

Developing an authentic leadership style

 By [Claire Cobble Dick](#)

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Every single day, in the English-speaking world, five new books are published on the topic of leadership. A cursory Google search for the term *how to lead* delivers 1.3 billion results in less than a second. Clearly, this tells us that there are a) no shortage of leadership styles in the world and b) no shortage of people in leadership positions that want to learn how to improve their leadership style.



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I enjoy reading leadership books and gain a lot of insight from them, but I've also learnt that there is no failsafe tried-and-tested methodology that works for every leader in every organisation. I was thrust very suddenly into my first senior leadership role when the CEO at the agency I was employed with fell ill. Feeling painfully aware of what I felt were my shortcomings, I decided to play it safe and adopt a leadership style that had worked for years: my predecessor's. I tried to emulate what is probably a traditionally masculine approach – top-down, dogmatic and authoritarian.

Unique strengths and own voice

It didn't work for the team, and it didn't work for me. I came to the realisation that the only leadership style I should follow was my own, focusing on my unique strengths and own voice rather than a prescriptive playbook or that of a different personality. I decided to lead in a way that felt natural to me, freeing myself up to build closer, more collaborative relationships with the team rather than trying to dominate. Adopting this approach brought new energy and focus to the company – and my role.

Research has shown that when workers and leaders feel more comfortable being themselves at work, they are not only more engaged with and delivering a better performance, but their overall well-being improves too. Trying to act, think, speak and lead in a way that is not natural to you can be exhausting.

Women, in particular, can feel the need to conform to a certain standard very acutely. It's challenging to be your authentic self at work, when there are so many competing selves – mother, wife, partner, worker and boss. Often times we try to suppress emotional reactions or instincts that come naturally to us outside of work (such as empathy, concern, expressing emotion) at the office because it doesn't feel like reactions that a "boss" would have. However, none of these traits are necessarily negative or inappropriate in a work context.



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Anja van Beek 25 Jan 2018



Apply your whole, authentic self

McKinsey Research, when evaluating the behaviours more frequently applied by women to improve organisational performance found that female employees are more likely to focus on people development, setting and communicating expectations, to serve as role models and to engage in participative decision-making.

Recent research by Rennes 1 University also found what many women have long suspected – motherhood makes women more efficient at their jobs, not less. (In fact, their study showed that the volume of gray matter in female brains related to social processes, empathy and theory of mind increases so dramatically after becoming parents that neurobiologists can discern whether they are looking at the scans of women that are mothers and those who aren't).

There are many amazing and helpful theories about leadership out there, and many amazing role models. But what if your leadership style and personality is not only every bit as good as those of the leaders you admire or replace? What if it's *better*? The only way to find out is to start applying your whole, authentic self to your role. Certainly, you will discover many weaknesses along the way, but you'll also discover a great many strengths.

When the decisions you make – good or bad – are your own rather than that of the image you'd like to project, you learn a lot more about who you are, what you represent and what you can achieve.

ABOUT CLAIRE COBBLEDICK

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