



Is it time for leaders to
'get real' in the workplace?

Employee Engagement: "There's hidden power in talking to the real self..."

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Whether we recognise it or not, most of us develop some sort of work 'Avatar.' An often-random amalgamation of actions, behaviours and beliefs that we think will help us to stand out from – or fit in with - the crowd in the office.

But is this Avatar stopping our 'real self' from shining through?

Is it a barrier to expressing the shared joys, motivations and struggles that make us who we are?

Specifically, if you're a leader, can allowing your real-self to come through improve engagement with your employees and shape your culture?

We've made some progress in this area over the last few years. Most companies have started introducing perks such as relaxing dress codes and complimentary Friday-afternoon beverages. Even the beanbags, pool tables and gumball machines are no longer the preserve of the trendy agency in Shoreditch.



“While food, physical comfort and fun can all encourage people to be their real selves, in isolation they are not enough.”

Let's face it, life can be pretty messy at times.

The workforce is made up of human beings who all have nuanced, multifaceted and often unpredictable lives. They have children who throw tantrums in supermarkets, parents with terminal illnesses, financial worries, a favourite flavour of ice cream, a memory they return to on rainy days, and a favourite tradition at Christmas. There are counsellors, family chefs, swing pushers, chief laundry officers and semi-professional taxi drivers. As human beings, we all take turns in playing a variety of different roles in life aside from employee or colleague.

What about one of the most fundamental elements of life, the need for sleep? We all have a relationship with sleep and without it, we simply cannot function as human beings, let alone perform well in our jobs.

Recent statistics have shown getting some shut-eye is becoming a private struggle for many of us. According to the US Department of Health, 20% of Americans have a sleep disorder, 27% of adults struggle to sleep most nights and 68% (roughly 164 million Americans) have issues with sleep at least once a week.

So perhaps it's no surprise to hear about the recent engagement success of a wellbeing workshop held by one of our healthcare clients at a national conference. By providing a workshop to improve sleep, a significant part of our physical wellbeing, the event demonstrated an empathy with the delegates and a recognition of a personal, yet universal struggle.

“When someone empathises with our real self, this empathy creates gravity, pulling us in. In short, we get to lose the façade and be who we really are. The by-product of such a relationship is often a new, deeper level of trust in an organisation.”



The feeling of *'oh, these people get me – I can be myself.'* When we feel we are seen and accepted in this way, it can produce a powerful emotional investment in the relationship on an unconscious level.

So, what if we translated this understanding into how we can lead? If you look at some of the most influential people of our time: David Beckham, Steve Jobs, Oprah Winfrey, Robin Williams - we know lot more about them than simply their professional accomplishments. Sometimes we have even had a front row seat to some of their personal upheavals. We've watched David Beckham lose his temper, getting England knocked out of the World Cup in 1998, we know Oprah Winfrey was fired from her first job in television and we know Steve Jobs suffered through pancreatic cancer in 2003. Olympic gold medallist Michael Phelps has often remained open about his battle with ADHD, and Richard Branson with dyslexia. Lady Gaga was dropped by a major record label after only three months at the beginning of her career and Arianna Huffington collapsed from exhaustion and burnout in 2010, prompting her to make a huge career change. Revealing more personal elements of who we are, and indeed what we may struggle with could seem initially counter-intuitive in the pursuit of strong leadership, but as these individuals show, this is often not necessarily the case.

So in terms of connecting to employees within an organisation, should we all just start revealing we can't sleep, got fired once and can't remember where our keys are? Well, we could - but we don't have to. The following are other ways of demonstrating an engagement with the real self that are perhaps a little less vulnerable.

Flexibility. Life is always in flux and unpredictable events and circumstances are the new normal for many of us. By offering real workplace flexibility and practising flexibility as a leader, organisations can show they are open to adapting to the reality of the lives of their employees.

Workshops for real life. Providing and encouraging the attendance of optional courses on sleep, personal finance, nutrition, social networking safety or yoga can demonstrate a desire to connect with 'real-self'.

Re-define 'hard work'. We are in the midst of a 'workaholic' culture. Many of us fear that if we are not working through lunch, staying late and asking for as much work as possible, we will be perceived as 'lazy' by our employers.



Employers are taking steps to address this.

At 21, the CEO of Semco Partners, Ricardo Semler, had a serious health scare.

He realised that if the schedule he was employing could slowly kill him, then it could be killing his employees too. Consequently, he made the radical decision to do away with workplace rules.

This meant removing rigid working practices, sick days and limited annual leave. Semler has since built a \$200 million business of loyal and productive employees through having zero rules. Through enabling people to feel they could build their own schedules, exercise interests outside of work and take unlimited leave to maintain the physical and mental health of themselves and their families, he built a company around acknowledging the 'real-self'. This squashed any culture of rewarding overwork, encouraged decision making from a place of accumulated personal wisdom rather than authority and, ultimately, built a sustainable multi-million-dollar business. He also walked the walk, refusing to give up the Wednesday afternoons he spent with his niece at the beach, despite being told he could make more money if he did.

Re-evaluate your benefits. Societal values are shifting; we're beginning to value free-time, increased flexibility and autonomy - over elevated pay. Conducting research within the workforce to find out what is really perceived as a benefit should ensure alignment between employee and organisation.

Authentic communications. Giving employees the freedom to communicate in a way that reflects who they are and how they think can be impactful. As a leader, becoming authentic in your communications gives your employees permission to do the same. The rise of creating social platforms inside organisations is also encouraging just this. By enabling employees to communicate in the same way they do in the 'real world, this invites an environment of authenticity.



Talking to the real self boils down to remembering three important things;

- 1) We're all human and no matter how senior we become, this remains true.
- 2) Remembering this in interactions with employees, the creation of company policy and the way we react to change and disruption could prove to be a powerful asset towards creating a positive connection with an evolving workforce.
- 3) As a leader, if you want to create a culture where people feel seen, heard and respected as their real selves, this starts with you showing up as your real self too. Authenticity reciprocates but its up to leaders to get the ball rolling.

And on a final, yet very important note; in lieu of the inevitable robot invasion, remembering there's a power in remaining human could become the most important tool we have in shaping the future of work.

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