Why should anyone be led by you?

What it takes to be an authentic leader

Rob Goffee / Gareth Jones
This book is dedicated to
all those who strive to
lead organizations.
CONTENTS

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INTRODUCTION     Why Should Anyone Be Led by You?
    ONE     Be Yourself—More—with Skill
    TWO     Know and Show Yourself—Enough
    THREE    Take Personal Risks
    FOUR     Read—and Rewrite— the Context
    FIVE     Remain Authentic— but Conform Enough
    SIX      Manage Social Distance
    SEVEN    Communicate—with Care
    EIGHT    Authentic Followership
    NINE     The Price and Prize of Leadership

APPENDIX A     Evaluating Your Leadership Potential
APPENDIX B     Maximizing Authenticity and Skill

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
NOTES
ABOUT THE AUTHORS
Since this book was first published, the world has experienced some significant shocks. Most obviously, the 2008 financial crisis—the biggest crisis of capitalism since 1929. The fall of Lehman Brothers and the rapid spread of financial disorder threatened the entire global economic system. The impact on businesses—small, medium, and large—has been huge. And the public sector has not been immune, either. Geopolitical change has been significant. Even as we write this, both the short- and long-term future of the Middle East seem highly uncertain. In Europe we have witnessed the rebirth of Russian territorial ambitions just as the Eurozone threatens to fall into stagflation.

Do these dramatic changes make the question “Why should anyone be led by you?” more or less relevant? Our answer is unequivocal. The need for authentic leadership is more pressing than ever. When the economic history of the global financial crisis is finally written, we will see that brave leadership on the part of political figures on both sides of the Atlantic prevented a significant recession from becoming another Great Depression. In the corporate world, great leaders have begun the process of leading us to sustained growth and continuing innovation. The world needs great organizations—and great leaders—more than ever. As for Europe and the Middle East, we await the emergence of brave and visionary leaders who can positively transform a volatile and dangerous situation.

So we are confident that the key messages of this book still resonate. In fact, the emergence of the knowledge economy has made leadership both more important and more difficult. The clever people who inhabit the knowledge economy do not, for the most part, want to be leaders—and many of them don’t want to be led! They want to be left alone to pursue their personal goals and the Next Big Thing. Yet they are significantly more productive when they are well led. We addressed this issue in our book Clever: Leading Your Smartest, Most Creative People.

Since this book’s original publication, it’s fair to say that the concept of “authentic leadership” has become a modern orthodoxy. Cynics might even conclude that authenticity has become an industry. We are, however, still convinced that authenticity, as defined in this book, differs significantly from its interpretation by others. Our argument was—and remains—that authenticity manifests itself in context and in relationships with others. It is never solely an attribute of individuals. That’s what our central theme “Be yourself—more—with skill” really means. Our book is infused with a sociological perspective, in contrast to the predominantly psychological approach taken in many accounts of authenticity.
The pressures on leaders have become greater. They have less time than they used to. They need to assess situations (a key skill, called situation sensing, we discuss in this book) more quickly. This means they must read context and think about how to re define it faster. If they don’t, social media will redefine it for them. In addition, the organizational world is increasingly characterized by geographically dispersed, often virtual teams. Leaders must achieve closeness in imaginative ways. They must identify and take advantage of cultural differences using new forms of communication. All of these changes reinforce rather than undermine the key leadership skills we discuss in this book.

Despite this concern with speed, we stress in the book that leadership development is a continuous process. Great leaders are never finished. All of us are challenged to constantly review and renew our leadership skills. Again, this is not an entirely individual task. Effective leadership development is fueled by honest, authentic conversations with others. And honesty, in many organizations, is in short supply. We address this particular challenge—how to create authentic workplaces and organizations—in our new book Why Should Anyone Work Here?

As we have talked about our ideas with many people in diverse organizations, we have urged them to find others with whom they can have honest discussions about the true nature of leadership. Our ambition is that this book will provide the questions that fuel those discussions.

The big question remains: Why should anyone be led by you?
Why Should Anyone Be Led by You?

