



# AUTHENTICITY AT WORK: BE HONEST, IS IT A GOOD THING?

by Adrian Furnham

**It is often said that honesty is the best policy. But if we apply that maxim invariably and unquestioningly, does that automatically make us better people, or just naïve and incapable of evaluating our situation? In business, for example, is unflinching bluntness a quality to be espoused or eschewed? Adrian Furnham gives us an honest assessment.**

**M**any people say they value authenticity at work. They want to be themselves and express their real emotions. And they want all others to do likewise, particularly their boss and colleagues.

The word “authentic” implies that one always gives a faithful, honest, and accurate account of personal beliefs, preferences, and desires. It means genuine, *bona fide*, and honest, while the antonym implies dodgy, dishonest, and insincere.

We are told by the gurus that “authentic” leaders have all sorts of virtues: they tend to be more self-aware, more disciplined and inspiring, and more liked and trusted by all stakeholders. Thoroughly good egg; very desirable type.

Being authentic with others always and everywhere seems like a good idea, even a fundamental right. But is this possible in business, particularly the service industry? What if you don’t like, admire, or trust a colleague or customer? Are you being inauthentic if you don’t show it or – worse – if you express the opposite?

It is a “course requirement” to understand that, as we used to say, “the customer is king” and to do everything to please him or her. To be professional often means covering up your “personal circumstances” when you are at work.

There are a number of psychological concepts that relate to the idea of authenticity that are worth exploring.

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## IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT

The sociologist Erving Goffman coined the term “impression management” 70 years ago. It is the act of presenting a favourable public image

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of oneself, so that others will form positive judgements. It is used by some psychologists as a synonym for “dissimulation” or, more crudely, lying. It is what people do at selection interviews and sometimes when filling out questionnaires.

Most people try to create a good impression which may, at the very least, mean being “economical with the truth”. This is why the selection interview is a hall of smoke and mirrors where both sides try to get behind the (carefully presented) façade and find the truth.

Can, or indeed should, one be “authentic” at a job interview or a press conference? Is that not a recipe for failure, rejection, or humiliation? Ever heard a politician saying they are unsure, paralysed with fear, or simply overwhelmed?

Goffman is also well known for his dramaturgical model which makes three distinctions. Being on the “front stage”, where people are conscious or aware of their behaviour while (performing) “on stage” in front of others. It means playing a part for the public, whoever they may be. The opposite situation is called “backstage”. Being backstage is where the person is not acting or performing for others – no make-up, no lines, no pretence. In this sense, authentic. Third, there is “offstage”, which occurs when a person is neither front nor backstage. They are unaware of others observing them and are not conscious of being watched.

So does the authentic person not distinguish between being front stage and backstage? Are they the same whomever they are with? Is that healthy or desirable? Discuss.

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## SELF-MONITORING

For 50 years, psychologists have talked about “self-monitoring”, defined as the tendency to

notice (visual, vocal, verbal) cues for socially appropriate behaviour. And, more importantly, to be able and willing to modify one’s behaviour accordingly.

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High self-monitors emphasise the public self and, like actors, seem to be asking, “What role should I be playing in this situation?” Low self-monitors are more interested in their personal value systems and private realities. The central question asked by the low self-monitors is, “How can I be the person I truly am in this situation?”

High self-monitors choose careers in politics and PR, theatre and diplomacy. They are



happy selling things and themselves. They do presentations, in every sense of the word, well. Low self-monitors choose the helping professions and prefer being in groups like themselves.

Clearly, high self-monitors are better at reading non-verbal cues and adjusting their behaviour accordingly. They are highly socially flexible and adaptable. Some would say social chameleons, inauthentic, all things to all people. Low self-monitors are honest to themselves and their beliefs and can be seen as stubborn and socially unskilled.

These two types respond to people and products rather differently. High self-monitors rate image-oriented advertisements and products as more appealing and effective, and seem willing to pay more for the product. By contrast, low self-monitors react more favourably to product-quality-oriented advertisements.

A useful distinction in selection and promotion? The serious-minded, low self-monitor who wants at all times to be able to be authentic at work. The flashy high self-monitor who can fit in as the occasion demands.

## POLITICAL SKILL

Office “politics” is a bad word, but office “savvy” or “political skill” are good. American and German psychologists have shown that you can assess the extent to which a person is politically skilful and that this predicts success at work.

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**Political skill has been defined as the ability to effectively understand others at work and to use such knowledge to influence others to act in ways that enhance one’s personal and/or organisational objectives.**

and/or organisational objectives. It has four distinct components. **Social astuteness:** This is about being perceptive, insightful, attuned to all the vagaries and nuances of everyday interactions. **Interpersonal influence:** This is about being persuasive in different contexts. It inevitably means being adaptable and flexible. **Networking ability:**

This is understanding the usefulness of, and more importantly to be able to establish, a range of alliances, coalitions, and friendship networks.

