

THE CONCEPT OF AUTHENTIC LEADERSHIP IN PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS

The strengths of executive leaders are key to associations' successes, and the weaknesses of leaders, when these are significant, are reasons for failures and sometimes catastrophic ones. The ability of the CEO, and of his/her top managers, to help the Board define the right strategy and to federate the staff on the achievement of the goals and the plans to reach them, is of prime importance to the *raison d'être* of their organization.



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In a recent event organized by ESAE¹, a senior partner of an executive search company compared profiles of CEOs in trade associations with those in for-profit companies, and mentioned that companies, being under budget pressure, are pushing back responsibilities to their trade association and therefore are increasingly looking for entrepreneurs to lead their association.

While this could certainly also be true for our professional associations, I believe that there are significant differences between us and associations representing businesses' interests. The main differences are of course our mission and the non-commercial cause we are defending, and also the specificities related to our work with the support of a limited number of staff and the help of many volunteers. This, in my opinion, does require more authenticity in leadership and influential capacity than in any other job.

I personally fully agree with Susan West² when she asserts that *"being influential in the XXIst century does no longer mean power and authority, but means instead helping others to develop their expertise, and to establish meaningful relationship based on trust with a great sense of humanity"*.

In professional associations the staff is our chief asset, much more than in any for-profit companies – those have other assets: a pool of products, valuable supplies, expensive equipment and machinery, real estate..., as assets we only have our staff and our volunteers, and we absolutely need their engagement as much as their expertise, skills and talents.

When we consider our staff, job satisfaction is an essential element to get their commitment, and there are several key factors to develop satisfaction at work, among them the classic tools are fair financial benefits and a harmonious environment such as work space, comfort, reliable IT, etc. While being important, these good conditions should go along with intangible rewards such as recognition, appreciation, trust, educational opportunities, compatible co-workers, life balance, and for sure a good boss... an authentic manager.

Being an authentic leader requires us only to be ourselves, to remain what we really are, to avoid any artificial behaviour, to stop considering our position as an authoritarian role to play.

Authentic managers **recognize** their staff's efficiency, congratulate them for their successes, and thank them for their hard work.

Authentic managers are **accessible** and practise an open-door policy: they listen, and are open to others' opinions, they also are able to disagree and to clearly explain why without affecting the relationship, they understand that by **listening** carefully they can be a useful sounding board for their colleagues.

They **communicate** clearly, and regularly keep their staff informed.

Being authentic means paying attention to the staff's workload and avoiding additional stress by ensuring that deadlines are realistic; it also means being **empathic**, noticing and treating with kindness personal crisis.

Being an authentic leader is being **trustworthy**, with self-awareness, and **transparent** by admitting and acknowledging one's own limits, it is also being **credible** by showing an ability to recover quickly from one's own mistakes.

Not everybody is able to be a charismatic leader, it requires inborn qualities and skills, but we all can easily become authentic leaders: to feel confident in that way to be and to do, it is enough to be honest with ourselves, to care about others, and to live our values.

The honest, fair and authentic attitude of associations' senior management will result in a stimulating commitment by staff members, able to use their own skills and talents, positively impacting their colleagues, being loyal, and contributing actively to our bigger purpose.

1. [European Society of Association Executives \(www.associationexecutives.eu\)](http://www.associationexecutives.eu)
2. [Professor for the executive master in international association management at Solvay Brussels School \(http://exed.solvay.edu/fr/11-program/27-executive-master-in-international-association-management\)](http://exed.solvay.edu/fr/11-program/27-executive-master-in-international-association-management)

Authenticity implies also **TRUE VALUES**. Years ago, when I was a CEO, I organized a staff retreat and hired a coach to help us define together values we believed in, those that we found important for our jobs and for assuming our mission. It was a great and intensive work, it took us a dozen hours to reach a consensus and to elaborate a clear definition for each of the identified values. We were all enthusiastic and very proud of what we had produced, we posted our common values on our web site, and on the walls of our main meeting room, we wanted to be sure that our Board would be aware of them.

A couple of years later, I decided to organize a follow-up retreat, and hired a different coach to animate and facilitate our two day meeting.

A few weeks before the event I briefed the new coach about the goal and purpose of this new gathering and I proudly explained the achievements of our previous retreat. I remained speechless when the coach told me: "these are the values you and your staff like, tell me now about the values you are living." ...I was confronted with an unexpected reality: we had been too theoretical, we had used nice words and produced beautiful sentences, and that had been enough to satisfy us, but we didn't take care to apply them all in reality.

This has been one of the many laborious experiences that led me to reflect on my management style and to evolve in the direction of a more authentic leadership.

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