At the beginning of the new millennium, our research was driven by this single, simple question. It had an impact. Audiences we addressed throughout the world paused for thought when they were asked it. Rooms fell silent as people pondered their right to lead and the willingness of their followers to be led by them. A Harvard Business Review article with the question as its title produced a flood of communication.

Over the last five years, the question has taken us in intriguing, exciting, and often perplexing directions. Along the way, we have interviewed dozens of leaders (and their followers) in the corporate world and beyond—in schools, hospitals, sports organizations, and elsewhere. After all, leadership is all-embracing. It is not the sole preserve of high-profile CEOs. As we have continued to work with students and consulting clients, we have learned even more.

This is a book whose genesis was driven by a question, but it is one whose fruition, we hope, provides a range of answers to the leadership riddles and dilemmas we now face—as well as an entirely new range of questions.

Our own work on leadership began some twenty-five years ago and has followed three paths. First, as academics, we exhaustively surveyed the leadership research of the past century before developing our own working model. Second, as consultants, we tested our approach with managers and leaders in workshops worldwide and through observations with scores of clients. And third, as leaders, we vetted our ideas in our own organizations.

Throughout, the focus of our research has been on leaders who excel at inspiring people—leaders who succeed in capturing hearts, minds, and souls. We are fascinated by leadership that, reaching back to the ideas of Max Weber, is antibureaucratic and charismatic. To have leaders with these qualities is not everything in business, but our contention is that it is worth a substantial amount. Indeed, great results are likely to be impossible without it.

Make no mistake: leadership is about results. Great leadership has the potential to excite people to extraordinary levels of achievement. But it is not only about performance; it is also about meaning. This is an important point—and one that is often
overlooked by contemporary leadership literature. Leaders at all levels make a difference to performance. They do so because they make performance meaningful.

It is to state the obvious that the impact of leadership on our lives is profound—at work, in our spiritual lives, in sport, and of course, in politics. But this observation does capture a peculiarly modern obsession: the search for authentic leaders. In Western societies, at least, there is a deep and deepening disenchantment with the able role player or, worse still, the skilled apparatchik—of the political or corporate kind. We are increasingly suspicious that we are being “worked.” The search for authenticity is ever more pressing.
The Authentic Quest

There is evidence of the desire for authenticity all around us in popular culture. The seemingly inexorable rise of reality TV (a truly Orwellian phrase as participants are manipulated for an anonymous and isolated audience of voyeurs) is one manifestation. Or we can watch soap operas portraying a nostalgic view of communities—filling the gap left by the decline in genuinely communal life painstakingly dissected in Robert Putnam’s *Bowling Alone.*

These questions about authenticity are related to a wider set of concerns about how we live now. Critics of modern societies persistently point to three concerns that, in their view, restrict or prevent the authentic expression of humanity and make it harder to be yourself.

To begin with, there is the triumph of individualism. If there is one overriding characteristic of the modern era, it is the extension of personal freedom through the march of individualism. At the heart of this, of course, lies a paradox. While few would deny that modern life has increased the scope for human choice, many have cautioned against the rise of excessive individualism: a world characterized not by the authentic expression of self but as simply selfish.

At its core, this critique argues that authenticity itself rests upon some sense of moral regulation. We cannot be freely ourselves without an overarching set of shared moral values. In their absence we get not authentic leaders but narcissistic ones. The damaging scandals at Enron, Tyco, Hollinger International, and World-Com add contemporary bite to this critique.

Closely related to this lack of moral regulation is the Weberian notion of the modern world dominated by a particular way of thinking. Weber calls this “technical rationality.” In more modern terminology, this is often called instrumental reason: the rationality of an act is judged by the connection between means and ends, where the ends are given. It is a view of rationality stripped of morality. Whatever your problem, there is a technically rational solution to it.

For Max Weber, the triumph of this way of thinking constitutes the nightmare of modern life. He writes passionately of mankind trapped in an iron cage—from which it cannot escape. This critique of modern life had been elaborated many times, but of special relevance for us are its consequences in the workplace.

