

Issue 47

Realizing

LEADERSHIP

DAVID IRVINE

**AUTHENTICITY, PASSION,
AND ACCOUNTABILITY**

A close-up, low-angle shot of a Black man in a dark suit, white shirt, and striped tie. He is smiling broadly, looking upwards and to the right. The background is bright and out of focus, suggesting an indoor setting with large windows.

*Realizing Leadership
in Conversation*

DAVID IRVINE
Authentic Leadership

with **LAURIE WILHELM**

As The Leader's Navigator™ **David Irvine** has dedicated his life and work to inspire, encourage, and guide leaders at all levels and in all walks of life to be more authentic and more accountable—thus enabling themselves and others to reach their full potential.

David believes that being an impactful leader is synonymous with being oneself. It is that simple, and it is also that difficult. He has an exceptional ability to create a trusting learning environment through the power of his authentic presence. David joins us in conversation:

LW David, thank you for joining us today. To start, I'd like to ask you a big question: What is authentic leadership?

DI Well, Laurie, in order to understand authentic leadership, it's important to understand, first of all, what authenticity is and then what leadership is and then how to integrate the two. Let me share what I think authenticity is from my experience of observing and researching this now for 20 years.

Abraham Maslow, the great American psychologist said that, "A musician must make music, an artist must paint, a poet must write if he is to be ultimately at peace with himself." In every person lies a place that when they're connected to it, they feel deeply and intensively alive. In such moments, there's that quiet voice that says to ourselves, "This is the real me."

We're born with that place, but what happens is that we grow up in a world that tells us how we should be and so we move away from it. I always say to people, don't start by asking what the world needs, start by asking what makes you come alive. What the world needs is for you to come alive and then, once you come alive and you find that authentic voice within you and you live from that place, then you mobilize others for a higher purpose, for a cause beyond your own self. So that, first of all, is what authenticity is.

And then leadership means that you mobilize others to move to find their voice and then move toward making the world a better place. But you come from a place that's authentic. It's who you are, rather than how you should be.

LW How does that work into the workplace? When we're just trying to get projects done before 5:00 pm, how does this relate to what it is that we're trying to get done at work?

DI It's probably unrealistic to think that we're going to spend every moment of our life being authentic. What's important is to be engaged. This is the sweet spot, where our soul's desire meets the world's needs. It is this intersection that I call authenticity and authentic leadership in the workplace is being committed to helping people find their sweet spot. There's a practical process you can engage in that has to do with answering three questions:

1. What do you love?
2. What are you good at?
3. What does the organization need?

Now, it may be that that sweet spot is in your personal life. This could be a job for you. All you do is come to work and make money so that you can experience your authentic life in your personal life, in your community, in your family. I met a lawyer once who said that what he really loved was playing in a band on the weekend. That was his authentic self. Work was a job for him. That's called an avocation. We can have an engaging conversation with our employees if we care enough about them to say, "Your authentic self is at home, but maybe you can carve out even 10% of your job that could be in your sweet spot."

It's really your gift and your passion and your authentic self—that's where you begin to emerge into your vocation where you can actually have work be also authentic. Maybe you need to say no to some projects, to make more room for others. Maybe what you hate

to do might be in somebody else's sweet spot. You can negotiate to allow that sweet spot—it might be a little corner of your day when you get to be authentic. Do it consciously and mindfully. It's unrealistic to be 100% authentic.

LW You've written that an authentic journey must lead to contribution. How do you select where that contribution is going to be?

DI It also implies that authenticity, paradoxically, has to serve the world in order to be fully authentic. For example, I coached a mountain climber who made it to Everest twice. You could say this was his authentic path, but the third time he went up, he arranged a way so that he could connect with a grade three class and using technology he could teach and communicate the climb. He didn't make it to the top, but he said it was the most fulfilling because it contributed, it made a difference. One could argue just getting there makes a difference, but it can be self-absorbed, and that, by definition is not quite authentic yet until it closes the loop.

An example we have here in Canada which is a really good one is Clara Hughes, whose authentic self was her speed skating and her cycling. But where she really contributed as a real leader is she came back and used that authentic self to change the face of mental illness in this country. It's crossing that bridge that really mobilizes others. In order to be authentic, you have to give back through your gifts.

LW So this has to involve courage.

DI Totally. Of course, it implies courage. First of all, you have courage to be who you are, then you have courage to serve and bring to it out in to the world.

LW I've also read in your writing that great leadership is also a matter of love. We don't often hear it worded that way. Can you elaborate on that phrase?

DI I tell leaders that if they're not comfortable with the word love, use the word caring.

Here's another example: I was coaching an executive who was assigned to me by his CEO and who wasn't getting results on his sales team. He complained for the first ten minutes of the session about the young generation and that they don't have a work ethic.

