

A White Paper



Getting Real

How High-Achieving Women Can Lead Authentically

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Women aren't always true to themselves. In a vain attempt to live up to organizational norms and expectations, their behaviors sometimes go against their own values. But it's not easy being a phony. It takes a lot of energy to behave in ways that are out of sync with our true values, priorities, hopes, characteristics and style. The energy expended trying to come across as something you are not is energy unavailable for work and other activities.

The alternative to this predicament is authenticity – a healthy alignment between your values and behaviors that can reenergize life at work and at home. Women who are authentic have a good understanding of themselves and their priorities. They attend first to what is important to them rather than what might be important to other people. They are clear about how they feel and what they need and prefer.

Authenticity is best thought of as a condition or dynamic balance – and not a personality trait. As a goal, it is not clearly defined like earning an MBA. And achieving authenticity doesn't mean it's yours to keep. You have to work to remain authentic, reviewing your priorities and choosing behaviors that match those priorities as circumstances change.

It is difficult to develop your capabilities when you are suppressing your true values and style or are distracted by inner conflict.

But living a life strongly connected to your belief system promotes growth, learning and psychological well-being. That makes authenticity an important factor in leadership development.

Individual authenticity is important for organizations as well. People who are authentic bring their whole selves to their jobs and participate fully and honestly in the workplace. Organizations that place a premium on conformity at the expense of authenticity may be incurring hidden costs. Managers who put on a false front or who struggle with feelings of inauthenticity exhaust so much of their energy that they often find themselves depleted and losing interest in their work. In addition, inauthenticity can often be recognized by others and become a disruptive, negative force adding to uncertainty and distrust. Organizations that foster authentic behavior are more likely to have engaged, enthusiastic employees and workplaces that are open and promote trust.

Timeless Insights

There is no doubt that authenticity is a hot topic today. You'll hear it discussed in business schools and corporate training sessions and see it debated in the leadership and business news.

The economic upheavals of recent years, career decisions of high profile executives, and failures in corporate governance are among the drivers - of this heightened interest in a "classic" topic. Society needs authentic leaders to do the difficult work of governing corporations ethically, developing talent, and building sustainable organizations that can stand the test of time.

The 2002 book *Standing at the Crossroads: Next Steps for High-Achieving Women* features a study that sheds a great deal of light on what authenticity is, how it impacts people's lives and how it can be developed. And the insights it provides are just as relevant today as ever.

Researchers with the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL®) explored the choices and trade-offs facing high-achieving women in managerial and executive roles. They surveyed and interviewed 61 participants in CCL's *Women's Leadership Program* who ranged in age from 26 to 58, with an average age of 40. Of those, 71 percent were married or in a committed relationship, and about half had children. Seventeen percent classified themselves as executives, 31 percent as upper-middle managers and 45 percent as middle managers. The rest did not specify their level.

The participants were well-educated: 91 percent had a bachelor's degree and 45 percent had a graduate degree. Most indicated their careers were extremely important to them, and many had been with their organization for a number of years.

Each was asked to fill out a questionnaire, to allow researchers access to their assessment data from the program, and to participate in three interviews – one shortly after the program, another six months after, and the last a year after.

In the interviews, women were asked about the personal and career choices they made in the past, the current issues they were confronting, and their hopes for and fears about the future. *Authenticity* emerged as one of five themes influencing women's careers and life choices.

This white paper explores some of CCL's findings and how women managers and executives can become better leaders by being more authentic.

Since the publication of *Standing at the Crossroads*, authenticity has received a great deal of attention as an important component of leadership for both women and men alike. Authenticity forms a platform necessary for learning the finer skills of leading organizations.



In Touch and in Tune

CCL's study found authenticity has five defining characteristics, some of which are interrelated:

- Clarity about one's values, priorities and preferences
- Acceptance of the necessity for choices and trade-offs in life
- A strong sense of self-determination
- A willingness to work toward aligning one's values and behaviors
- A high degree of comfort and satisfaction with decisions made earlier in life

Women who demonstrated the greatest authenticity were in touch with what was most important to them and in tune with their instincts. They could articulate the choices and trade-offs they had made about leaving jobs and taking on new ones, balancing work and personal life, having children, getting out of bad work or personal situations, switching careers, managing dual careers, setting financial goals, and a range of other issues.