From this perspective, work is degraded. It becomes the means to the satisfaction of other ends—paying the mortgage, buying designer-label goods—rather than being a milieu both for the building and discovery of an authentic self and for its disclosure. Both
workers and executives are just another kind of input to be down-sized, delayered, and discarded. Our workplaces become not arenas for the expression of authenticity but soulless machines for the production of conformity. This is a theme captured in the grim pessimism of Kafka’s novels and railed against in the long line of anti-bureaucratic heroes Western culture has produced, from Charlie Chaplin in Modern Times to Yossarian in Catch-22 via The Good Soldier Schweik in Jaroslav Hasek’s novel: all human beings who resist being processed.

One final theme helps to explain our focus on authenticity. It is most eloquently articulated in the work of Alexis de Tocqueville, who fears the rise of “soft” despotism—a society in which individuals decline to engage in acts of self-government in exchange for a government that meets their material needs. He fears the withering of civil society—the myriad of informal associations that both provide social glue and critically function as vehicles for the expression of self.

This Tocqueville theme finds later expression in David Reisman’s classic The Lonely Crowd: a picture of isolated, atomized individuals lacking the social relationships from which they could create an authentic self. A similar anxiety is unearthed in Putnam’s Bowling Alone. Putnam produces a veritable barrage of evidence to support this claim: declining membership of parent-teacher associations, falling attendance at public meetings, and of course, despite the popularity of bowling, the collapse of the bowling leagues.

All of these arguments help to explain the contemporary focus on authenticity. It is a reaction to the turbulence and change of modern life. Work and family institutions seem under threat. Recent geopolitical events have dramatically and tragically reinforced this sense of turbulence. As rates of change increase, individuals are ever more motivated to search for constancy and meaning. We’ve become increasingly suspicious of a world dominated by the mere role player.
Authenticity at Work

In organizations, the search for the meaning and cohesion leaders provide has become especially acute. The traditional sources of organizational cohesion have all become weaker. The old world was characterized by elaborate hierarchies, by more or less stable careers (for some, never for all), and by clear boundaries between organizations. All this has changed. Now hierarchies in most organizations are becoming flatter, driven by the need for faster response times and by the competitive pressure to drive down costs. But hierarchies were not just structural coordinating devices in organizations. Rather, and much more significantly, they were sources of meaning. It is not that long ago that after fifteen years you had made it to deputy assistant to the superintendent—and you had done well. As hierarchies flatten, meaning disappears. We look to leadership to instill our organizations with meaning.

Equally significant is the changing shape of careers. Not so long ago, the psychological contract for many (but never for all) involved movement up a relatively stable career ladder, often with one organization. Those days are gone. Instead, individuals maximize their life opportunities through increasing their human capital, knowing that their organizations can offer little certainty for the future. Part of this is liberating—individuals as architects of their own working lives—but part is the removal of another source of meaning at work.

Even organizational boundaries have begun to break down. The old theory of firm behavior described discrete organizations competing in more or less perfect markets, where some won and some lost. Today organizations make alliances with suppliers, customers, and sometimes competitors. The organization man, with company blood coursing through his veins, has to come to terms with a world of high ambiguity in which overidentification with one organization is a problem rather than a career.

Finally, the spate of corporate scandals at Enron et al. produced a huge loss of faith in our corporate leaders. If there is one good outcome here, it is that we may be finally cured of the cult of the heroic CEO. There is, for example, a growing interest in so-called quiet leaders. Our concern is that in time this, too, could become a leadership cul-de-sac. We do not want leadership clones—noisy or quiet. We want real leaders.

The corporate scandals are a symptom of amoral leadership. The damage done to the ideology that makes our economic system cohere has been substantial. The cozy belief that capitalist enterprises are led in the interests of stakeholders has taken a battering. There is widespread cynicism about the state of our political economy.