I stopped him and asked, "Do you care?"

He said, "Of course I care. I care about results. I care about getting the job done."

I said, "No, you're not hearing me. Do you care about the lives of the people on your team? Do you care what they go home to? Do you care about their values?"

He stopped and for the first time, he paused, and he said, "Not really."

I said, "Thank you for your honesty. Now, why don't you do your organization and yourself a favour and take the pressure of positional leadership off yourself and get out of management."

And he did and as we continued on, there was a reason why he was blocked in his caring.

But you have to bone-deep look in yourself and ask, "Do I actually care about the people I work with?" When you're promoted to a position of a leader in an organization, you really have to be honest about whether you care about the people who you're serving on the team. It's really about service. If you don't care—you can't fake leadership. You can go to a course and learn the skills of being a leader, but you have to really care. You can't fake that. Either you do or you don't.

LW Some people really aren't comfortable demonstrating caring. What can we do to show that?

DI I think you have to know yourself enough to know how you express caring. We all express it differently; there are different languages of caring. We have to know ourselves and care enough to know others.

Some people are shown caring by being left alone. Again, you have to know people enough. Those people who want to be left alone, you can say, "I trust you. You work alone, you achieve alone. I'll be here to support you whenever you need me, but I'm going to stay out of your way." Other people need fairly consistent feedback and confirmation and appreciation. You have to read people enough and know yourself enough to know your barriers. It's a little like a marriage in terms of how we show and receive love from our partner. We need to know enough about ourselves to be flexible to show love and show caring.

LW I'd like to ask you about being accountable while being authentic. How do we hold others accountable when we're being caring and genuine and authentic so we achieve our goals by the end of the day?

DI It's an interesting paradox. We can't really be authentic without being accountable. If you take a musician or an artist, it's a practice. You're not going to become a great musician if you're not going to be accountable to practice everyday. There's a toughness to it.

You're not caring to an organization when you lower standards or when you have a set of values that the organization stands for and people are not adhering to them. If you don't do anything about it, that's not caring. You really need to sit down and be clear about the expectations and work out a discipline process for people to achieve results. It's not a sufficient variable for authenticity, but it is necessary. You can't be authentic without also being accountable.

If an 18-year-old asked me, "How do I be authentic?" I'd say to go out and get a job. Just show up in the world and be accountable

in the world but stay connected to your authentic self and you'll emerge into that. But it starts by being accountable. Authenticity without accountability is just a fantasy. You have to integrate both those forces together; it's the yin and the yang of engagement.

You can't just be accountable. The problem with most accountability systems is if you don't get the people's passion, they're not going to be accountable. You have to access people's passion because accountability without passion and authenticity is just drudgery.

LW What can people do right now to start on their authentic leadership journey?

DI First, make time for stillness in your life. Our lives are so busy today. Ask someone how they are and they'll say, "I'm busy." We're so consumed with business.

Where in your life do you allow time for reflection and for stillness?

It may be that your job isn't the place to create that. But create somewhere in your life, whether you get up early or stay up late, or make time on the weekend for stillness or unproductive time. Practice stopping and going inside and listening to the voice within you. That's the place of authenticity. It has to come from within.

Buy a journal is another action. Start to spend time listening to the voice inside and start to be directed internally.

Another action is to find community to find someone to help guide you to find your authentic self. It might be a coach, a mentor, someone you say, this is a person who I see is authentic and I want to be authentic and I need some guidance. It's a lonely journey to be authentic, but it can't be done alone. It's important that you work in the context of community to access your authentic self. This is looking at it within yourself.

If you're in a management role, if you've done this with yourself first, then you can begin to ask questions of your staff. To meet

with them individually and say, “I’ve been on this authentic journey myself, and I’m wondering if I can help you and support you—I’m not going to compromise and you still have to produce these results—but I’m wondering if we could help make your job a little bit more authentic. What’s your passion here? What are your gifts? What are you good at? How could we help you find that in your job? Can we negotiate some of the roles that you may want to let go of?”

Maybe we need to stop and reflect a little bit at work because we’re all so busy. Maybe we’re busy doing the wrong things. There’s nothing more useless than doing something efficiently that shouldn’t be done at all. So we can create a little more authenticity at work, in our organizations, by stopping and having some retreat time to really reflect.

Maybe the best thing you can do is take a little sabbatical. Even just five minutes as a daily sabbatical, just to think. We’re so conditioned to always look busy and it’s not going to get us out of here. It’s not going to get us onto the path of an engaging, productive, sustainable organization. When we get five minutes of reflection time, we get on the Internet. In our breaks, we get on technology. When are we actually unplugging?

Stillness means unplugging from technology, spending time in nature, spending time just being and learning how to go inside.

LW David, thank you for sharing your knowledge, insight, and experiences with us. It’s been a pleasure learning from you.

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