Being authentic—knowing who you really are, and holding true to yourself in the most difficult moments—is “ground zero” of leadership credibility. It all starts here, like taking your grip on a golf club or tennis racquet—you must get step #1 right to ensure your chances of success. To create the trusted connections you need to lead with real influence, you must first pass the authenticity test of your followers. It sounds simple but isn’t; it takes courage, and there are absolutely no trick plays or shortcuts.

I don’t have to tell you that authenticity is more complicated than simply “being yourself.” For a very few people, this happens without enormous effort, and they never think twice about it. But for most leaders the complexity of their responsibilities creates the occasional conflict that they must confront within themselves. These are situations that test our ability to stay true to our core values in the face of tremendous temptation to take the easy way out.
Ask yourself: “When am I the most authentic?” The likely answer is when you are with family and close friends—the people with whom you can let down your guard and allow your true self to emerge.

What do those “authentic” moments have in common? There is nothing at stake. Your friends and family already know who you are, so being yourself with them has no unforeseen consequences. They know you aren’t perfect, so you aren’t obliged to be. They like you as you are, and they wouldn’t want you any other way. When you are with these people in your life, you believe you are already inherently “good enough” to hold your place in that family, or that friendship. You aren’t “trying out” anymore—you made the team, and you act like you know that. You trust yourself completely. There is no doubt in your mind that you are wholly and completely qualified.

These examples from the comfort of our lives with friends or family also illustrate the quality of the connection and ease of dialogue with others that we feel when there is no temptation to be someone we are not.

Although being ourselves authentically comes easily in most personal life settings, it is at times difficult as a leader for the other side of the same reason: when you are leading an organization, in the situations that test you the most, there is usually something at stake—for others and for you. The outcome of most leadership interactions has a consequence to everyone involved, and it is in your hands. These are the stressful times when you must have the courage of your convictions and be true to yourself in every way. These are the circumstances that challenge us to do the right thing even if it feels difficult, risky, or uncomfortable, and, in the same moment, tempt us to say something that just seems easier at the time.

Consider what is required to build that extra strand of muscle that most of us need to maintain our authentic self in a situation of meaningful consequence—where your decisions and conversations affect others, sometimes on a grand scale, and sometimes in very
personal or dramatic ways. It takes an unusually insightful understanding of yourself that is beyond what you would normally know without an extra effort. This is highly personal and disciplined work that most leaders will not attempt.

Knowing who we are at the core is a project of awareness, courageous introspection, and thoughtful reflection. The inquiry we must embrace is: *What informs and creates our capacity to lead with real influence?* Surveys tell us we are informed by our own personal reflection—and it takes real courage to own the unvarnished truth about our lives and our past. We are also informed, in a profound way, by understanding how others perceive our leadership behavior. This requires a tolerance for unfiltered feedback that few leaders have. Let’s look at each of these steps in detail.

**Tale of Two Leaders: Polar Opposites**

Here’s a pair of stories, reflecting the antitheses of authenticity, from the part of my career as a venture capitalist. I’ve changed the names to protect the less-than-innocent.

Carl was the CEO of a venture-backed software company. He had previously held senior management positions at several large IT companies. He was the first kid in his family to go to college. He was well educated, with several graduate degrees. But he came from a family with humble roots in the Midwest. A classic story.

However, Carl never denied his roots. On the contrary, he *owned* them. The analogies he used in leading his team came from his life story; the things he chose to say in running the company were stories of his own from rural upbringing. He told them from the heart, and with great humility.

That humility was the most memorable thing about Carl. He knew who he was, and he understood what shaped him to be who he was. In the middle of Silicon Valley, he wore a cowboy hat and drove a pickup truck. And he didn’t care whether you wore Brioni suits and drove a Lamborghini: he made no value judgments that way. And he felt no need to look like somebody else.
Where did this attitude come from? I think it went back to Carl’s comfort with where he came from. In his world, there was no looking good, no keeping up with the Joneses, just a tight focus on getting it done. It was an upbringing that taught him to value excellence and experience. That’s why Carl, who had a Ph.D., would emphasize a point not by reference to some academic theory, but rather with a story about working in the corn fields.

It was this realness, his what-you-see-is-what-you-get simple elegance, that became Carl’s platform for competence. You never caught him acting like somebody he was not supposed to be. He was never trying to be someone he was not. This made him incredibly easy to talk with; you always felt like you were talking with the real person.

The effect of this way of behaving, consistently over time, is that, with his team, Carl enjoyed incredible trust and loyalty. People wanted to be on Carl’s staff because his style was so authentic that he freed everyone to focus their energy on all the right things—and not worry about all of the overhead and excess calories of worrying about how you look and how you fit in. There was very little social currency that needed to be expended for the company to move forward. And you never, ever had to worry about competing with the boss.