The fourth component is **Apparent sincerity:** Being able

to look authentic and genuine on all occasions *irrespective of what you really think or feel*. It is the ability not to show coerciveness, manipulation, or that one has hidden motives. Thus, what you see is not always what you get! Sincerity is therefore part of showmanship. It is good acting and really understanding and displaying appropriate emotions, even if you do not feel them.

There is a questionnaire which measures this. Items include the following: “It is important that people always believe I am sincere in what I say and do”; and, “I try to show a genuine interest in other people.”

The message is clear: being able to look interested, committed, and sincere is a useful skill, particularly when you are not. In this, being authentic might simply indicate a lack of skill in this department.



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## EMOTIONAL LABOUR

There are three types of labour: physical or manual labour, intellectual or cognitive labour, and emotional labour. Even before the craze for emotional intelligence, it was recognised that many workers were required to display certain emotions as part of the job. This has been called “emotional labour”, which means hiding or suppressing real feelings while displaying other, even opposite emotions. The job may require “appropriate emotions” which have to be displayed more or less intently than would come naturally. Waiters and nurses, gardeners and fitness trainers, accountants and attorneys, psychotherapists and independent financial advisers all have to fake emotion: concern, interest, enthusiasm, and so on.

The term was first used in a book called *The Managed Heart* and subtitled *Commercialization of Human Feeling*. It was published 40 years ago and was a study of commercial jet flight crew.

Those who work in the field have distinguished between “surface acting”, which occurs when employees display the emotions required for a job without changing how they actually feel. On the other hand, “deep acting” is an effortful process through which workers change their internal feelings to align with organisational expectations, producing more natural and genuine emotional displays.

The objective of both is typically to show positive emotions, which are presumed to influence the satisfaction of customers and bottom-line outcomes, e.g., sales, positive recommendations, and repeat business. So questionnaires that assess this concept ask questions such as: “I put on an act in order to deal with people at work in an appropriate way”; “I just pretend to have the emotions I need to display for my job”; “I make an effort to actually feel the emotions that I need to display toward others”; and, “The emotions I express to people at work are genuine.”

The question is, therefore, whether emotional labour is essentially an effort to conceal, rather than reveal, true thoughts and feelings. A requirement to be inauthentic!

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## SUPERFICIAL CHARM

Then there is the dark side of inauthenticity. One of the key markers of a genuine psychopath is their superficial and glib charm. This is why they are most successful and lethal if they are educated, good-looking, and intelligent.

There are, in the literature, dozens of cases where otherwise serious “grown-ups” have been conned by the sweet-talking psychopath.

Psychopaths are often considered to be charming, engaging, and smooth, due to a lack of self-consciousness which frees them from the inhibitions and worries about saying the wrong thing that can cause others to be more socially awkward. However, it is not this, but lack of conscience (super-ego) that is the problem. They are deeply inauthentic liars ... all the time.

Studies show that chief executives with high psychopathy scores tend to be seen as charismatic, creative, and adept at communicating. They tell people what they want to hear, and are praised for their perspicacity, insight, and courage ... until they are found out.



The essence of psychopathy, as opposed to Machiavellianism, is that the former have no guilt, no “still small voice” of conscience. The bright, talented, high-self-monitoring psychopath learns to appear authentic, not simply to smooth social intercourse, but to further their own ends. They are particularly dangerous the more skilful they are and rejoice in letting others believe how authentic they are.

A major book on psychopaths at work is entitled *Snakes in Suits*. Most people when they hear the word “psychopath” think of the shower scene murder in the film *Psycho*. The trouble is that the sweet-talking colleague at work is more likely to be one. Indeed, it is not clear how or whether a psychopath could be authentic, even if they wanted to be!

**SO...**

Can you be authentic yet still tell “white lies”, which are usually defined as being harmless to others – a minor “porky” that maintains politeness, social manners, and important courtesies?

Originally, white lies were seen as being nothing more than harmless fibs told in the service of embellishing tall tales.

People tell white lies when telling the truth would be too complicated, uncomfortable, or hurtful. The argument is that white lies function to censor harmful, socially awkward facts, and prevent the hurt that would result from cold, unflinching honesty.

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So is the white-lie-evading “authentic” person to be admired? Are they being so authentic because they don’t have the skills to tell white lies?

Being a grown-up and a success at work requires tact and diplomacy. It requires knowing your audience and communicating appropriately.

There is all the difference in the world between, on the one hand, a high self-monitoring, politically skilled person with emotional intelligence and, on the other, a cynical, manipulative psychopath. Is a person authentic because they don’t have the insight and skill to behave otherwise? In this sense, they have no option, but could they be a liability to themselves and others?

Or is the authentic leader one who knows when and how and where to express what they really feel. As George Burns the elderly comic said, “Sincerity – if you can fake that, you’ve got it made.”

In short, authenticity has its place; it is situationally defined and constrained. 

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**



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