



WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE AN AUTHENTIC LEADER?

Thinkers50, the organisation that produces the world's most prestigious ranking of management thinkers, also publishes the Thinkers50 Radar - a list of 30 management thinkers most likely to shape the future of how organisations are managed and led.

In the first of a series of interviews with these thought leaders, Deputy Editor [Sue Stockdale](#) talks to [Margarita Mayo](#), Professor of Leadership at IE Business School in Madrid, whose research is in the field of authentic leadership.

One of the most pressing issues that we face in society these days is a lack of trust. People are less willing to trust leaders because we have seen so many cases of corruption or corporate scandals, and they are unlikely to trust someone just because they hold a certain title or position. The antidote to this may be the notion of *authentic leadership*, a topic that Margarita Mayo has been researching for the last 20 years.

It was a warm spring day in Madrid when I spoke to Professor Mayo, a relaxed but passionate academic whose personal story embodies all the characteristics of authentic leadership that she espouses in others. Margarita is a psychologist by training and loves philosophy. She grew up in a small town with a humble background and her fair share of adversity. In the workplace she saw how some

people took things for granted, whereas she had to work hard to progress. Having got the opportunity to obtain a Fulbright Scholarship to the US, she admired those who were authentic and true to themselves and did good for others, which inspired her to begin her research to be able to tell their stories.

Mayo, whose research has been published widely, describes authentic leadership as 'being yourself, but also being true to yourself and to others', and has identified three characteristics that differentiate authentic leaders from others, which are heart, habits and harmony. She is keen to encourage coaches to help leaders explore these areas with their clients, to help them identify behaviours that will enable them to become authentic and remain authentic over time.



HOW HEART IS KEY TO AUTHENTIC LEADERSHIP

A leader's ability to make their passion contagious is one of the characteristics that Mayo believes is vital to being an authentic leader. It's how they motivate others through their emotional appeal and develop an inspirational vision for others to follow. Mayo believes it is important to look at your personal story. She comments, 'one of the things I discovered was that authentic leaders embrace this and they are able to tell you what they have done in life and learned as a result. Their sense of self-awareness is very balanced, with equal attention being given to both strengths and weaknesses. This is important because when you have a balanced view you can provide more effective feedback for other people to help and contribute to their development.

'It's not just about me, me, me but they are much more other-centred. They use their life stories to teach their values and beliefs and philosophy of management.' She cites Sheryl Sandberg, COO of Facebook, as an example. Sandberg showed vulnerability and shared her difficulties when her husband passed away suddenly, and was in tears at times. She has talked about the lessons she learned from her personal challenges as a way of inspiring others. Mayo explains that vulnerability is different for women and

men. Some are fearful that it will result in a loss of power and show weakness. However, the benefit to a leader is that vulnerability can develop trust with stakeholders, their wider audience and employees. One entrepreneur Mayo spoke to in Italy has a winery, a family business with a long history. This man displays his private self to new employees by sharing with them the history of the business. His staff relate to him at a more personal level and he has now developed a more trusting relationship with them.

THE HABIT OF CONTINUAL CHANGE

Another facet of authentic leadership is the power of habit - the habit of changing. Mayo has found from her research that most authentic leaders have a growth mindset, a term coined by psychologist Carol Dweck to define the underlying beliefs people have about learning and intelligence. When people believe they can get smarter, and that effort makes them stronger, they put in extra time and effort, which leads to higher achievement. Mayo says 'authentic leaders are constantly asking questions because they want to improve. Many of the authentic leaders I have met have faced and overcome many difficulties in life and through these critical events they have developed resilience and set themselves new habits.'

HARMONY BETWEEN YOURSELF AND OTHERS

The final characteristic that is important for authentic leadership, according to Mayo, is to be true to others and go beyond the here and now. For example, many of the leaders she has interviewed have a concern for how they are going to be remembered 20 years from now. They build a context for others to grow. She says 'authentic leaders are architects. They build social scaffolding, with a caring mindset and put employees first. This can translate into policies in their organisations that are going to last and be their legacy. One example of this is Indra Nooyi, CEO of Pepsico. She believes it is her obligation to pull others up and to build the future.'

While I agreed with Mayo's notion of authentic leadership, I wondered if the true assessment of authenticity comes from third-party feedback rather than one's own self-perception. Mayo responded, 'there is usually a gap between self-perception and other perceptions. However, the smaller the gap, the more authentic you are. We tend to be over-estimators. When we receive the feedback from others, some people then realign their views to the views of others. My research shows that women tend to do this more, whereas men keep inflating their views of themselves. The implications are that women may be more in touch with who they are and therefore are able to learn, but the downside is that with getting feedback their self-confidence goes down, and this may result in them being less willing to take on new positions. Men, however, with their higher self-esteem, are more likely to engage in action-oriented behaviour to take on new positions.'

'From a coaching perspective,' Mayo says, 'we can help individuals to use their authenticity strategically to become more learning oriented, and to make sure they focus on strengths as well as weaknesses. For women, we must encourage them to seek jobs where there are good opportunities to develop. When assessing a career opportunity, they should be able to do maybe 60 to 70% of the role already, and the rest is going to come doing the job.'

Mayo's research contains several points of relevance for coaches. Not only can we encourage our clients to tell their personal stories, and develop greater self-awareness, but we can also encourage them to demonstrate vulnerability and to think about what they want their legacy to be within the organisation. But we coaches must also look in the mirror and apply these points to ourselves, particularly in terms of building trust with our clients, and the degree to which we feel comfortable showing our own vulnerability.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sue Stockdale is an accredited executive coach and coaching supervisor. Her clients include leaders in business, elite sport and not-for-profit organisations. She was the first British woman to ski to the Magnetic North Pole and has represented Scotland in track and field athletics. As an author, Sue has written and co-authored eight books including *Cope with Change at Work*, (Teach Yourself Books 2012); *The Personality Workbook* (Teach Yourself Books 2013); and *Risk: All that Matters* (Hodder & Stoughton 2015). She is Deputy Editor of *Coaching Perspectives*.



ABOUT MARGARITA MAYO

Margarita Mayo is Professor of Leadership at IE Business School. She is a Fulbright Alumna of Harvard University and has taught at some of the world's leading business schools. Her publications have appeared in the *Harvard Business Review* and in leading academic journals. Her media commentary has appeared in the *Financial Times*, *Fortune*, *The Guardian*, *Forbes Magazine* and other publications. Margarita was educated in Europe and the United States. Her upcoming book *Yours Truly: How to Stay True to Your Authentic Self in Leadership and Life* (Bloomsbury, 2018) is the distillation of her global research for over 20 years.
