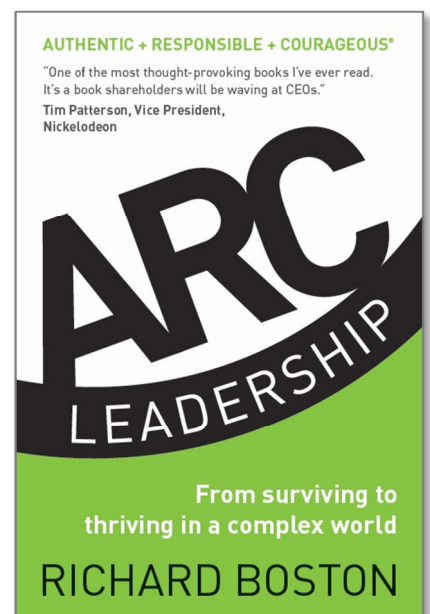


ARC Leadership: Resolving the “Authenticity Paradox”

*A response to Herminia Ibarra’s article
in the Harvard Business Review
by Richard Boston
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In her article in the Harvard Business Review (available at <https://hbr.org/2015/01/the-authenticity-paradox>), Herminia Ibarra argues that Authentic Leadership is a pill that has been swallowed all-too-readily by leaders and proponents of leadership development. Richard Boston believes Ibarra’s criticisms highlight four key paradoxes in our quest to be authentic. Here he explains how leaders can resolve those paradoxes by being ARC leaders – not only Authentic, but Responsible and Courageous.

Herminia Ibarra is right: Authentic Leadership may be hugely popular these days, but far too many people are treating it as a global panacea. On its own, authenticity will not turn back the tide of our declining trust in leaders and their organisations. We've all come across stories, like Ibarra's, of leaders' unbridled authenticity unsettling their staff. Who really wants to know that their boss is worried she lacks the experience required to lead them? Who really appreciates a senior figure excusing his own bullying behaviour as "simply the way I am"? How do we respect the cultural norms of other cultures while 'being true to ourselves and adhering to our own individual values'? Not only that, but how do we stop authenticity from being an excuse for sticking within our comfort zones – a recipe for staying just the way we are, regardless of what our context and our aspirations demand?

It's because of these issues that Goffee and Jones rebranded Authentic Leadership as "being yourself, with skill". As I've argued in my book *ARC Leadership*, I believe this was a mistake. There's nothing wrong with the advice they offer. However, I believe they've diluted the meaning of 'authenticity' which robs the term of much of its power. It's the equivalent of rebranding the word 'walking' to include climbing and swimming, purely because we've realised that it's not practical to walk across all types of terrain. To me, it makes far more sense to stick with a tried and trusted understanding of what it means to walk *and* to climb and to swim. Then we're in a better place to help people improve in each of those activities, and to empower them to choose the right combination for whatever terrains they should encounter. And so it is with 'authenticity'.

That's why I've chosen to strip authenticity back to its basics, so it's easier to grasp and easier to apply. It also makes it easier to spot what's missing: two other qualities that are essential in leaders if we're to turn back the tide of mistrust facing leaders and their organisations. Leaders need to be Authentic, yes; but they also need to be Responsible and Courageous – hence the A, R and C of ARC Leadership.

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The addition of responsibility achieves the same things as Goffee and Jones' rebranding of authenticity, but without the dilution. It also allows us to embrace a simpler, purer meaning of authenticity while recognising the place for Mark Snyder's chameleon-like "High self-monitors," as well as the more transparent "Low self-monitors". As Ibarra points out in referencing Snyder's work, both positions have their pros and cons. Encouraging leaders to choose align with either the high or low self-monitor positions will ultimately dilute the power of both approaches and encourage people to judge anyone they believe is taking the opposite path to them. It's much more helpful to look at this dilemma as tension between the need to be authentic and the need to be responsible – to yourself, your people, your context, etc. Both have their benefits, but neither is a panacea. Focus on one at the expense of the other and you'll come unstuck. It's blending the two that delivers the greatest value – as long as that blend goes beyond simple compromise. Being *a bit* authentic and *a bit* responsible brings us the worst of both positions. As I explain in my book, the real value creation comes from being authentically responsible or responsibly authentic.

Adding responsibility and courage to the mix is also very consistent with Ibarra's messages in *The Authenticity Paradox*. Like me, Ibarra believes leaders need to adapt and grow. This growth both requires and promotes authenticity. It means taking responsibility for one's performance and, in turn, it brings the leader additional responsibility – helping them to rise up their respective career ladder. Growth both requires courage and promotes it. As they grow, leaders and their people become increasingly courageous in their aspirations and their actions.

The power of using these three ARC qualities in unison is evident when we look at four challenges Ibarra levels at Authentic Leadership. Essentially they are four paradoxes, each being an example of needing to find ways to be simultaneously authentic, responsible and courageous – integrating the three rather than choosing between them.

Paradox 1: “As a leader, you should be true to yourself while also recognising that there is no single static self.”

Our identities are (or should be) constantly evolving. The pinnacle of authenticity is to be self-aware enough to see that and embrace it, while striving to be an even better version of yourself. We need to supplement that authenticity with in responsibility and courage to avoid complacent acceptance of who we *currently* are. Being authentic, responsible *and* courageous takes us beyond complacency, beyond making minor tweaks to our habitual ways of thinking and behaving. It encourages us to genuinely change our game, moving to a different paradigm – whether that shift involves us as individuals, a team, an organisation, or something bigger. This is exactly what’s required when we need to shift to a new leadership mind-set, including the steps from technical expert to leader of a multi-disciplinary team, or the shift from delivering services to selling them. For instance, unless you can let go of your current ‘authentic’ habits and mind-sets, you risk being locked in micro-manager mode or stuck thinking selling is beneath or beyond you.

