



The Signature Voice

the quarterly newsletter for clients and friends of Isis Associates

2008: The Age of Authenticity?

These days, it seems we cannot turn our head without the word “authenticity” in our faces. If authenticity was a product, it would surely be a hot seller. Clearly, the game of being authentic has become high stakes - - one only needs to watch the pundits square off on Hilary Clinton vs. Barack Obama or Mitt Romney vs. Mike Huckabee to see how high stakes it is. But what is authenticity? And, is it really as important as the weight we put on it? When asked the meaning of being authentic, most folks surface ideas of “being true to oneself”, “being comfortable in one’s own skin”, “walking the talk”. The problem is that these are all self-centered attributes focused on how one feels about oneself. According to Webster’s dictionary, authenticity is “a state of being that can be believed, is trusted and deemed reliable.” Authenticity is thereby a relational behavior rather than a self-centered one. To be truly authentic, one must not only be able to be comfortable with herself, but also comfortably connect with others.

Take a coaching client, Mark, a vice-president of a technology company. When we first met, he asked me what I thought of him. Given that I had only briefly interacted with him up to that point, it was a risky question to answer - - yet a very important one given what I had observed thus far. Here was my response: “Clearly you are intelligent, ambitious and passionate about the work that you do. You appear to always have the ‘right’ answer to my questions yet I wonder if they are your ‘real’ answers. I feel like you tell me what you think I want to hear. So I’ll be curious to find out if others in your organization are experiencing you the same way.” My response was a hypothesis - - his 360 feedback from his peers and boss provided the data to drive the point home. Mark was seen as someone whom you never knew where he stood on the issues nor where you stood with him. His colleagues had over time lost trust in him because they were never sure if what he said was truly what he meant. This was a clear example of showing lack of authenticity because of an inability to be comfortable with one’s own perspective, stance and direction nor connecting to what others need. As a leader, others want to know where you stand so they know whether to follow or walk with you - - they do not want to have to guess or be blindsided midstream.

While there is not a quick fix to increasing one’s authenticity, there are several focus areas that will certainly help you get on a positive path. We refer to them as the 3 P’s: Point of View, Position, and Personal History.

Point of View: By articulating his point of view on organizational issues, challenges and disagreements, Mark became more comfortable speaking his mind and being challenged on it. Having a point of view is critical to being authentic. Being open and willing to engage in exchanges on that point of view accentuates your leadership even further by demonstrating both strength and flexibility in the midst of challenges and change.

Positioning: While taking a position is important, over-positioning yourself within an organization is detrimental. Know the difference between navigating the political waters of your organization vs. actually becoming the politics itself. Mark became more forthright in his efforts to implement change in the organization - - rather than working primarily behind the scenes, he encouraged an open forum on the issues. Get support for your initiatives but be transparent about what you are doing, why you are doing it and how you are doing it.

Personal History: At the core, one needs to connect with their personal history and identify the key events, messages, people that shaped who they are today. Growing up, Mark did not come from a privileged socio-economic background. When he was sent to elite schools at a young age, the message he received was “to survive in this system, you need to watch your back and not rock the boat.” While that message might have served him well then, it was no longer serving him in the corporate leadership world. Exploring your personal history will often surface messages that are worth reexamining in order to truly express your authentic self.

As the path to Election 2008 continues and we watch with interest the pundits argue who is authentic and who is not, reflect on your own path: if you were the candidate, what would we be saying about your authenticity?

-Muriel Maignan Wilkins

Quarterly Reflection: Path to Authenticity

“To attract followers, a leader has to be many things to many people. The trick is to pull that off while remaining true to yourself.”

--Robert Goffee + Gareth Jones

Reflection Questions:

1. What do people think you stand for? What point of view do you take on the various dimensions of your work and personal life?
2. Observe how you navigate your organization and your relationships. To what extent do you seek to understand and consider other's agendas without becoming too chameleon-like?
3. What steps can you take tomorrow to engender trust from others yet remain true to yourself?

Quarterly Book Selection: Power of Full Engagement

What dog-eared, highlight-filled books are on our bookshelves that we find ourselves turning to time and time again and frequently recommending to others? Here's our book selection for this quarter:

“Power of Full Engagement”

By Jim Loehr and Tony Schwartz

“The number of hours in a day is fixed, but the quantity and quality of energy available to us is not. This fundamental insight has the power to revolutionize the way you live.” In this easy to read book, Jim Loehr and Tony Schwartz expand our understanding of classic time management by providing a new distinction that managing our energy is a far more powerful leverage point.