From the unique perspective of being a substantial investor and director of the company during my time in that capacity, I began to notice something else: because Carl was so truthful about himself, you began to believe that he must also be equally truthful about the business. He started each board meeting with a financial overview demonstrating that he was on top of the economic viability of the company, and then he always gave an overview of what he was most worried about in the business, whether that was something internal or external to the operations of the company. We always knew what kept him up at night, so we knew where to focus our support. Carl used his board as a resource, trusting us with the real truth and therefore garnering tremendous respect. This is the kind of respect that every entrepreneur dreams of getting from investors, and he seemed to earn it effortlessly.
There was something else as well. I also noticed that when you were around Carl, his personal authenticity and honesty called you to a higher ground in your own behavior. Any phoniness or bombast on your part was thrown into sharp, embarrassing relief—and you backed down pretty quickly. This attitude made it possible to have board meetings that were remarkable in their combination of truthfulness, full disclosure, and open dialogue. You never felt "Ah, Carl’s selling us one here." Instead, his personal confidence allowed him to put bad news on the table without making it a judgment about his own worth. As you might predict, when it came to agreements, Carl was always as good as his word.

What made this even more impressive was that the company had only a moderately successful outcome. It was a niche business that never got to the scale we all had hoped for, and eventually it was sold for a good, but not great price to a large corporation. It was no grand slam; nobody really got rich from the years they spent at the company. Yet I suspect every one of them would join Carl again, no questions asked, if he called. I know that I would—because I know that the experience of working on Carl’s team was so great that I almost didn’t care what we were working on.

Now, in stark contrast, let me tell you about Bill, another entrepreneur whose company—this one based on the East Coast—I served, again as both an investor and a director.

Bill was also a brilliant guy—a trained corporate attorney—and his company had far more potential than Carl’s in terms of both the available market and the potential financial gain for investors and employees. It was also a less complex and risky path to success than Carl’s venture. But, tragically, Bill had made the conscious choice at some point in his career to adopt the then-popular notion of "leadership as performance"—and with that, he had transformed himself into the most inauthentic and ineffective leader I had ever encountered.

Some of this may have come from Bill’s legal experience. Being an attorney is all about advocacy: gathering facts, conducting an analysis, and then developing the best case for your client to present
with conviction and persuasion before a judge or jury. This is what we want from lawyers, but it isn’t what we want from leaders. And that was Bill’s fatal mistake.

His inauthentic, advocacy style created a bizarre kind of dog-and-pony culture inside Bill’s company. For instance, the board would arrive at the board meeting wearing khakis and button-down shirts—and Bill would march in with his team, all in tailored suits. You could feel their attitude of OK, time for the board performance. Then Bill would take the stage, just like he was addressing the jury for an opening statement in a trial.

And that speech was always predictable in both its style and its substance. There was never a brutally truthful conversation about the state of the company. Rather, the message was always inspirational and hopeful—always Field of Dreams style—“If you build it, they will come.” Bill never seemed to notice that by trying so hard to impress, to constantly reaffirm his leadership of the company, he was only making it obvious that he clearly wasn’t comfortable in his own role. I can remember sitting there thinking: Bill, why are you trying to sell yourself? You already got the job.

This insecurity made it impossible for Bill to show any vulnerability with his team and his investors. He was constantly solving the problem, always on the brink of something great, defeating the competition. And implicit in these presentations was the sense that “If we can just get through this meeting, we can buy ourselves some time.” Bill thought he was giving us what we wanted to hear, because he thought his job was to pacify and inspire the board—when in fact he was doing just the opposite.

And it only got worse. That same insecurity led Bill to fail at hiring people better than him for fear they would expose his weaknesses. Hiding in his suit of armor, he was much more comfortable keeping his B-team marching to his own drum beat. I believe he wasn’t even conscious of doing this. And sometimes even that wasn’t enough, so Bill would also overmanage his teams, lest they make a mistake and embarrass him.

What came next was almost inevitable. An ambitious guy, Bill had begun with a laser-like focus on success. In many ways it was his
best quality. But before long, Bill abandoned that goal and became obsessed with merely failing elegantly—of not damaging his tender reputation. Ironically, the board of directors might have been able to help him—if only we had been given the real facts.

In the end, we had no real choice. We replaced Bill. By then it was an easy decision. Then the hard work began. We brought in a new CEO, who is still struggling to overcome a dysfunctional company filled with B-level talent working in a culture that rewards image over reality, gracefulness over victory—an organization of recovering codependents. It’s going to be a long haul. As I write this, the fate of Bill’s company, which once had the potential to be much greater and more famous than Carl's, is still up in the air.

For Bill, as you can imagine, being fired was devastating. His worst nightmare—what he had put on that elaborate show to prevent—had come true. How different the results would have been if he had just been authentic to himself and to others. And finally, knowing what I know now, and how fatal the disease of insecurity can be, I would never even consider investing in him again—or in anyone who even reminded me of him.

**Look at Life: Seeing Who You Are**

You must be willing to look at your life and reflect—on where you have been, what you have learned, and how your life experiences have shaped you—and realize that this collection of factors is now a meaningful and inescapable part of who you are and how you see the world. Listening to ourselves is difficult, and it doesn’t occur to us in the normal course of a day—we are always thinking, moving from challenge to challenge, reacting, and getting things done. It is often true that the only thing we don’t make time for is listening to ourselves—reflecting on our deepest thoughts, feelings, and intuitions. For some people, staying this busy is a way of permanently avoiding any self-reflection that would be possible. But that doesn’t change its value. We need quiet time and personal space to search our memory for the patterns in our life that have become our routine. I’m convinced this is the purpose of six- or seven-hour
flights where we have no obligation to others—just some time to think. We need to ask ourselves open-ended questions: Why did I do that yesterday? How do I feel about this, really? What worries me? What was I concerned about when I did that, or said that, or thought that? What is driving me right now? What past experience of mine just influenced my thoughts or feelings? This is work no one can do for you—you must initiate your own process and follow it through to your own insights.

