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# Two steps to success

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# Two steps to success

**Christopher Smith outlines the twin pillars of authentic leadership: relationships and alignment Published by Training Journal, February 2011.**

Leading authentically is all about alignment and relationships. Authentic leaders need to sustain a high quality of relationships within an organisation, with its stakeholders and the community in which it operates. The best also create an alignment between their own values and ambitions, and those of the people in an organisation, and a shared purpose or endeavour.

Leadership is not about the heroics of those at the top but must be exhibited by people throughout an organisation if their common purpose is to be achieved.

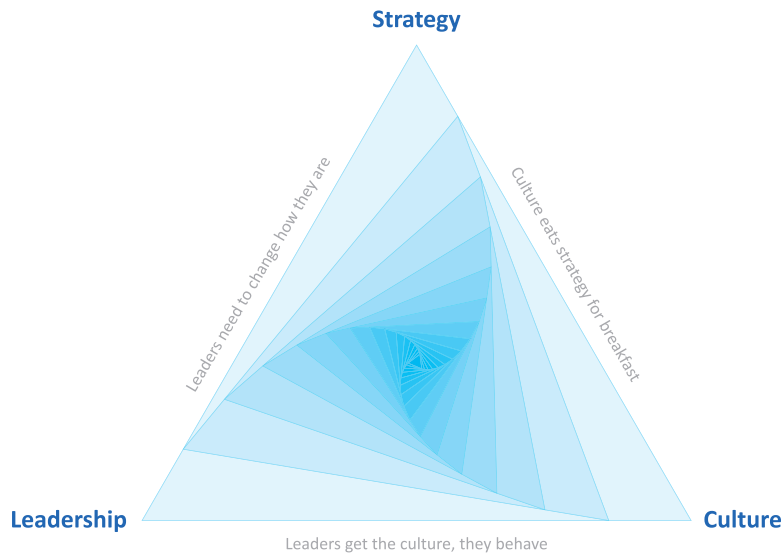
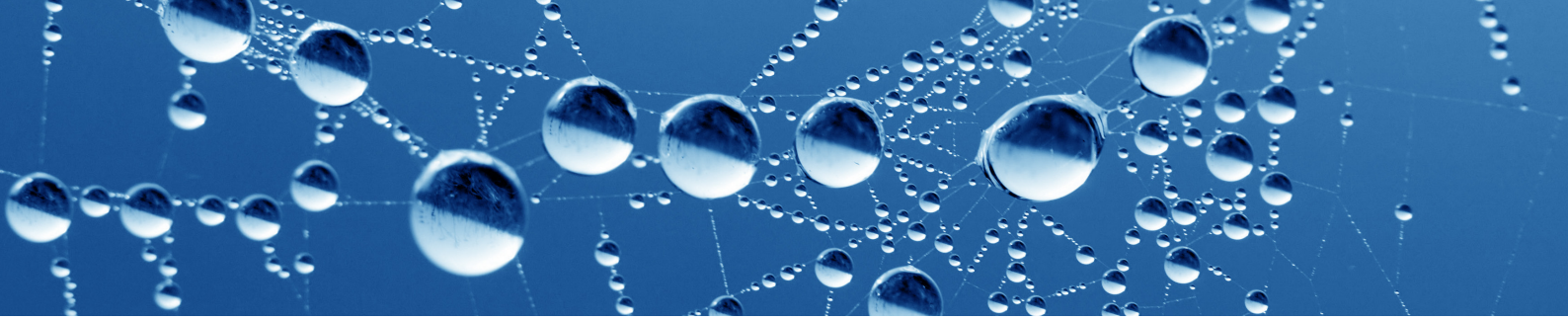
*“A leader is best when the people are hardly aware of his existence, Not so good when people stand in fear, Worse when people are contemptuous. Fail to honour people, and they will fail to honour you, But a good leader who speaks little, When the task is accomplished, his work is done! The people will say, ‘We did it ourselves’.” - Lao Tzu, ‘Tao TeChing’*

All organisations operate in dynamic environments and, if they do not change in line with them, they are not standing still but effectively going backwards. The most progressive organisations look to shape changes in their environment.

