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## **ARTICLE** **MANAGING YOURSELF**

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*by Amy Jen Su and Muriel Maignan Wilkins*

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Authenticity — what is it, who has it, and how do you get it? Most people associate authenticity with being true to oneself — or “walking the talk.” But there’s a problem with that association; it focuses on how *you* feel about *yourself*. Authenticity is actually a [relational behavior](#), not a self-centered one. Meaning that to be truly authentic, you must not only be comfortable with yourself, but must also comfortably connect with others.

Take one of our coaching clients, Mark, the COO of a private equity firm. One hour into our kick-off meeting, he asked what we thought of him. It was a risky question to answer so early in the process — yet a very important one given what we had observed thus far. Here was our response: “Clearly you are intelligent, ambitious, and passionate about the work that you do. You seem to always have the ‘right’ answer to our questions — yet we get the sense that they aren’t your ‘real’ answers. It feels like you’re telling us what you think we want to hear. We’ll be curious to find out if others in your organization are experiencing you the same way.” This response was foreboding — Mark’s 360 review bore low marks in integrity and trust, and follow-up interviews with his peers and boss drove the point home.

Mark’s colleagues didn’t trust him because they were never sure if what he said was truly what he meant. To have [leadership presence](#), others need and want to know where you stand — they don’t want to have to guess or be blindsided midstream. While there isn’t a quick fix or a one-size-fits-all solution to [increasing one’s authenticity](#), there are several focus areas that will certainly help:

**Point of View:** Having a point of view is critical to being authentic. Being open and [willing to engage in exchanges](#) on that point of view accentuates your leadership and demonstrates both strength and flexibility. By articulating his point of view on firm issues, challenges, and disagreements, Mark became more comfortable speaking his mind.

**Positioning:** While taking a position is important, over-positioning yourself is detrimental. Know the difference between [navigating the political waters](#) of your organization and actually becoming the politics itself. Get support for your initiatives but be transparent about what you are doing, why you are doing it, and how you are doing it. Rather than working primarily behind the scenes, Mark became more forthright in his efforts to implement change in his organization.

**Personal History:** At the core, you need to connect with your personal history and identify the key events, messages, and people that shaped who you are today. Mark grew up in difficult, under-privileged circumstances that he learned to navigate. When he was sent to elite schools at a young age, the message he got was “to survive this system, you need to watch your back and not rock the boat.” While that message might have served him well then, it was no longer serving him in the corporate leadership world. Exploring your personal history will often surface messages that are worth reexamining in order to truly express your authentic self.

As Robert Goffee and Gareth Jones point out in their book, [Why Should Anyone Be Led By You?](#): “To attract followers, a leader has to be many things to many people. The trick is to pull that off while remaining true to yourself.” While it’s easy to sniff out who’s authentic and who’s not, it’s not so simple to recognize it in ourselves.

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