This will not always be a comfortable set of reflections and thoughts. The painful memories will be even more instructive than the pleasant ones. In Steve Tappin’s book The Secrets of CEOs, he reports that a large number of the CEOs he interviewed had suffered a trauma or had an adversity in their lives at one point that had significantly shaped their personal leadership philosophy. Everything we’ve done in life informs our outlook—both in ways we realize and, often, in ways we don’t know—sometimes it is a tough lesson learned or the wisdom of a mentor along the way. It could even be a cliché or prejudice passed down from a parent or sibling that resonated so strongly that it has served as a guiding principle for us ever since—“Never go home before the people you work for,” “Don’t trust people from New York,” and so on. Whatever these messages within us are, we need to find them within our deepest patterns of thought and to appreciate that they have, to one degree or another, shaped our point of view in life, probably unknowingly. We want the right to dismiss them as silly or even dangerous, but we must realize they are within us and locate them for a rigorous inspection.

The lens through which you see the world is uniquely yours; it affects the way you interpret everything that passes before you, and you must own that point of view and any biases that come with it. In fact, you must embrace it and allow others some insight as to how you see things from the experiences you’ve had. When we explain ourselves in terms of our background and the view of life it gives us, we invite others to see our perspective, and in a leadership relationship this is a big step toward creating a personal connection.
to our constituents. When we own our point of view publicly and take responsibility for seeing things the way we do, we allow debates and conversations to occur more objectively. We can separate the facts from the bias that we might carry and that keeps others from feeling as if they are fighting our “opinion.” When the authority of hierarchy speaks with a strong personal opinion—as opposed to a strong fact-based point of view—it usually serves to shut down any hope of a useful, collaborative dialogue; no one wants to argue with the boss’s “opinion.” Unusually Excellent leaders also find opportunities to weave a lesson or principle from a specific experience from their life into a conversation or a situation as it occurs, as a way of further revealing some insight into what makes them tick.

We are who we are, and it is comforting to our teams to know something about our background—and that is possible only when we are willing to look at ourselves and see what is really there. When you, as a leader, are willing to explore the forces and events that shaped your point of view, the process results in the comfort of knowing you have reflected on your life story and accounted for the experiences that have formed your unique and personal point of view toward important ideas, concepts, and principles. Ultimately, knowing yourself better than you thought you could will repay you many times over in the form of the confidence that comes from being totally comfortable in your own skin. You can then move forward with a different kind of ease—knowing yourself at the core and understanding how you will approach and deal with the inevitable challenges of leadership. In the toughest moments, the one person who will always be there with you is—you. You want to know that person.

Owning Your Past: The Sting of Failure

Most of us in leadership positions live by the credo “Failure is not an option.” Yet every successful business titan I’ve ever known has failed in his or her career at least once, usually miserably. But whereas mediocre leaders often spend their entire lives running
from some past catastrophe, great leaders embrace those failures, carry the lessons with them, and continue to learn from them as they go. If self-reflection seems difficult, acceptance of failure will feel nearly impossible. There is a significant and natural resistance to including in your self-image the failures and shortcomings in your past. Executives who achieve great success are often, paradoxically, experts at marshalling the defenses required to avoid or resist the analysis of their failures and disappointments. They tend to ignore, deny, rationalize, or justify those events as something other than their responsibility. And they certainly don’t want to talk about any of it publicly. Why? Simply because at many levels within their psyche, it serves them to avoid seeing the harsh truth. Because they’d have to admit to subordinates that they aren’t perfect. Because they will disappoint some people in this moment in time—even though, in the long run, they are helping others form a more authentic understanding of the true person they are. Because, most of all, they will no longer have an excuse to offer themselves—that the failure really belongs not to them at the core of who they are, but to that other public persona that poorly represents them.

Success in this effort is measured by the degree to which you can accept what is really true about your history and the wins and losses contained therein. It requires a declaration to yourself that your past—all of it—is actually, legitimately OK. You accept who you are, what you’ve done, and the disappointments that come with life. You have forgiven yourself and others as necessary and left your resentments and anger at the door, and you have captured those lessons and included them in your current view of the world.

As a leader, if you do not make peace with these events from your history, you will forever be reliving them, and you will unconsciously infect your future with the unfinished business of the past. Of course, it is helpful to remember that all the other people you know have their stories, their disappointments, and their regrets. It is also useful to remind yourself of something we already know,
but may have forgotten in an attempt to block out bad memories: that adversity often demands the best from us, and without these tough times we would not be who we are, in many of the ways in which we are best.