Ibarra encourages us to pay attention to others’ feedback (enhancing our authenticity with responsibility). She asks us to use the actions of others as inspiration for integrating different styles into our own, and to be playful, to experiment with different ways of being. To me, these are further examples of courage in action. After all, if you’d focused exclusively on being true to your current self when you were 6 months old, you’d still be limited to crawling, bawling and turning sustenance into excrement. How did you escape that trap? You were born to learn – to learn as quickly and effectively as possible, because in your ancestors’ more hostile environments failure to learn could be fatal. It’s only as we grow older that this drive to learn becomes overwhelmed by our need to prove (to ourselves and others) that we already know everything there is to know. As Ibarra notes, citing psychologist Carol Dweck, we’re locked into a ‘performance’ mind-set instead of a ‘learning’ mind-set.



Paradox 2: “Leaders should align what they say with what they do and with what they feel. At the same time, unfiltered self-disclosure risks undermining your credibility and your stakeholders’ confidence in your leadership.”

This is a prime example of the tension between authenticity and responsibility. If you adapt your behaviour or filter your opinions to be more palatable to your staff and stakeholders, you might be deemed less than authentic. At the same time, being responsible to those people demands that you do adapt and filter. Your responsibilities to yourself and your leadership role also call for you to hold back anything that would threaten your perceived right to lead. As with all tensions between the ARC qualities, the solution is not to choose one quality over another, but to integrate them – to find the course of action that is both authentic *and* responsible.

Paradox 3: “As a leader, you should base decisions on your values but recognise that other people have different values and that rigid adherence to one’s values is often used to justify atrocities and terrorism.”

Our values are but one piece of the puzzle. Terrorists often act in accordance with their values, as do other fanatics and zealots *and* the people who fanatically and zealously oppose them. They lack the intellectual courage to see that their perspective is just one of many, that there’s value in both sides to any dilemma or disagreement. In my opinion, they also have an overly narrow definition of responsibility. When my colleagues and I work with responsibility, we’re influenced by the African Ubuntu tradition. In my book I explain in detail that we encourage our clients to take two important steps to help them be both authentic and responsible in dealing with competing priorities:

1. Empathise with the ‘outsiders’: assuming other people have simple, one-dimensional, storybook motives will drive us toward simple, one-dimensional solutions – solutions that rarely stick. That’s why any response to ‘terrorists’ needs to start with an understanding of their world view rather than blind vilification of their beliefs.
2. Redefine what is ‘good for the community’: this means including the needs of the ‘outsiders’ in a redefinition of what is good for the whole system, rather than focusing on its individual parts. This can be very, very tricky where the needs and system are complex, and where the conflicts in value systems.

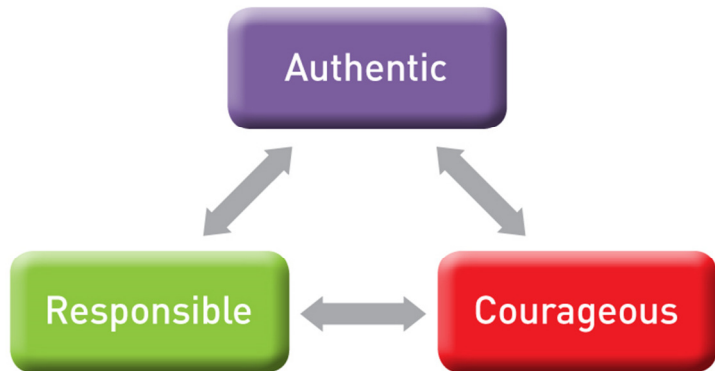


Paradox 4: “We’re told that being authentic means sharing personal details, being humble and hoping and pursuing our own individuality. However, these behaviours are themselves based in a single ideology and run contrary to many people’s cultural beliefs.”

In the literature and in leadership development programmes, authenticity has become increasingly prescriptive, drifting from its origins as “be the best version of yourself”. I think the three-pronged approach I take in ARC Leadership is an antidote to this. Being simultaneously authentic and responsible means truly knowing yourself, including the impact of your cultural origins on your beliefs, aspirations and day-to-day behaviours. It also means thinking bigger than yourself, addressing the needs of the wider system – including socio-cultural needs, as well as those of a more physical and economic nature.

Ibarra’s four paradoxes are primarily examples of the tension between authenticity and responsibility. As with all tensions, we tend to resolve them by opting for one side or the other or attempting to compromise. In doing so, with either exclude one quality or dilute both of them. Either approach results in a sub-optimal outcome.

When we add courage to the mix, we have an approach to leadership that helps us find new, brave ways to rise above the tensions between authenticity and responsibility – an approach that turns an apparent paradox into an opportunity for something better. That’s one reason why my colleagues and I always show these three ‘ARC qualities’ as a triangle. It reminds us that these three qualities are always interlinked and often appear to be at odds with each other. It also reminds us that the key to great leadership typically lies in resolving or rising above those tensions to create something that is simultaneously Authentic, Responsible and Courageous.



Read reviews and download sample chapters of Richard’s book at www.leader-space.com.