In any organisation there is an iterative interconnection between the strategic direction, the culture (the way things are done) and the leadership. Alignment between these is essential for success in delivering performance and moving toward the common purpose. Authentic leaders have an important role in enabling these changes through sense-making, encouraging realignment and shifting how things are done. The quality of their relationships, the trust they establish and their ability to see issues from the perspective of others influence their capacity to lead through change, strategy and purpose.

A significant role in authentic leadership is to align the underlying purpose of the organisation with the strategy and finding ways to engage others in the process so that they can make the connections for themselves.

The leader does not have to work it all out and tell others, but rather has to orchestrate the process. He needs to have an outward perspective himself and to encourage others to have the same. He also needs to be aware of the internal capabilities and capacities that indicate the potential of the organisation. These frame the strategic choices that are available in pursuit of the organisation’s purpose.



In our experience, most leaders spend very little time formally generating or reviewing strategy. They spend much more of their time asking questions to understand what is happening, establishing priorities and communicating to others the overall direction and its implications for the organisation. They have to inspire others about the common purpose, connecting it to their own lives. The authentic leader has a

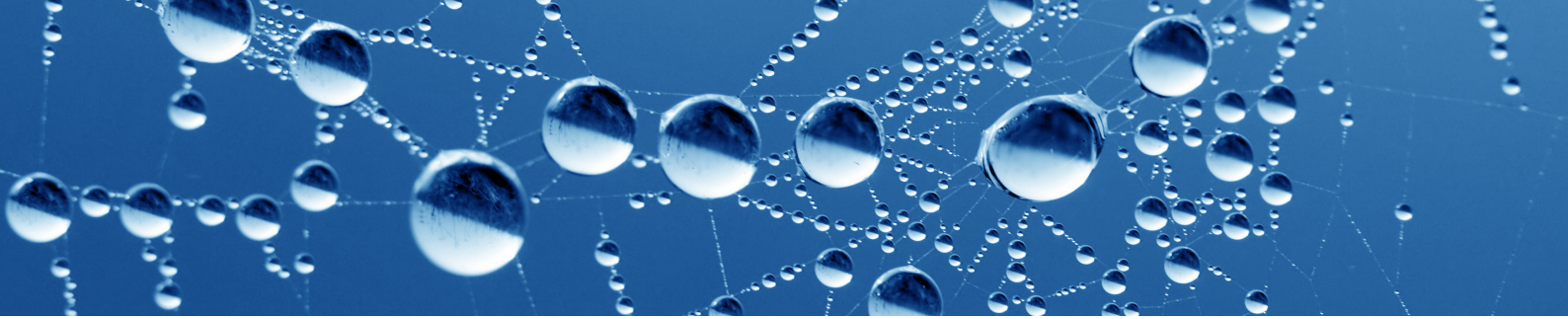
genuine and visible commitment to, and belief in the value of, that purpose. It is not simply mouthing the right words when needed: people readily identify insincerity and, when they sense it, will become cynical about the leader and the organisation.

The clarity of the leader's belief in the purpose of the organisation and his commitment to achieving it – his passion – are central to his ability to engage, align and energise others. Passion is infectious and will excite others, while indifference or a purely transactional approach will rapidly be picked up on and reflected in the attitudes of others.

**The leader's ability to build effective relations and generate trust depends in part on whether he is seen to be consistent and true to his own values.**

## Engaging people in the need for change

For people to understand the need for change – to see how they will have to do things differently and to commit to moving from where they are now – requires leaders who can connect the strategic direction and the environmental context with the work that people are doing throughout the organisation. If people are clear about the direction and the reasons for change, they can begin to find their own ways to move themselves and the organisation.



**It is a role of the authentic leader to bring to life a vision for the organisation.**

It is a role of the authentic leader to bring to life a vision for the organisation: where it is headed and why it matters to the leader, to people in the organisation and to those it serves. This is about connecting people to the underlying purpose and putting their work and actions into this context. Increasingly, in a world of knowledge workers who have considerable flexibility in what they do, where and with whom, it is about helping them to align what they value in life with the purpose and values of the organisation.