Adversity demands more of us than normal times do. There is a reason they call it a “learning experience,” or a “character-building experience.” Because challenge pushes us—and when we are pushed, and stretched, and challenged, we learn who we are and what we are made of. But sometimes that pushing, stretching, and challenging results in a failure or shortfall. And we must embrace those experiences and appreciate them as having helped us become who we are today—stronger for it all.

An Unexpectedly Bad Day

Consider the “learning experience” of professional golfer Dustin Johnson, at the 2010 United States Open Championship at Pebble Beach.

Johnson came into the 2010 U.S. Open as one of the hottest, most successful young players on the PGA Tour. He arrived at Pebble Beach with high hopes for a strong showing—he had won the last two PGA Tour events at the same golf course, the AT&T Pebble Beach Pro-Am tournaments in 2009 and 2010.

“Whenever you have success at a golf course, you get a lot of confidence,” Johnson said. “So I’ve got a lot of confidence here. The first time I walked out here I loved the place. And I really enjoy playing golf here. You couldn’t ask for a more beautiful place. And I just really enjoy it.”

The three-time winner was also considered the best athlete on the PGA Tour, certainly one of the few able to dunk a basketball. But the question, as he faced his final round in the U.S. Open was—could he handle the immense pressure on a Sunday afternoon in his first legitimate chance to win a “major” and put his name on that trophy along with Jack Nicklaus, Arnold Palmer, Tom Watson, Tiger Woods, and many other legends of golf?
After a stunning 5 under par performance on Saturday, Johnson found himself sleeping on the lead Saturday night, and positioned in the last group on Sunday with Graeme McDowell, who was 3 shots behind Johnson’s 6 under par total for the first three rounds. It was Johnson’s tournament to win, and he looked invincible.

“I think I’m very patient most of the time,” he said. “Sometimes I can get a little impatient, I’ll hurry. But tomorrow I’ll just try to keep it slow, keep a good routine going like I’ve been doing, and take what the golf course gives me.

“This is what I live for. This is what I practice every day for. This is why I go to the gym and do all the stuff that I do, to be in a position like this to go out and have a chance to win a U.S. Open.”

Sunday did not turn out as Johnson wished—in fact, it was a long, slow-motion train wreck, with every painful mistake broadcast globally to sixty million viewers, complete with a harsh, but honest appraisal of Johnson’s meltdown. The expert commentators showed no mercy in critiquing Johnson’s unexpected technical flaws—which he had never before shown to be subject to—as well as his lapses in concentration and focus under the immense fishbowl pressure of playing in the last group in the U.S. Open at Pebble Beach. The mental and physical challenge to remain calm and find your best game in that crucible are beyond what most of us could possibly imagine.

Johnson started out badly Sunday, and it just got worse from there. His final-round 82 was the worst score by a 54-hole Open leader since 1911. This was not the distinction Johnson was hoping to earn. In short, it was a nationally televised character-building event for Dustin Johnson. It certainly tested both every fiber in his body and every promise he had made to himself to stay calm and “take it one shot at a time.”

But the lesson of this story for leaders, in the midst of a chapter on being authentic, is to look at the opportunity it presented for Johnson to contextualize this substantial failure in his own authentic
way and make his own decision and commitment about how this would shape his future.

After the round, when interviewed by the same analysts who had chronicled this embarrassingly miserable day for him, he said “Even though I played poorly today, I still had fun. I learned a lot. I’ll get it done next time.” We’ll see if Johnson gets it done next time he is in a similar situation. The kind of outcome Johnson had at Pebble Beach that day will either inspire him to learn from his misfortune and go on to even greater accomplishments, or, as in the case of dozens of other players who’ve had similar experiences, crush his confidence forever.

Johnson took the exact right first step here. He accepted this disappointment for what it was—a bad day. In fact, to be clear, it was simply a day he did not execute as he had intended. It wasn’t a bad strategy per se. And he is still the athlete and player he was before that day. He didn’t allow it to be a negative statement about him or his talent or his accomplishments—rather, just about that round of golf. He spoke of it as a learning experience, and he vowed to come back stronger. This event is now part of his history, and he will own it. He can talk about it in a way that every 15 handicap weekend golfer can understand and empathize with, because they all have been there themselves—face to face with the cruelty of the game and unable to bring their best effort forward that day. He now has something that bonds him with every amateur partner he’ll ever get in a Pro-Am.

Regarding disappointments like this one, it isn’t what happens in our life that defines us, it is how we deal with it. It isn’t whether we fall or not, but how we get up. Courage allows us to face our failures, and experience helps us deal with them. The next time Dustin Johnson is in a situation like the 2010 U.S. Open—if he is fortunate enough to be there again—you can be sure he’ll be wiser, tougher, and more prepared to meet the challenge of that day. And he can credit himself for the way he accepted defeat with humility and learned everything he could, when a lesser man would be licking his wounds and blaming something outside himself.
Share the Shame

When you can appreciate the value of your failures and shortcomings as simply the lessons of life, no matter how painful they were at the time, another opportunity opens up. You now have a chance to pick the perfect moment and share with your team a story or two of your past disappointments, as a powerful way for you to connect with your followers on a personal level—with humility, which is a cornerstone of being authentic. Some leaders are tempted to hide behind their shame, using the authority of their position to justify it, and expect others to adhere to the philosophy “I am who I am—take it or leave it.” This approach will most certainly get you what you deserve, which is a standoff with the folks you lead, with both sides camped in their corners of the ring, never to meet in the middle and share their experiences—and therefore never to connect, trust each other, and win together.