Highly authentic women consciously designed their lives in accordance with their top priorities. For example, one woman said she had decided to spend more time with her two young children, even though she knew it would slow her rise through the ranks of management. Another was willing to sacrifice being on top of every detail as a mother in order to put more time into her career so she could advance rapidly in her organization. In each case, the trade-off was one the woman was willing to make.

Women high in authenticity had clear understandings of what it would take for them to be successful in life according to their own definitions of success. They lived by their own standards and rules. This is not to say they overtly and purposely defied societal or organizational conventions, although they did sometimes swim against the tide. Rather, they carefully selected the aspects of those societal and organizational values they would follow, while finding ways to maintain their individuality.

Related to this sense of self-determination was a willingness to take the steps necessary to align their values and behaviors. Women who had fought through feelings of inauthenticity had often faced a situation that called their authenticity into question, whether it was working for a boss they considered unethical or in a field that didn't interest them.

One woman in the study made a career change at 40 to better align her work with her values and priorities. Christine had been a well-paid information technology manager for a large industrial company. But helping the company make more and better widgets held little meaning for her. She wanted to pursue a career more closely related to helping people and had always dreamed of working in an educational setting, so she accepted a pay cut to take an IT job at a university. Christine felt her new work was meaningful, and the school's mission was in line with her values. She accepted the lower pay as a trade-off necessary to regain her sense of authenticity.

One of the most interesting observations from CCL's research is that it is possible to be authentic in one aspect of your life and not in another. For instance, a person who has a job that is aligned with her values might feel she can't behave fully like herself in her relationships outside of work. One young executive was in an authentic situation at work, but had a growing resentment of her new husband. He was dissatisfied with his job and wanted to find a new position in a different area of the country. She felt bound by tradition to say she would go with him, but at a deeper level she was having difficulty adjusting from a "me" to a "we" framework and learning how to make major decisions as part of a couple. She kept finding ways to block the move.

Other women who took part in the research were true to themselves in their personal relationships but hit a brick wall of inauthenticity at work. This usually happened because they felt disconnected from and no longer cared about their jobs. Still other study participants were authentic at work

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Christine's feeling of authenticity was bolstered by her comfort with the decision she made. Most of the women who rated high in authenticity said they had no regrets about how they had lived their lives or about the choices they had made.

and in their relationships, but not in how they treated themselves. They made time for everyone and everything except their own needs and desires.

Getting to Work

The degree of focus women place on authenticity varies widely. In what situations do they work on authenticity in a strong and persistent way? The study showed that women managers and executives tend to focus on issues of authenticity when they are:

- Attending to long-ignored goals and passions
- Addressing an inconsistency in their lives
- Suppressing personal style – for instance, trying to fit in with a male-oriented organization, and
- Responding to a major life event

Unlived Dreams

Many women have goals they have long dreamed of pursuing but have placed on the back burner for one reason or another—usually related to societal, financial or family pressures. They may have wanted to be entrepreneurs, novelists, artists or athletes, but the practicalities of life forced them to restrain those desires or set them aside for later. As people get further along in their careers, these dreams may take on more prominence and may need to be addressed before a sense of authenticity can be achieved.

When the participants in CCL's study turned their attention to their dreams, they generally did not abandon everything they had built in order to pursue them. Instead they worked on making small, incremental changes that put them on the path to achieving their dreams without upending their current lives and careers.

The Big Switch

Today's organizations often experience perpetual and rapid change, with shifting structures, hierarchies, tasks, goals and strategies. This can create situations in which women must confront issues of authenticity. They may be sailing along smoothly when their world is turned upside down by a changed organizational environment – such as a new boss, assignment, reorganization or reduction in force. The job in which they felt comfortable and authentic suddenly makes them feel awkward and inauthentic. Sometimes they aren't sure exactly why, and they must figure out what is wrong in order to remedy the situation and regain their sense of inner and outer alignment.

One study participant had worked for the same company for more than 15 years. Sophie had steadily advanced in her organization and truly liked her job. When her department got a new boss however, everything changed. His approach was completely different from that of her previous bosses, and it made Sophie uncomfortable. At first she told herself that he simply had a distinctive style, but it soon became evident that his tactics and ways of handling business issues lacked integrity, ethics and even morals. He had no qualms about misleading people and pursuing hidden agendas.

Sophie could no longer reconcile her job with her values. She felt dishonest and without control over her own life. Her performance and well-being declined. Sophie decided the only way to fix the situation was to leave it. When a company job opened up in a different city, she jumped at the opportunity. Now she is thriving as a manager in the new location, where the business practices align with her values and allow her to work with integrity.

