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CAREER STRATEGIES AND INSIGHTS

Authenticity – Raw and Refined

Authenticity is a reoccurring theme with my clients lately. It's also becoming part of the corporate landscape. Organizational cultures are integrating authenticity into their corporate values and encouraging executives, leaders, and individual contributors alike to “bring their authentic selves” into the workplace. While this is a positive thing it does require a few parameters, that if not considered can lead to derailment.

This is typically how the authenticity conversation begins, “I’m encouraged to be my authentic self, then I’m told I’m too ...” You fill in the blank. As the frequency of these conversations increase I’ve begun to think about authenticity in two forms – raw and refined. This viewpoint seems to resonate. In its raw form, we simply *show up* with little thought about the quality of the experience that we’re creating for others when they interact with us. There is no malicious intent, we’re just being ourselves. In its refined form, we think about how we want others to think, feel, and respond to us as a result of the interaction. We are intentional about the experience we want to create.

Consider this as an example, “I’m encouraged to be my authentic self, then I’m told that I’m too direct. On one hand, sharing what you think or believe to be true can leave someone feeling embarrassed, angry, or inadequate. On the other hand, sharing what you think or believe to be true can encourage a conversation, stimulate an exchange of ideas, motivate someone to take action or re-evaluate their thinking. In both cases you’ve been direct about your thinking, but your approach will affect how the person on the receiving end will be left thinking and feeling. Infusing directness with thoughtfulness and empathy (#Emotional Intelligence) can change your brand from “too direct” to “open, honest, and diplomatic.” It is a matter of distinguishing your *message* from your *delivery*.



Meet Vanessa. Vanessa is an intelligent woman (I’m sure her IQ is off the charts). Her colleagues are quick to acknowledge her mental prowess and the professional competence she displays in her field. Vanessa has a natural presence that commands a room, which is envied by others. Her performance is impeccable, but her style is questionable. Vanessa gets in her own way. In her defense, Vanessa is simply being herself. When asked her opinion, she gives it – raw, straight up, no chaser. Her



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expectations of others are the same as those she holds for herself – high. When not met, her feedback is swift and to the point; but it leaves direct reports, key stakeholders, peers, colleagues, and sometimes even her boss afraid to “get it wrong.” In its raw form, Vanessa’s authentic self can be off-putting. She also has a sense of humor that others rarely experience and a sensitivity known only to those closest to her.

My questions to Vanessa are, “As a leader in your organization, how do you want people to perceive you?” “What attributes of your brand do you want to be known for?” Something changes when you begin to see yourself through the *lens of a brand*; the pivot makes more sense. In Vanessa’s case, I’d suggest exploring the components of the SEEM model.

State your intention. Share that “It is my intention to have an open, honest, and free flowing conversation.”

Expose Yourself. Share that, “I’ve been accused of being too direct sometimes. If it feels that way to you, please let me know.”

Engage. Invite the person you are speaking with into the conversation. “I’ve got some thoughts, but I’d love to hear your thinking.” Blend in those aspects of yourself that others don’t often see. Look for opportunities to appropriately infuse humor, or share a story that conveys your point of view and communicates your “passion.”

Manage Yourself. Pay attention to the nonverbal behavior of the person with whom you are speaking. Observe their body language, facial expressions, eye contact, and tone of voice. Let that inform your approach and pivot as needed. If you are not sure what you are observing, ask again “What are your thoughts?” “How do you feel about this?” Look for opportunities to genuinely empathize. Stay positive, regardless of the energy you get in return. Doing so will ensure that *your authenticity* does not become the issue.

If Vanessa’s scenario sounds familiar it’s because her experience is a common challenge. Vanessa is actually a composite of several client profiles blended with some of my own experiences. There are many different scenarios to consider when it comes to authenticity refinement. Whatever the circumstances, one thing is for sure, authenticity refinement is an active process and it must be intentional.