One of the reasons Cisco Systems survived the dot-com crash in 2000 and was prepared for the even bigger crash in 2009 was because chairman/CEO John Chambers had been a senior executive at Wang Labs, where he had watched helplessly as that billion-dollar corporation disintegrated and died. He carried that memory with him as both a warning lesson about management hubris and an object lesson in cash management—and it saved an even greater company.

Face Time

When Jim Wilson took over as CEO of a multibillion-dollar public company several years ago, the company was coming off some major setbacks including a stock repricing issue and a problem with restated earnings. These events threatened to derail the company from its leadership position within its industry.

It’s the kind of situation that virtually demands a change of leadership—and Jim was the guy that the board of directors recruited away from a superb opportunity in his current role to turn this troubled company around.
There’s a standard operating procedure for CEOs undertaking a major turnaround. You typically go in, keep a low profile for a couple months as you scope out the strengths and weaknesses of the operation and the key people, and then make your moves quickly and decisively.

But that is not what Jim did. Instead, he had another idea in mind for the beginning of his one-hundred-day plan. He spent his first three weeks with the company visiting the top (largest) ten employee locations—and keep in mind, it took a long time to reach all of them, as they were in Illinois, Arizona, Singapore, Japan, France, Italy, California, and Mumbai. During these first three weeks, he arrived at one of these locations late at night, and the next morning, he awoke at 5 A.M., drove to the local office or facility, and positioned himself at the entrance, where he served coffee and pastries to the entire employee population at that site. Jim stood at the front door of each location, dressed casually, and shook hands with every single employee entering the building. To each of them, he said, “Hi, I’m Jim Wilson. I’m the new CEO, and I’m happy to be part of the company. I hope to get to know you and learn about what you do.” His goals were simple—model humility, authenticity, and availability, and give everyone in the organization personal access to him. At some locations this meant greeting over a thousand employees, which took more than six hours.

In other words, Jim began his tenure at the top of his new company not by meeting with the board, or hunkering down and reading reports, or even visiting customers. Instead, for almost his whole first month on the job, Jim did nothing else but introduce himself to every one of his employees, one-on-one and face-to-face. He made himself real on that cold, rainy Illinois dawn. And his message was: I’m not above you, I’m with you. Thank you for letting me be a part of your company.

In my experience, the best leaders always try to make that kind of personal connection with their followers. They make it a top priority, whereas less capable leaders do not—often because they just
do not have that much interest in their subordinates as individuals. I know, from talking to others in Jim’s company, that in all of the years before Jim’s arrival, roughly 75 percent of the company’s employees had never spoken with the CEO, much less shaken his hand. In fact, the previous CEO had never even shown up at three or four of the sites Jim visited within his first three weeks. Jim followed up his greeting of all the employees at the door with an all-hands, open-forum meeting at each site—and when possible, he brought his family along. He talked about his background, his successes and failures outside of “work,” and the reasons that he had joined their company. He showed the team at each site the person behind the title “new CEO.”

Jim did what most leaders are either too self-absorbed or too afraid to do: he connected with the entire team, as individuals, and realized that above everything else, they were all bound together by the things they all shared—being human and wanting to make a difference and be successful. Moreover, he was humble enough to go to his employees, not the other way around. And the resulting connection was sufficiently unique and personal to be compelling—indeed, unforgettable—for the employees. In the process, Jim and his new followers made an enduring connection—one that would soon show up in the company’s results.

The Perception Gap

Although it is essential to know yourself in order to be authentic, it is equally important to know how others see you, so you can have that information to create the option of correcting the things that you may unknowingly be doing to undermine your good intentions and efforts—and potential success. Although self-knowledge is a great asset in knowing how you will interpret a situation or why you will react a certain way to an event, the feedback you can get from a diverse group of your constituents—if you try—will help you connect to your team on their terms, which are the only terms that matter to them.
All of us know that once we step out from behind our public persona, the real person we are is not always exactly the real person we want to be or hope we are. To be authentic is to face the truth about yourself as seen by others, and that can be a soul-shattering experience in a job where we want—indeed, almost need—to be admired and revered. Never forget that others’ perceptions of you are their absolute reality, and it doesn’t matter whether you know their views—they exist nonetheless, and it certainly isn’t relevant whether or not you agree with what they see or feel. The gap between their reality and your self-image can be the cause of great frustration and even failure in key relationships across an organization.

Why do so few leaders get useful feedback? Two main reasons:

1. Very few seek the feedback in a sincere and genuine fashion. They really don’t want to face the facts of how they are perceived. It can threaten a leader’s self-esteem and self-image, not to mention whatever illusion the leader holds about his or her public reputation. Subconsciously, we may not want to hear the data we fear exists in our followers’ world, and it may be more important to keep our self-confidence, no matter how much that keeps us locked in a delusional fantasy about our true standing. It’s easy to talk about wanting feedback on your decisions, but it takes real guts to go out and seek comparable feedback on yourself. It really is easier to assume—or pretend—that everything is fine.