Executives are not immune to this. Interviewed at work about what gives their lives meaning, they mouth the latest corporate propaganda: “increasing shareholder value,”
“delighting customers.” Asked the same questions at home, they admit to profound symptoms of meaninglessness as they struggle with work-related stress and dysfunctional family lives. We face an epidemic of anomie.9

It seems that Max Weber’s grim predictions of the “disenchantment of the world” may be fulfilled.10

All of this has left modern societies with a profound moral vacuum. We are not sure what we believe in. Indeed, one notable contemporary social phenomenon in the Western world is the growth of cult religions as people struggle to find something to believe in.

The demand for authentic leadership is there and growing. As traditional hierarchies disintegrate, only leadership can fill the void. Without a clearly articulated purpose, meaning is elusive. Leadership provides that articulation. This search for authenticity and leadership is reinforced whenever we work inside organizations. CEOs tell us that their most pressing need is for more leaders in their organizations—not the consummate role players who seem to surround them. And lower down the organization, the plea is either for more inspiring leadership or, just as common, a fierce desire to develop leadership skills for themselves. Authentic leadership has become the most prized organizational and individual asset.
When we ask people in organizations—executives, first-line supervisors, head teachers, hospital nurses—which set of competences they would most like to develop, all provide the same answer: help us to become more effective leaders. They have seen that leadership makes a big difference to their lives and the performance of their organizations.

Equally, when we ask CEOs what is the biggest problem they face, they unerringly reply: our organizations need more leaders at every level.

So, given the hunger for leadership, why are leaders in such short supply? We think there are two fundamental reasons:

First, organizations desire leaders but structure themselves in ways that kill leadership. Far too many of our organizations—in business, in the public sector, and in the not-for-profit sector—are machines for the destruction of leadership. They encourage either conformists or role players with an impoverished sense of who they are and what they stand for. Neither makes for effective leaders. And of course, this gives rise to legions of disenchanted followers, producing the deepest organizational malaise of modern times: cynicism.

Second, our understanding of leadership is blinkered. Having reviewed much of the existing leadership literature, both new and old, we find it surprising how little we know. This observation is not a criticism of our academic colleagues who, no doubt, like us, have pondered long and hard on the mysteries of leadership. Rather, it is an observation about the methods we have used and the fundamental assumptions upon which much of the research has rested.

The main body of leadership literature focuses on the characteristics of leaders. This

Be Yourself—
More—with Skill
gives it a strong psychological bias. It sees leadership qualities as inherent to the individual. The underlying assumption is that leadership is something we do to other people. But in our view, leadership should be seen as something we do with other people. Leadership must always be viewed as a relationship between the leader and the led.

Books on leadership persistently try to find a recipe for leadership. Beleaguered executives are invited to compare themselves with lists of leadership competences and characteristics—against which they always find themselves wanting. Attempts to imitate others, even the most successful leaders, are doomed to failure. As Bill Burns, CEO of the $16 billion global pharmaceutical division of F. Hoffmann-La Roche Ltd. (Roche) told us, “The idea of us all becoming Jack Welch is nonsense.”

In our view, there are no universal leadership characteristics. What works for one leader will not work for another. We think that those aspiring to leadership need to discover what it is about themselves that they can mobilize in a leadership context. They need to identify and deploy their own personal leadership assets.

Our position is different from much contemporary thinking. This insists that effective leadership rests upon full self-knowledge. This sometimes leads to excessive concern with the inner drives of the leader and finds expression in some formulations of emotional intelligence (EI) and more broadly in the psychoanalytic literature on leadership. No doubt EI is a highly useful life skill, but our observations of leaders suggest that few develop full self-knowledge. Rather, our experience suggests that effective leaders have an overarching sense of purpose together with sufficient self-knowledge of their potential leadership assets. They don’t know it all, but they know enough.

Against this backdrop of increasing demand for leadership, an organizational predisposition to kill leadership, and an inadequate understanding of what leadership entails and requires, the key question is:

**How Can We Become More Effective As Leaders and As Developers of Leaders?**

The answer, we believe, lies in an explicit recognition of three fundamental axioms about leadership.