

How to be a Real Leader

Kevin Cashman advises leaders from companies such as American Express, Pillsbury, and Rollerblade. His message: "To be more effective with others, we first need to become more effective with ourselves."

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If leadership is so important, why are effective business leaders so rare? Kevin Cashman, a Minneapolis-based leadership coach, thinks that he has the answer: "Too many people separate the act of leadership from the leader. They see leadership as something that they do -- rather than as an expression of who they are."

Cashman is the founder and CEO of LeaderSource, which has helped executives from companies such as Pillsbury, American Express, and Rollerblade to explore what it means to lead. His flagship program, the Executive Leadership Institute, has been dubbed "the Mayo Clinic of Leadership." Why do leaders come to Cashman for a checkup? "Leaders lead by virtue of who they are," he replies. "If we want to be more effective with others, we first need to be more effective with ourselves."

Cashman's most recent book, *Leadership from the Inside Out* (Executive Excellence Publishing, 1998), distills his insights about becoming a real leader. In an interview, he distilled his thoughts even further.

What does an effective leader look like?

There are three core qualities to leadership: authenticity, self-expression, value creation. "Authenticity" refers to a link between the inner and the outer person. Truly authentic leaders are open both to their gifts and to their underdeveloped qualities. People who understand who they are tend to have a more powerful voice -- and to make a more profound contribution to an enterprise.

We do a lot of work with Pillsbury. The current CEO, Paul Walsh, came to the job from finance. He had none of the marketing experience that's so critical to running a consumer-products company. The first thing he did was to admit to that knowledge gap; he then created a plan to learn everything he could about marketing. Because he was so open, people enthusiastically helped him.

What separates authentic leaders from the rest of the pack?

Most of us know more about our favorite sports team or vacation spot than we know about ourselves. Leadership comes from one of two places: persona or character. Persona is the coping part of our personality -- a mask that we create to protect ourselves from external stresses and internal fears. Character is the essence of who we are; it goes beyond what we do. It's critical to spot the cues that signal when you're in character and when you're relying on a persona: Under what circumstances do you tend to get stuck? When do you overreact? When does everything come together and flow?

The second attribute of leadership is self-expression.

Does that mean "straight talk"? It means something more than straight talk. How often have you held back from saying something that you felt was important -- just because you were worried about how you would express yourself? How often have you feigned modesty about something that you were really proud of? Authentic expression goes beyond telling the truth: It demonstrates a total congruence between who you are and what you do and say.

Leaders are measured by results. How does authentic expression translate into value creation?

Leaders create value through relationships. But many leaders still have the illusion that they are the ones who really "make things happen." Admitting that you don't have all the answers is a big part of building good relationships -- and a big part of getting good results.

Sidebar: How Authentic are You?

It's impossible to lead people who don't trust you, and it's impossible to build trust without cultivating authenticity. According to Kevin Cashman, asking these three questions will help you to explore your authenticity.

Do you know yourself? Get in the habit of asking yourself two crucial questions: "Why do I pursue the work and the life that I do?" and "What do I act like during the most fulfilling times of my life?" Your answers will help you spot the defining thread of your experiences, and they will lead you to your purpose.

Do you know how to listen -- and to hear? Most leaders think that not speaking is the same as listening. But hearing people's words is only the beginning. Do you also hear their fears? Their intentions? Their aspirations? When you start to hear at a deeper level, you'll start getting information from people. Better yet, people will know that you care about them, and they will eagerly commit to you.

What's your appreciation ratio? In the business world, confrontation, criticism, and even hate are more socially acceptable than expressions of appreciation. That's too bad, because appreciation is a truly value-creating activity. It energizes people, and it makes them want to exceed their goals and perceived limits.