

## Authenticity

### Board Room Magazine March/ April 2015

“Chris, you need to get us new tables and chairs, these ones are terrible!” This was the greeting from Mrs. Smith, a Club matriarch with 56 years of membership, to the general manager, Chris. Now in her eighties and four feet four inches in height, Mrs. Smith’s feet no longer touched the ground when she sat down, and the table was the level of her chin. “Who designed this room? I hate it and won’t eat in here ever again. You need to get some better tables and chairs.”

“Oh, Mrs. Smith, let’s get you taken care of. Jan, would you please get one of those pillows from the casual furniture for Mrs. Smith, and let’s make sure we keep it handy for her.” Jan, a waitstaff person aware of Mrs. Smith’s needs, was already heading for the pillows. “Mrs. Smith, we’ve just got to get you taller!” Chris joked, smiling warmly as Jan placed the pillow in Mrs. Smith’s chair. The other Members at the table smiled at Chris, knowing that Barbara’s complaints were a daily ritual and that she would be back to harangue Chris again the very next day.

Chris’s attitude towards Mrs. Smith in this scenario was one of empathy, warmth, and understanding, all of which came across as very *authentic* to the other Club members. We have no idea what was on Chris’s mind when the diminutive bull dog named Barbara Smith blustered into the dining room for lunch. It could very well have been something like “Oh man, not *again*. Lady, you’re four feet four and *shrinking*, it’s natural. Sure, I’ll get that pillow...” What goes on inside a person’s mind is, well, personal. Changing your own thoughts is virtually impossible. Changing your delivery, on the other hand, is a necessary skill. A great leader can keep their thoughts to themselves, choosing which sentiments they wish to express publicly and sending out signals of authenticity to their listeners.

In terms of how we govern and express our own thoughts and emotions, psychologist Mark Snyder refers to two fundamental profiles: “true-to-selfers” and “High self-monitors.” If you watch the movie *The Imitation Game* about the mathematician Alan Turing, you’ll see a good example of a true-to-selfer. In the film, Turing expresses his true thoughts clearly and mercilessly; as a result, his work team hates him. Jane, his closest and most honest workmate, tells him that his team needs to like him in order to work with him. Taking her advice, Turing brings each of his team members an apple, a gesture so uncharacteristic and blatantly inauthentic that his team members are amused. As Herminia Ibarra relates in her Harvard Business Review article *The Authenticity Paradox*, the danger to true-to-selfers is that they may stick too long with comfortable behavior that prevents them from meeting new requirements, instead of adjusting

their style as they gain insight and experience. Their reluctance to censor their own opinions to spare others' feelings may also make it difficult for them to work productively with others or navigate delicate social situations

Chris, by contrast, behaves in the opening scenario as a High self-monitor. High self-monitors are able to adapt to different situations without feeling fake, and are consequently better at projecting authenticity. One downside to this adaptability is that, as a person constantly modulates their behavior to suit the situation at hand, a person may sometimes appear to be disingenuous and lacking in character. Bill George, former Medtronic CEO and current Harvard Business School professor, suggests in his book *True North* that cultivating your authenticity takes time and practice. This process of development centers on five areas: self-awareness, values, motivations, support team, and integrated life.

Self-awareness is at the heart of true authenticity, and feedback is at the center of self-awareness. As Stanford's Joel Peterson relates, feedback is "the breakfast of champions." A manager must be on the constant lookout for feedback, and must learn which people to trust as valuable peers: self-awareness requires a person to consider a variety of different perspectives. Acceptance of feedback about your own behavior is challenging, but necessary. In crafting your authentic persona, however, it is essential not to compromise on your values. Values are the deeply-held principles that dictate your most important decisions. Your values are learned through self-reflection and experience and are exposed during high-stress periods, so it's good to know them in advance!

Understanding your motivations is important when integrating an authentic persona. It's essential to identify your true motivators, whether intrinsic or extrinsic. Your job performance will be far more productive and authentic when you have aligned your true motivation with your professional role. Knowing whom to trust is also very important to growth and sustainability for integrating your life and work. Virtually all great leaders have a support team on whom they can rely for real conversations and true feedback. While we may have to take the feedback of a character like Mrs. Smith with a grain of salt, the feedback of our closest and most trusted friends can provide real insight into our strengths and challenges.

Learning to be authentic in the varied situations that managers and directors find themselves in is critical to our success as leaders, and even as human beings. We all have Barbara Smiths in our lives, and we must learn how to interact with them genuinely and positively

*MacDonald Niven, CCM, CCE is the general manager at La Rinconada Country Club in California and can be reached at (510) 439-8522 or via email: macniven09@gmail.com*