In the 1992 movie *A Few Good Men*, in a well-known scene, Colonel Nathan R. Jessep (played by Jack Nicholson) is on the witness stand, being cross-examined by Lieutenant Kaffee, a young attorney played by Tom Cruise. Kaffee is peppering Jessep with tough questions. Jessep finally loses his patience, and temper, and in a violently heated manner he blasts Kaffee: “You want answers?”

Kaffee replies with matching emotion, “I want the truth!”
Jessep snaps, “You can’t handle the truth!”

This scene has become modern leadership folklore because it highlights exactly the fundamental issue in seeking feedback—*can we really handle the truth?* And, knowing how unpleasant it can be,
most leaders in a position of substantial authority and power simply opt out of this exercise, preferring to carry on, doing what they hope works, but without the value of knowing, truly, the perceptions of themselves held by those they lead.

2. *Even if you have the guts to seek feedback, and believe you can handle it, it is difficult to get.* Leaders live in a protected space—a bit of a bubble, often surrounded by lots of yes-men who believe it is advantageous to stroke their leader’s ego with wonderfully supportive “feedback” intended more to enhance the chances of their own advancement than to serve the growth of their boss. That’s because to get the truth, you must pierce the nice, warm, insular bubble of ass-kissing bullshit that serves to delude many leaders into believing they are more positively perceived than they really are. You must seek feedback well beyond your circle of admiration, be it legitimate or politically motivated. Most important, you have to do anything you can to make it legitimately and completely safe for others to communicate their real experience of you. In most feedback summaries I’ve seen, leaders tend to overestimate the regard others have for them—and it is an understandable tendency. Specifically, the area in which leaders are overly optimistic is in their assumption of having created a trusting workplace—we’ll deal with this topic in the next chapter.

Classic 360 degree review processes are generally useful, but sometimes misleadingly harsh, as anonymous feedback can degrade into a projection of the reviewer’s own personal issues, so you have to look for themes, trends, and broad perceptions. Like the scores in an ice skating competition, it may be smart to throw out the high and the low and look for the data that defines the central message in each area.

However, if you are willing and able to get this precious feedback, the real value comes in hearing it constructively and committing to use it *diagnostically* to improve your leadership impact. First, try your best to depersonalize it. It usually isn’t about *you* but about what you do. And it is just information. Try to see this
feedback like the oil gauge in your car, or the reading on your home thermostat, which you would never confuse as something personal. The fact is that most of your constituents are not qualified to assess you in technical, psychological terms—what they are really reporting is their experience of working with you or for you. Finally, remember that it is difficult, if not impossible, for others to separate their historical biases and prejudices from the data that is uniquely about their experience of your leadership. Take it seriously, but remember, it isn’t totally objective, and it isn’t perfect. The more instructive opportunity of this data is to look for trends or consistency among groups of people—it is noteworthy to know the common perceptions of a larger sample of your followers.

Also, do your best to minimize the emotion and drama of the feedback. It is leadership performance feedback—you want it to do your job better. Ask for feedback specifically about your behavior as a leader—that is what you want. What do you do that works, and what do you do that doesn’t work? Allowing the critique to wander into more personal territory, although instructive to know in some ways, opens a can of worms that ends up creating more problems than it solves. This is a business, not a marriage. Making it overly personal keeps you from hearing the useful part about your performance as a leader.

You will earn a significant level of respect for seeking this feedback, but you may never be acknowledged publicly for the courage that everyone knows this takes. I overheard our college-age son critiquing several professors with a friend, and was pleasantly surprised to learn that from his point of view, the teachers who asked for feedback more frequently, like once or twice during the term, were substantially more respected than the ones who waited until the end of the course to request their evaluations from the students—when the information was useless for improving that student’s experience of the teaching. The feedback will also get better and better each time you ask for input, as your team realizes there is no penalty for giving you the information you wanted. Your willingness to hear this
data counteracts the “ivory tower” or “asleep at the switch” prejudices that often distort followers’ perceptions of their leaders—and are normally fully justified by their experience of other bosses along the way.

**The Courage to Listen**

I’ve already mentioned John Chambers of Cisco. There’s another story about him that is related by journalists. At the end of an interview, John will ask the reporter, “How was that? How did I do? Did I answer all of your questions? Is there anything I can do better?”

First-time interviewers are often shocked by those questions. Fortune 50 CEOs are supposed to be Masters of the Universe, utterly confident in their dealings with the media, shareholders, and legislators. Moreover, by all accounts, Chambers is not indulging in some technique to ingratiate; he is honestly soliciting suggestions for how he can be better at his job—and he’s not going to let pride get in the way of that education. It is no mystery that John is one of the very best CEOs on the planet with the media—he is likely one of the few who regularly seeks feedback on his effectiveness and includes it in his personal growth plan.

To my mind, one of the greatest stories of modern business is the Great Return of Bill Hewlett and Dave Packard. By the late 1980s, both men, having built one of the most admired American companies, had retired to board positions at their company. And by every important indicator the HP they had left behind was doing fine.

