

The Third Opinion

Wanted: Authentic Leaders

Saj-nicole A. Joni 09.25.06, 12:00 PM ET

Internet start-up billionaire Mark Cuban is a fixture at Dallas Mavericks basketball games. He purchased a majority share of the NBA team in 2000 and has managed its operations ever since with the raw enthusiasm of a fan. As leader of the franchise, Cuban has always been, in a word, himself. His blunt comments about officials, other teams and even his own players have cost him more than \$1.6 million in fines from the league. While fans and admirers enjoy the spectacle of his uncensored, "be yourself" transparency, its impact on his business is another matter.



Authenticity has been lauded as the gold standard for leaders who employees yearn to follow: a guardian we know and trust, with values we respect, who makes transparent, cogent and fair decisions we can stand behind. This matters all the way to the bottom line, since a leader who attracts and keeps the best people drives his or her company's performance and competitive position. There are benefits to being perceived as authentic. But thoughtful leaders know that the popular definition of authenticity--being fully yourself, completely transparent, always telling the unvarnished truth--is at odds with the reality of the executive leadership role and responsibilities.

Why? To effectively deal with all the issues executives face, the desire for full disclosure must sometimes give way to discretion. There are too many variables to be 100% authentic all the time, says leadership guru Warren Bennis. "The truth is, we all know that executives operate in roles that come with many strategic, operational, legal and ethical constraints."

It's time to rethink what we are looking for in authentic leaders. Despite a plethora of books and people who will tell you otherwise, authentic leadership is anything but simple, straightforward, fully truthful and uncontrived.

Mark Cuban's judgment in purchasing the Mavericks franchise appears to be sound. But his decisions on and off the court since then have caused even some of his own players to question his leadership. According to Bennis, "What we are looking for is well-honed judgment that is rooted in visible purpose and values that we can consistently count on over time."

Ron Heifetz, co-founder of Harvard's Center for Public Leadership, takes this one step further. He teaches that calibrating authenticity by looking at the level of truth and transparency in a leader's communications misses the mark, leaving out the purpose served when one plays a leadership role in the life of others.

"Authentic leadership is a function of those purposes, those commitments of service and the discipline anchoring them, not a function of self-expression. Fundamentally, leadership is the activity of educating and preparing people to be more adaptive, so that they can marshal resources and creativity to thrive in ever-changing and challenging environments," Heifetz explains. "Authentic leadership--which includes judgment about pace, framing and what and how to disclose information--is a commitment to serve the growth and adaptability of those you lead."

At its core, the executive position is a role, and nowhere is the seeming paradox of role and authenticity better understood than in the theater. "In order to effectively take on and play the role of a character, the actor must be 'real,' that is, connected to something authentic from the depths of his or her own being," says Belle Halpern, co-founder of the Ariel Group, and internationally known for her pioneering work in integrating acting with authentic presence in business. "You must think strategically as you develop your platform for authentic presence and communication. First, it's about the role, results and people you serve, and only secondarily is it about you. What you seek are the aspects of deeply held self that are most relevant and strategic for the business purpose and requirements of your executive role."

Diana McLain Smith, founding partner of Action Design, has spent the last 25 years researching and advising relationships at the top that make or break the growth of people and companies they lead. "Many relationships actually

dis-incent the very authenticity that people clamor for. Executives are often surrounded by peers and subordinates who both want to be protected from harsh realities and at the same time demand transparency and truth.” Instead of confronting this bind head-on, too many executives err on one side or the other, saying more than people can use or less than they need. Her prescription: “First, you have to understand that relationships--not individual leaders--are the key to authenticity and you build relationships capable of withstanding authenticity.”

The charisma of individuals who gain authority cannot be a criterion for judgment. Ultimately, Heifetz says, you can tell authentic leadership by the ability over time to create a community that cultivates responsible authenticity. “Purposeful honesty and appropriate transparency at all levels are eventual indicators of your organization’s adaptability and ability to thrive.”

Bennis advises us to look for leaders who reach out to the widest network of sources: unexpected sources, dissonant sources, varied perspectives, sources that yield unvarnished truth and outside insight. “Gravitate toward the executive who can create an envelope of safety where people can commit candor without getting canned.”

Every aspiring leader wants to be thought of as authentic, a leader who people trust and will follow. It’s best to get real about the gray zones of honesty and transparency that you will be required to consider and act upon. Develop an explicit way you will measure your judgments about strategic choices and disclosure, and revisit your calibrations regularly. And don’t go it alone. Find someone with wisdom, expertise and an independent perspective to guide and challenge you as you wrestle with the many dilemmas of judgment required of all authentic leaders.

Dr. Saj-nicole Joni is chief executive of Cambridge International Group and an internationally known “third-opinion” adviser to senior executives and high-potential leaders. She is the author of The Third Opinion: How Successful Leaders Use Outside Insight To Create Superior Results.