Playing a Role

Eagly and Carli (2007) note that women face more complexity in the workplace than men do. They often don't seem as "leader-like" to others and may have somewhat different values and attitudes than most of their male colleagues.

When women feel the need to restrain their personal style to fit in with the prevailing organizational culture, their authenticity suffers. There are numerous examples of this phenomenon among both men and women. But CCL's study of high-achieving women showed that the most common behaviors suppressed are those generally perceived as feminine. Women encounter strong and long-established norms in some predominantly male organizations, often believing they need to conform in order to advance up the corporate ladder.



Yet these women walked a fine line. If they came across as *too* masculine, they ran an equal risk of marking themselves as “different” and “not part of the team.” In any case, restraining femininity in order to comply with male norms can handicap women and their organizations.

Wake-Up Calls

Women in CCL’s study also tended to place a higher priority on authenticity during some key event in their lives. Most typical was a change in health. Diagnosis of a serious illness in themselves, or the death or illness of a loved one, triggered a review and reassessment of their values vis-à-vis their behaviors and choices. This frequently led to what they described as a profound learning experience as they worked to reestablish authenticity. Confronting the fragility of life after years of taking good health for granted brings into focus the values and yearnings that are truly important and the ways they are compromised by one’s behaviors.

Author Bill George wrote about his wife Penny. A few years ago, she was diagnosed with breast cancer and endured both surgery and chemotherapy. For some time she remained convinced that she would die. She gradually took back control of her life and created her own healing path, with a renewed sense of purpose. She gave up her psychology practice to devote herself to integrative medicine - using the mind, body, heart and spirit as part of the healing journey. She became a tireless advocate for changing how medicine is taught and practiced and took on leadership roles she never imagined.

Meredith Vieira's Decision to Leave the *Today* Show: A Lesson in Authenticity

Meredith Vieira spent nearly five years as co-anchor of NBC's *Today* show. But in 2011, she decided to step away from the lucrative position to realign her life around the things she valued most.

"I've really had a great time, but 'time' is one of those weird things; you can never get enough of it," she said in announcing the move to viewers. "And it just keeps ticking away, and I know that I want to spend more of mine with my husband, Richard, and my kids, Ben, Gabe and Lily."

In a subsequent interview with *Good Housekeeping*, she elaborated further on her reasons for leaving.

"I knew for a while that I was leaning [toward leaving]; my gut was telling me that it was time to go," she said. "After a four-year contract, I signed on for one more year. But as the year progressed, I began to realize that it wasn't working for me in terms of my personal life. ... You don't define yourself by your job, but I found myself kind of doing that."

The 2:30 a.m. alarm each workday was taking a physical toll, leaving her tired much of the time. And it also meant disrupted sleep for her husband, who has progressive multiple sclerosis.

There was no time in her schedule for friends and the spontaneous gatherings that once were commonplace.

"My friend, neighbor, and agent, Michael Glantz, said he felt I had changed a little over the past five years," Vieira said. "That there was a bit of a heaviness to my soul because of the intensity of my job. He said, 'It's not like I see it on the air, but I know you. And I feel like there's a weight on you that you carry because you're committed, you signed that contract, and you will do your job. Some of the usual lightness of Meredith is missing.' You know, I wouldn't have even noticed that, but when I think about it, he was right."

In contemplating what to do, Vieira says she did a lot of running and solitary walking to clear away the clutter, look at the bigger picture and think things through. "One of the things I thought about in leaving the *Today* show was, *Meredith, you've got to find out: Who are you in your core?*" she said.

In the end Vieira decided to leave *Today* to reconnect with friends and family and to live a more authentic life that nourished her. She has been able to reshape her career around a more normal lifestyle by working as a special correspondent.

Developing Authenticity

It is clear that authenticity is important to women managers and executives, and there are situations in which they feel compelled to work on increasing their authenticity. But what can individuals do to develop authenticity? How can they align their inner and outer selves so their work behavior becomes comfortable and natural to them, allowing them to be better leaders?

CCL's study pinpointed specific steps each of us can take to better align our inner and outer selves, as shown below. But know that the process of becoming an authentic leader isn't easy. It doesn't happen all at once, and it doesn't happen overnight. You have to work to become and remain authentic, reviewing your priorities and choosing behaviors that reflect those priorities as circumstances change. It requires continuous effort and overcoming hurdles - from societal norms to organizational cultures. But the rewards can be great for individual leaders and their organizations.