And yet, as the legend goes, Packard received a private memo from a longtime, low-level employee he’d never met, which warned him that—no matter what he heard from senior management—Hewlett-Packard was heading for the rocks.

I can’t imagine that there have ever been more than a handful of big companies with cultures that would have emboldened an employee to write so forthrightly to the chairman of the board without fear of consequences. And I can think of only one company—HP under Bill and Dave—in which the chairman would actually
read that letter, hear it as constructive feedback, and act on its mes-
sage. In fact, within days, Dave Packard was grabbing every HP
employee and contractor he could and soliciting their opinions on
the company and his own stewardship. Based on what he heard,
Packard, with Hewlett’s support, turned HP upside down—and
restored it to historic levels of success.

The Great Return could never have happened had Bill and
Dave not spent the previous forty years building and reinforcing
trusted and safe communications channels that empowered rank-
and-file HP employees to speak honestly and forthrightly to the
men at the very top of the company. It also would not have hap-
pened had Dave Packard refused to admit his own mistakes, or
silenced the bad news, or allowed his pride to get in the way. In-
stead, he admitted that having been asleep at the switch, he had
allowed the famous HP Way to become more a series of mean-
less rituals than a living corporate culture, and most of all, he had
let HP grow old, stuffy, and slow. Packard showed that he could
handle the truth, even at the cost of his own perfect image.

Honest Feedback

Although this effort to gather honest, useful feedback is difficult, pri-
vate, and personal, and can be upsetting and disruptive, it is the
work that separates Unusually Excellent, unusually credible leaders
from the rest of the pack. If you are willing to do it with vigor and
sincerity, you’ll minimize the chance that your credibility will ever
be limited by your own shortage of self-knowledge, self-acceptance,
or self-confidence. The vast majority of leaders work in the illusion
that they know how they are perceived in their organizations, and
therefore they believe they know what works about their leadership.
They are often dramatically out of touch with reality within their
organizations. It is the rare leader who wants and gets the feedback
that could move the leader from the ranks of the “normal” to the
classification “extraordinary”—if the leader only knew what followers
really thought about him or her.
Being authentic 100 percent of the time is a high bar, but it is the appropriate goal for leaders, and theoretically it should be a simple objective to achieve. But most of us are not perfect in our track record on this topic, and sometimes we find ourselves in situations that truly test our mettle. Why are we tempted to slide from what we wanted to do, or say, to the point where we compromise the authentic leader we would so much prefer to be? I think there are four basic reasons—most of which we simply don’t notice in our own behavior at the moment we stumble. The pitfalls to watch for are as follows:

• **We feel insecure and we get scared.** Yes, even tough-guy and tough-gal leaders are subject to self-doubt at times. We can be caught off-guard, face-to-face with a tough or tricky leadership situation, and feel unprepared. Or we find ourselves in a circumstance where we aren’t sure how it will turn out, and we can’t tolerate the anxiety of the unpredictable outcome. We may imagine negative consequences for being brutally honest at the moment—and so we lose faith in ruthless candor as the right approach to the situation. At that point, we actually believe another path of action would serve us better—or at least it feels like that for the moment, and we take the bait. We start down a road that feels easier, and we can’t find an exit. We protect ourselves.

• **We know what to say, but we don’t know how to say it “right.”** We know what must be said, and we’d like to say it, honestly and authentically, without being harsh or inflammatory. But we don’t know exactly how to get the right conversation started. We assume it can’t be done—that we can’t communicate with both total honesty and empathetic compassion. So we opt for what feels feasible or what we’ve said before in a similar situation—and it usually isn’t exactly what we wanted to say.

• **We take on other people’s feelings**—or what we imagine their feelings will be—and we make them ours. Then we get lost or confused in the emotion of the situation—and ultimately we lose
ourselves to others’ concerns and become codependent in the occasion. We opt for taking care of others’ feelings now and sacrificing the truth that we know we must deal with later.

- We want to avoid the emotional pain of conflict that a brutally honest communication might cause—so we get into the habit of exchanging the short-term advantages of compromise for the long-term consequences of being inauthentic. We all avoid pain if possible—but it just isn’t the best tactic if it compromises the basic values that we stand for. Take your pain quickly and acutely. Learn to be comfortable with discomfort—and surprisingly, it does get easier after a few times through. It just becomes habitual to be authentic—or inauthentic. Habits are the things we repeatedly do.

The awful truth is that most of us compromise our authenticity, in small and not-so-small ways, more frequently than we’d want to admit to anyone, especially ourselves. And each time we do so, it is a paper cut to our self-respect. And people in power and authority are no more immune than anyone else—perhaps less so, given the ever-present pressure to appear all-knowing. The temptation to say or do something “easier” than what we know is necessary is, at times, intense. Our authenticity, and the courage that supports it, is tested in moments like these.

When we shortchange our integrity in this fashion, we are essentially making a decision that we don’t think we can be “be ourselves” or “say our truth”—for the reasons just outlined. In turn, this usually results in delivering a message that isn’t truly what we wanted or needed to say. In that moment, we imagine that saying something that was easier to say but isn’t what we meant will magically increase our options, decrease our discomfort, or smooth the path to action, avoiding something awkward or painful, or protecting our real selves from potential backlash or failure. Deception conspires with fear and seduces us down a dark road of believing we can “fake it,” just this one time, and it will all be OK.

