



The Courage to be Authentic

by Ilana Ridge

Authenticity is one of the most powerful, and misunderstood qualities in leadership. It's not about being loud. It's not about being raw or reactive.

Authenticity is about being clear, honest, and aligned with what matters most.

It's not just saying what you think. It's standing in what's true, without needing to prove, persuade, or protect. It's choosing integrity over image, even when it's uncomfortable.

And yet, many leaders find themselves caught in something else: **pretence**.

Pretence isn't malicious. It's not even conscious most of the time. It's a survival strategy we learn early, to gain approval, avoid rejection, or maintain control in uncertain environments.

We pretend to be fine when we're overwhelmed.

We pretend to agree when we don't.

We perform roles that don't fully reflect who we are, not because we're dishonest, but because we're human.

But leadership, real leadership, invites us out of that survival pattern and into something deeper.

Let's be clear:

- ▶ **Authenticity is self-honesty in action.** It's the willingness to show up with clarity and consistency, even when your truth may challenge the status quo.
- ▶ **Reactivity often gets mistaken for authenticity.**
Statements like "I'm just being honest" can be a defense, not a demonstration of leadership. Reactivity speaks from emotional charge, not grounded truth. Authenticity, on the other hand, is rooted in both truth and kindness. It's the alignment of your words with your values — not just what's true for you, but how you choose to express it. Brutal honesty is still brutality. Authenticity doesn't abandon yourself or the other person. It names what's real, but with compassion, care, and self-regulation.
- ▶ **Pretence is a survival habit.**
It can look like composure, strategy, or professionalism, but often, it disconnects us from what we really think, feel, or need.
- ▶ **Authenticity doesn't mean oversharing.**
It means not hiding. It's staying connected to your truth, even if you choose not to express it yet.



Authenticity Empowers

When leaders model authenticity, they create trust. They stop managing perceptions and start embodying values. This isn't about emotional exposure. It's about presence. Clarity. Alignment. Authentic leadership created environments where others can be real too, and that's where innovation, engagement, and accountability take root.

An example

During a team strategy session, a senior colleague challenged a leader’s approach in front of the group. The tone was sharp. The room went quiet.

Rather than defending the idea or smoothing things over to avoid tension, the leader paused. They took a breath, acknowledged the concern, and responded:

“I hear that this isn’t landing well for you. Let’s take a step back and unpack where the disconnect is.”

They didn’t shut down. They didn’t react. They held their position with presence, rooted in clarity, while still making space for the other person’s perspective.

The tension eased. The group had a better conversation. A more honest one. And the team saw what real leadership can look like: not needing to be right, but staying in integrity under pressure.

That’s authenticity.
Not pretence. Not silence. Not control.
Just truth, presence, and the willingness to stay.

A Moment of Reflection



Here are 9 spiral-aligned questions to explore authentic leadership in your life and work:

1. Where in my leadership am I being honest, but not yet kind or grounded?
2. Where do I confuse reactivity with authenticity?
3. What parts of me feel safest behind pretence or performance?
4. When I feel fully seen, without defence, where do I feel it in my body, and what does it feel like?
5. Where have I compromised my truth for belonging, approval, or peace?
6. Where have I spoken my truth in a way that created distance instead of connection?
7. What truth have I withheld, and what am I protecting by doing so?
8. What does it look like to honour my truth **without abandoning myself or harming others**?
9. How can I bring more kindness, clarity, and presence into how I express what’s real?



Why This Matters

Authenticity isn’t a personality trait, it’s a leadership practice. In a world full of pressure and pretence, being real is a strategic advantage. Because people don’t trust perfection. They trust congruence. They trust leaders who know themselves, and lead from that place. And that kind of leadership starts with presence, not performance.



A Connected Reflection

This piece completes a 3-part reflection series on leadership from within.
If you'd like to revisit the first two, you can read them here:

The Strength of Presence – on what it truly means to show up

The Strength of Detachment – on letting go without losing connection

Together, these reflections offer a layered invitation:

To pause.

To reconnect.

To lead with awareness, not armour.

Because **presence grounds us, detachment frees us, and authenticity aligns us.**

And that is where real leadership begins.