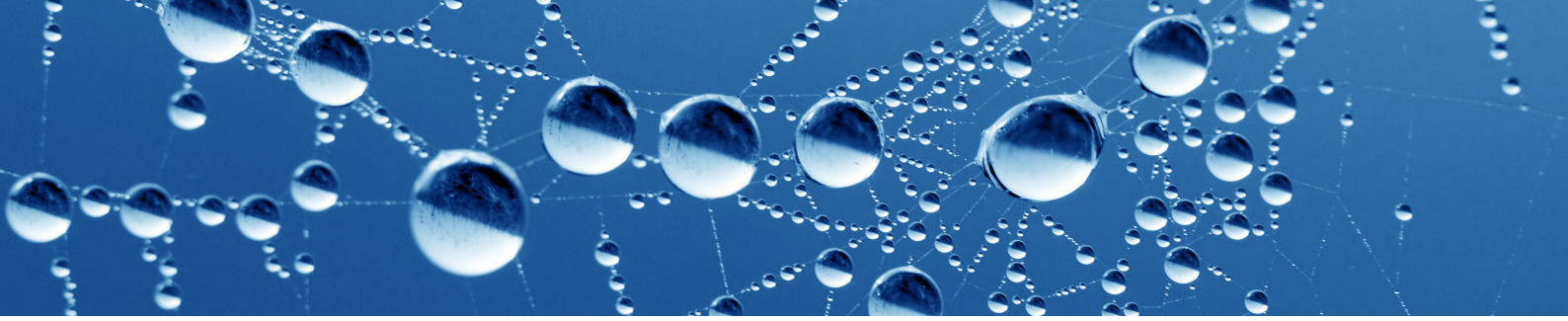
The leader's role can be about sensing what is emergent in the world around him as well as in the organisation itself and articulating these patterns and connections so that others identify with what is said. The leader puts his finger on something others understand and agree with, even if they could not quite say it themselves. It also releases them to make sense of what is happening in their own part of the organisation: they can connect the wider insights and direction to their local context and make decisions and take action accordingly.

Having the vision and the strategic story is not enough, of course. To engage people, one needs to understand their reality, to come alongside them and at least partly see the world from their perspective. Only when they feel that they are understood – why they are enthused or resistant, excited or worried – will the leader begin to gain their trust.

This trust enables them to make the changes in the way they do things that are needed to realise the strategy. It is not about the leader having the answers for them. It is about setting the questions, providing the frames of reference that help them see how things are and how they might be different. It is then about releasing their capabilities and their energy to bring about the change needed. Again, this is a continuing process, not a one-off event. Leadership is partly about the quality of dialogue generated with the leader, between others in the organisation and with those at the boundaries.

The leader's ability to build effective relations and generate trust depends in part on whether he is seen to be consistent and true to his own values – this is true authenticity. It is interesting how many leaders we have met who feel they should establish values for their organisation without ever having reflected deeply on their own values: what really matters in their lives.

This is not to say that the authentic leader cannot make mistakes or fall short of his intent – this only makes him human. It is to say that he should be clear about what he stands for and believes in, and he should align his actions to achieve this.



**Ten limiting mindsets in understanding organisational leadership: A provocation**

Below are some common limiting mindsets that we have encountered about leadership, together with a counterpoint to challenge this thinking.

Limiting Mindsets	Counterpoint
Leadership is what is done by leaders	There is no leadership without a leader, a follower and a shared endeavour
Leadership resides in the individual	It resides in the pattern of relationships between people - how the leaders connect and are given authority in the first place
Leadership resides at the top	Leadership is distributed throughout the organisation, wherever responsibility needs to be taken
Leaders are about affecting change within the organisation	Leaders are those who affect change but who are also willing to be changed by what they encounter both within and beyond the organisation. Leadership happens at the boundaries
Leaders set the vision and direction for others to follow	Leadership starts by empathic listening, then challenging, then orchestrating
Leaders need to get people to understand	Leaders need to engage hearts, will and mind, in true dialogue
Leadership is judgement	Leadership begins when you stop blaming others or making excuses
Leadership is developed by individuals going on leadership courses	Leadership development is a mix of challenging experience and supported reflection
Leaders are the organisational heroes	True leaders take risks by giving credit to others and creating others as leaders
Leaders have the answers	The key to leadership lies in the quality of the questions that are asked