But the downstream impact of making such a choice in a moment of stress or carelessness can be devastating. It always comes
home to roost. For one thing, it compromises the integrity of that all-important communications channel between leader and followers by changing expectations about the behavior of both. Worse, it sets a precedent for this type of inauthentic behavior that over time can trap a leader into an expectation or pattern of always behaving this way—over the course of years, a soul-destroying situation.

That’s why the higher you go in an organization—and the more power and status you hold—the greater the value of authenticity. Many things are amplified at the top of the leadership pyramid, and authenticity is one of the two things it is most dangerous for us to compromise. (See Chapter Two, Being Trustworthy, for the other one).

However, the rewards for leading an organization with authenticity are enormous. Mainly, it opens the door and invites in so many of what the ancients considered to be the classic virtues: humility, security, self-knowledge, thoughtfulness, mindfulness, connectedness, approachability, curiosity, and accountability—basically, all the things you wish you could see in the people who have led or now lead you. Further, it allows for the personal connections with people across the organization that are so critical to being broadly known and respected.

At the same time, authenticity acts as a natural immunity—like a vaccine—to the occupational diseases that accompany the game of power and that plague many leaders, such as aloofness, narcissism, isolation, the tendency to be surrounded by “yes men,” and disconnectedness. It also tends to strengthen the good kind of ego—confidence, while undermining the bad kind—arrogance.

In other words, when you can call on the courage to show your true self, with all of your warts and scars and shortcomings, for the world at large to witness, it’s pretty hard to be a pompous ass to the people who want your guidance, support, and direction the most.

Unusually Excellent leaders strive to remain self-aware and authentic in an environment designed to protect them from bad news about the organization and themselves. They spend a considerable amount of their time and energy staying grounded and connected, despite all of the institutional filters. They know that
information becomes unreliable at altitude (higher up the organization), perpetually stuck a level below where it is needed most—so they develop techniques to end-run those barriers and liberate the truth, no matter how painful it is to hear.

The best leaders remember that although no one at the top can completely escape being seen by others as the “boss,” they can find ways to relate at a human level with their followers, from informal gatherings to spontaneous visits. They seek out and cultivate employees at all levels who will speak to them with real candor. And they consciously present themselves as accessible and open and vulnerable—that is, they talk about their fears, challenges, and failures with humility, candor, and at times even some humor—so as to break down the barriers with those whom they wish to know. It is the mark of great leaders to know how to communicate with extraordinary authenticity and still be completely professional and appropriate given the specific circumstances, context, and appreciation of the authority they hold within the organization.

**Breathe and Be Yourself**

Authenticity is the first step of leadership greatness because it is the basis for the kinds of trusting relationships with followers that are crucial for taking on demanding tasks that lead to notable accomplishments. It also serves to humanize and soften the positional power that accompanies the built-in authority of senior leadership. But authenticity is also, in my experience, one of the most difficult aspects of leadership for even the most secure, experienced, successful leaders to fully grasp and own. Digging into this paradox yields fascinating insights and some practical ideas for leaders to master something that ostensibly should be easy, but isn’t: being themselves—*always*—and owning and embracing their own personalities, flaws, fears, passions, and values while still providing the role model behavior that is expected of them in a position of leadership accountability.
But it can be done—and we have the examples of great leaders before us to show us how to do it. Authenticity is rarely a neutral experience for our followers—if we are indeed authentic in the whole of our leadership behavior, it will be a huge asset in our credibility and effectiveness. If, however, we fall short of our followers' expectations in this crucial area, or we attempt to “role-play” an authentic leader when we are not, it will be a gigantic liability, and our credibility will be hamstrung indefinitely by this deficiency. It is almost this black-and-white, and it is worth the work it takes to get it right. The authentic leader ultimately has a happier, more fulfilling, and more successful career. Authentic leaders win.

In the end, perhaps the greatest contribution that communication makes to authenticity is not that it warns us when we are fooling others, but that it reminds us when we are fooling ourselves.
The Essentials of Being Authentic

• Just do it. Invest in yourself by doing the work you must do to truly know who you are—your life story, the things that shaped you, and your disappointments and failures. Own yourself for who you really are. This is what allows others to connect. There is no one who can do this work for you.

• Trust the power of allowing others to know you. Even though it can seem scary, and it requires the willingness to be vulnerable, it is the key to influence. The real you—no imitations or role-playing—is what people want to know, and the real you is the person to whom they will commit.

• Find the courage to be yourself when the pressure of leadership tempts you otherwise. There is nothing more comforting to others, especially in times of stress, than to realize that you know and trust yourself.

• Declare yourself worthy, adequate, and deserving of the job you have. Don’t doubt yourself if you expect others not to.

• Be careful about “trying” too hard to be authentic. Being yourself should feel easier than being the image you think others want of you. Don’t be authentic in the way someone else is—do it your way.

• Seek feedback from a wide group of your followers. Try to use it diagnostically, to improve, not as a threat to your self-image, self-esteem, or self-worth.

• Stand on personal courage to create relationships. You will be rewarded with loyalty.