

# Are you an authentic leader?

By Christine Long

Granted: being honest, transparent and collaborative can earn you brownie points as a boss. But are there times when it's better to keep your "true self" under wraps?

Dean Ramler, chief executive and co-founder, Milan Direct, doesn't think so.

"Life is too short to fake it," he says. "I am a firm believer in managing my team in a very direct way. When someone does something great, I will sing their praises."

And if someone doesn't live up to the company's standards, he doesn't bother "sugar-coating" his feedback.

"Running an online business is such a fast-paced environment there is no time to be anything but direct, blunt and authentic."

Aaron Zamykal, chief executive, Slim Nation, takes a different view. He describes his personal style as "very direct", but he's learnt to temper it to get the best out of his team.

"I know that when I'm talking to people I have to soften my approach. I have to listen, I have to ask great questions and build empathy. Because my personality can be strong, I don't want to come across as a jackhammer and not build that rapport first," he says. "I think about that every day."

Sandi Givens has spent 26 years teaching authentic leadership in hundreds of organisations.

She points out that to be authentic, you have to know who you are in the first place.

"Many leaders – through little fault of their own – don't even know what is authentic for them," she says. "Their levels of self-awareness are low; their ability to deal with others who operate differently to them is limited; and being

able to discern when their emotions are clouding their judgments and decision-making is a skill that eludes many."

Here are five reasons why you might want to rethink always "being yourself" at work.

**1) Being authentic isn't permission to stay in your comfort zone, never growing.**

"Leaders need to be learners," Givens says. "It's not about changing who you are, because I think the most important thing is to be you and to be real and authentic, but it's about expanding your capability."

**2) If being honest or transparent is undermining your effectiveness as a leader.**

If someone's definition of authenticity is being totally transparent, they may tell a team member who is pushing their buttons they are a "pain in the neck to work with", Givens says.

"I think that is not useful as a leader."

Likewise, she suggests honest admissions of vulnerability need to be held in check in "highly political, unhealthy, back-stabbing environments".

To work, she says, authenticity requires a culture of acceptance.

"Authentic leadership would probably be viewed with scepticism by people who are working in an environment where they didn't feel safe to be authentic themselves."

**3) If it's leading you to rely on values-based judgments or "gut feel" rather than solid data.**

Phil Owens, founder, The Bigger Game, says: "A great leader will listen to his emotional self; will trust his intuition to a point but then test it with rigour before he makes any actions based upon it."

**4) If you need to adapt your style to get the best out of your team. Authentic leadership requires exceptional self-awareness.**

"I think, sadly, a lot of leaders aren't aware of what their personality traits are; how that can come across to people; how that can impact people," she says.

Owens agrees, saying: "If your style is to be hands-off and your people want to be micro-managed then you're going to create conflict and low performance unless you work through that. The trick is awareness – authenticity and self-awareness is critical – but then you need a filter as to how you're going to apply that to get the highest performance out of the business and the people that you're working with."

To build self-awareness, Zamykal has undertaken several profiling exercises over the years, both on himself, and his staff, and even extended the process to job applicants.

"I think the more self-aware you are, the more ability you have to manage yourself in certain circumstances," he says. "[It's about] being open to other people's emotions or how they perceive you and understanding how they perceive themselves."

Owens says, though, it's important to be aware that profiling simply indicates a preferred style.

It can be damaging if people attach a label to themselves and think that's all they can be.

## **5) If your usual style isn't producing the goods.**

"That's just my style" isn't going to cut it if you're not getting the runs on the board.

Source; <http://www.theage.com.au/small-business/managing/are-you-an-authentic-leader-20150224-13btoi.html>