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1 Step One: Increase Your Self-Awareness.

A key component of behaving authentically is to understand what you care about most. What are your values, likes and dislikes? This might sound simple, but in today's complex world filled with a wide array of choices, pressures and distractions, selecting what is most important to us can be difficult.

Several CCL programs use a *value sort* exercise as a way to help participants define their true priorities. They are given a list of characteristics, actions, feelings, objects and goals (see below) and asked to arrange them according to how much they value each one. They then examine whether their behaviors match their priorities—or whether they are spending too much time and energy on things that hold little value to them.

Choices, Choices ... A Value Sort Exercise

One of the first steps in developing authenticity is becoming aware of the things that are most important to you and those that are not. One way to do this is to take a list of characteristics, actions, feelings, objects and goals and rank them in order of their priority for you.

Jot down each of the words below on a separate index card and place the cards in piles according to the following categories: *Always Valued*, *Often Valued*, *Sometimes Valued*, *Seldom Valued* and *Never Valued*. (You can add to the list of items if your values aren't included.) Try to limit the number of words in the *Always Valued* category to eight.

By asking yourself whether your behaviors are aligned with the things you value most, you can gain insight into how authentic your current choices are.

Achievement	Activity	Advancement
Adventure	Aesthetics	Affiliation
Affluence	Authority	Autonomy
Balance	Challenge	Collaboration
Community	Competence	Competition
Courage	Creativity	Economic Security
Enjoyment	Fame	Family
Friendship	Health	Helping Others
Humor	Influence	Inner Harmony
Integrity	Justice	Knowledge
Location	Love	Loyalty
Order	Personal Development	Physical Fitness
Recognition	Responsibility	Self-Respect
Spirituality	Status	Variety
Wisdom		

Step Two: Assess and Evaluate

Once you have established your priorities in values, likes and dislikes, you can better understand how aligned your behaviors are with your values. You may need to review what you have *already* given up - and what you are *willing* to give up to get what is most important to you. The women in CCL's study who were most authentic viewed trade-offs not as negative, but as a way to get closer to what they wanted most.

Ask yourself what you need to let go of to better align your behaviors with your beliefs. Perhaps you need to delegate some of your job duties so you can take on new responsibilities. You might need to sacrifice leisure activities so you can make the most of a career opportunity, or accept slower progress up the management ladder to spend more time with your family or building a nonprofit that addresses a social problem that is important to you. There are no "right" trade-offs to make, and your choices will likely change at various points in your life. The crucial thing is to be clear on what is most important to you *now*, and what you will and will not do to get there. Know what really motivates you. This clarity will position you to establish authenticity.



Step Three: Take Action

This is where the going gets really tough. It's one thing to be aware of your priorities and decide which trade-offs you are willing to make. But it is quite another to make real changes in your life. Remember that you don't need to make sweeping changes all at once. You can start with small steps and gradually align your behaviors with your most important values. If, for example, the most important thing to you is to improve the relationships in your personal life, you might cut back on the number of weekend hours you spend in the office or on business travel so you can be with family and friends. Although at first glance it might seem your decreased time at work will hurt your job performance, your increased sense of well-being might make you more productive and a better leader.

Step Four: Get Support

In any area of personal development, getting support from other people can help you achieve your goals. If you share your goals about authenticity with trusted colleagues and friends, you will create a source of feedback and reinforcement that can make it easier to stay on track.

At the same time, it's important to believe in yourself and the legitimacy of your values. Trust your instincts. Sometimes acting authentically requires going against what your boss, colleagues, family members or friends advise you to do. Developing authenticity often requires taking risks. Have faith in your own judgment about what is right for you.



The Real Self

The role of authenticity has not been given its due by many organizations and their leaders. It's easy to get caught up in the details of day-to-day operations and avoid less tangible issues that don't rank as high on the organizational priority list. Yet struggles between beliefs and behaviors can drain an individual's energy and decrease both personal and organizational performance. They also can impact retention, with women concluding they must leave the organization to be true to their authentic selves.

Organizations experiencing leadership problems should consider whether those problems can be traced, at least in part, to a culture that stands in the way of women managers and executives practicing their natural leadership style. The solution may be found in establishing an inclusive culture that promotes authenticity and celebrates different ways of being and leading.

When people feel the need to restrain their personal style to fit in with an organizational culture, their authenticity suffers.



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