The authors draw upon years of working with world-class athletes in professional sports to offer up a framework for corporate professionals to manage their energy. One of the best concepts offered in the book is in chapter ten, “taking action: the power of positive rituals”. The authors explain how rituals help to build structure in our lives, offer comfort, continuity, and most importantly, conserve our precious energy of conscious will and discipline. *“Great performers, whether they are athletes or fighter pilots, surgeons or Special Forces soldiers, FBI agents or CEOs, all rely on positive rituals to manage their energy and achieve their goals.”*

The book offers lots of real-life examples of rituals that business professionals have adopted to help manage and improve their energy in four domains: physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual. The examples offer readers a repertoire of creative ideas for building rituals into their own lives. The examples also highlight the importance of the first “30-60 days of acquisition” where the description of the ritual and timing of it are critical.

Beyond the tactics of managing energy, the authors also do a nice job of tying personal change and behavior to purpose and our most deeply held values. They remind us that ultimately change is powered “from the top down...purpose becomes a more powerful and enduring source of energy in our lives in three ways: when its source move from negative to positive, external to internal, and self to others.”

From the Coach's Corner: "New Year's Resolution #1: Build Executive Endurance"

From the Client:

"Every year I hope to start the New Year feeling energized and refreshed. Unfortunately, I am heading back into the office feeling harried and behind. I would really like to feel on top of things and develop better time management skills. My position in the organization was expanded earlier this year and it has been exhausting appearing "on top of things" all the time. I know there have been "cracks" as in my last performance review, my peers gave feedback that I often appear stressed and should better manage that perception. I am looking ahead at a big year – what can I do to improve this situation?"

From the Coach's Corner:

First of all, recognize you are not alone. In this 24-7 world of blackberries, cell phones, and increasing business demands, stress and tension have become a part of our external world today. More than ever, leaders are in need of building the executive endurance needed to both gracefully get through the every day fire-drill sprints while maintaining the overall conditioning needed for the marathon ahead. This level of endurance becomes especially critical as you become more senior in your organization with increased responsibility and demands.

Executive endurance is comprised of three major pillars– each one interdependent on the others – the synergy of the three helping leaders better perform at peak effectiveness and efficiency each day.

Pillar #1: Time Management

How do you currently manage your time? Are you clear on your priorities? Having a formal daily action list at the start of each day can help you be more intentional about how and when you will use your time. Be careful not to dive straight into email or focus all your time on non-important tasks or tasks you enjoy/prefer only. Be realistic about how long things take and what can be accomplished in a day.

How do you schedule your time? Focus on scheduling things in "time chunks" leaving yourself chunks of focused, productive work time not carved up by meetings and other people's needs. Also, focus on scheduling your highest priority work against your best energy windows during the day. If you know you do your best work early in the morning, block the first 1.5 hour of the day for yourself to move forward the most important deliverables.

Pillar #2: Relationship & Communication Management

Becoming more effective at managing relationships and communication with others is critical to building executive endurance. Do you negotiate deadlines, requests or resources with others such that both your agenda and the other person's agenda are understood and considered? Are you able to maintain a presence of flexibility and teaming while also being clear on your boundaries, constraints and needs? How effective are your requests for support? What does your communication (verbal, non-verbal, written) convey to others about your overall stress and tension level? Becoming a more sophisticated communicator, is one of the most powerful tools in building executive endurance as well as in managing others' perception of your ability to handle your current role.

Pillar #3: Self Management

For many of us, when deadlines are tight or the pressure too high, the first thing we sacrifice or compromise is our own self care. Ironically, it is during these intense periods, when we must actually increase our level of self-care and management. Your capacity to take care of the business, the organization, or your team is directly connected to your level of taking care of yourself and/or having a network of support in place to help you.

Building executive endurance requires first the realization that during busy periods when energy is flowing out – like a battery, you must recharge or put energy back in. Consider creating "bite-size" rituals or support systems that nourish you physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. (see this quarter's book review for great ideas). A 15 minute walk in the middle of your day or a 1/2 hour massage during a particularly difficult week will ultimately increase your overall productivity.

This New Year's take a step back and consider building your executive endurance and overall capacity. The paradox in this: "sometimes it takes slowing down to go stronger and faster."

-Amy Jen Su

Note: Adapted from Isis Associates' "Time Management for Top Performance" program