

# Authentic leaders promote psychological safety

**H**OW do you define an authentic leader?

In his 2003 book, *Authentic Leadership: Rediscovering the Secrets to Creating Lasting Value*, author Bill George mapped key behaviours for an authentic leader. He did this by using the Authentic Action Wheel that includes five constructs. Each construct's purpose is to encourage not only ideas but also behaviours as to how the leader is to engage their employees each day:

- **Purpose** — facilitates opportunity for passion
- **Values** — facilitates behaviours that are aligned to values
- **Relationships** — facilitates the importance of building strong connectedness with team
- **Self-discipline** — facilitates need to be consistent and steady in both good and hard times
- **Heart** — facilitates the benefit for displaying compassion and empathy for team's wellbeing

Though the theory behind authentic leadership is still forming at the core, an authentic leader is self-aware, demonstrates they care about their people, puts the organization's needs ahead of themselves, focuses on the long term, and isn't afraid to show their vulnerability.

Psychologically safe cultures require au-

thentic leadership.

The National Standard on Psychological Health and Safety, published by the CSA Group in partnership with the Mental Health Commission of Canada, promotes two main goals:

- Create a workplace that is psychologically safe, such as by allowing no significant harm or injury to employee mental health in negligent, reckless or intentional ways. For an organization to achieve this goal requires leadership to be willing to take all reasonable actions to protect employee mental health. Recently, a former French Telecom CEO was jailed for “institutional harassment” that was linked to several employees' suicide. This event suggests that protecting employees' psychological health and safety matters, and leaders may be held accountable when they fail to do this.
- Promote a psychologically healthy workplace where every leader puts in place resources and support that ensure every reasonable effort is made to promote the mental health of all employees.

Key tenets for creating a psychologically safe workplace are leadership buy-in and support. Without them, it's difficult, as they create expectations for how the culture will operate and how all managers are expected to behave.

For an organization to maximize its opportunity to create a psychologically healthy and safe workplace requires senior leadership to demonstrate they really care about their employees. Anything less than putting a stake in the sand and making it clear that psychological health and safety are critical and will be key performance metrics is nothing more than fake caring.

Leadership actions can predict a psychologically safe workplace

No single program or strategy is as important as to what senior leadership says and does with respect to promoting psychological safety. Senior leaders set the framework for culture and influence the importance of their organization's values through their role modeling and monitoring. They shape the philosophy as to how managers are expected to interact with their direct reports; they set the tone for no tolerance for employee abuse of any kind; they model the degree of humility and caring to be demonstrated to employees; and they determine how much they care about the employee experience to achieve the organization's business objectives.

Many senior leaders still don't remotely model any authentic leadership attributes. They are, for the most part, command-and-control leaders much more focused on results than their employees' experience. I recall meeting one of these leaders when I was working in Wall Street. I said to them, "I know it's inconvenient, but you know you really need people to make this business work." I'll never forget their response, "I know, but that doesn't mean I need to like it."

Society is evolving with respect to how employees must be treated. One needs only

notice the changes happening within occupational health and safety legislation, human rights, and labour codes across Canada.

Authentic leaders pay attention to how their words and behaviours impact their audience. Clearly, the French Telecom CEO was totally ignorant or didn't care about how the organization was managing its people through organizational change.

The more an organization's leadership and managers embrace authentic leadership, the higher the probability employees' psychological health and safety will be supported and protected. Without a psychologically healthy and safe workforce, an organization's sustainability is at risk. Employees are becoming clearer of their rights as well as the kind of workplace they want to work in and will accept.

## TIPS FOR BECOMING AN AUTHENTIC LEADER

- Seek honest feedback. Constantly look for real-time feedback on how others are seeing and experiencing you.
- Reflect daily on your leadership style. Pause at the end of each day and reflect where you could improve and where you did well within the five authentic leadership constructs.
- Be clear on purpose. Start each day with a clear vision of your purpose and commitments to your people and why focusing on them is more important than personal metrics.
- Take time to build authentic relationships. Get to know your people, what's important to them, what they care about, and how you can support them.