your feelings and thoughts—including the why behind the what—people have more opportunities to see your judgment and insights, amplifying how they experience your **Practical Wisdom**.

- As we've discussed, there's a strong link between sharing emotions and stories to the facet of **Vision**.
- **Integrity** may increase because people have more clarity about your values—what you see to be the right things to do and why.
- When you engage in more frequent communication—including getting back to people even if it's to let them know you haven't made a decision—that will enhance perceptions of **Interactivity**.
- When you don't shy away from making your opinions, views, and reactions known, this will amplify the facet of **Assertiveness**.

In short, the more you are transparent, the more many qualities of executive presence become crystal clear.