



## Let Your Freak Flag Fly

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**Summary:** Our buttoned-up office cultures are stifling the diversity, creativity, and passion that are necessary for an association to innovate and excel. It's time for you to stop holding back and to start bringing your whole self to your work, and it's a leader's job to make sure everyone else can, too. It's time to let your freak flag fly.

I live in Omaha, Nebraska, and we have a tendency here that I call "Nebraska nice." You might recognize it by another name. We choose politeness over honesty all day long. We have quiet, polite, reserved workplaces that seem nice, but we have a whole bunch of stuff simmering right below the surface. In a lot of teams that I have worked with, there are actually meetings after the big meeting, where people tell the truth to a smaller, safer group of coworkers.

This is highly dysfunctional. It looks nice and orderly on the surface, but it is wasteful and reckless. This is how groups of smart individuals make bad decisions.

If associations are to have strong capacity to share and process information, make meaning from that information, solve problems, make decisions, and innovate, they must be able to harness the robust intersections of differing ideas, perspectives, aspirations, and experiences. To continue evolving, associations must be able to engage competing narratives.

Employees, members, partners, and other stakeholders are the senses of an organization, and it needs access to the authenticity of these individual contributors. Every person involved who is not willing or able to be authentic in his or her relationship with the association is a closed eye or a covered ear.

So I have a question for you: Who are you at work? Do you fake it? Silly questions, for sure. Here's another one: Are you the real you at work? Of course you are, right? After all, who else would you be?

## Fractions of Ourselves

Before you answer that question, let us first consider identity. Our social

identities are built of many different things. Where you grew up and how you were raised are big components. Your experiences, values, and aspirations also contribute, as do race, age, ethnicity, gender, physical appearance, education, and profession. Each of us has a unique identity, a one-of-a-kind mash-up of all these different things laid over top of our genetic hand-me-downs. Each of us is a freak.

But these identities aren't carved out of stone; they are fluid and dynamic. Each of us is a little bit different in different situations and relationships. I am a little bit different around my daughters than I am around my wife. I am different with my wife than I am with my mother. We choose to share or not share the many different parts of ourselves in each of our relationships and interactions. Even if nearly all of this happens without any premeditation on our part, it means that we present different versions of ourselves in different settings.

So, my original question is valid. Who are you at work?

I don't accuse you of going to work and pretending to be somebody else. I'm simply suggesting that only a small fraction of your real self makes it to your desk. There is much that we keep to ourselves, parts and pieces of our identities we fear can make us vulnerable, like our true feelings, our weirdness, our untested and unproven ideas and hunches, our hopes and aspirations, our big questions, our big fears.

These personal qualities, which are natural and human, each generate some social friction when exposed. They make us stick out. They draw unwanted judgments and critiques. To reduce this friction, to reduce the risk of being the oddball, we keep that stuff to ourselves. We bite our tongues, we play smaller than we actually are, and we ride the brakes.

We may all still accomplish a lot with fractions of ourselves, but the result is that we end up with truncated identities at work, and the benefit our organizations receive from our contributions is truncated, as well. It is hard to build real relationships and a real body of work on less than real identities.

It might sound like this is going to get touchy-feely, but that is not my intent. This is a question of authenticity, allowing people be who they are, to fly their freak flags high. It is also about the genesis of leadership, creativity, and innovation in your association. It isn't a touchy-feely, happy-shiny, intellectual endeavor. Authenticity is the foundation upon which we build our work.

### **Where Value Comes From**

Unfortunately, "authenticity" is one of *those words*, a righteous concept that somewhere along the way got turned into a buzzword. We throw it around like a simple, safe, and common idea, but it is not. Authenticity is the quality of being authentic, genuine, or real, and I would suggest that it is rare in the workplace.

While we talk a good game about keeping it real, marching to the beat of our own drums, and being rugged individuals, we do not do much to risk standing out. We dress like the folks around us, we sit in the same place for our weekly or monthly meetings in the same conference room, and we nod our heads through the same anemic conversations. We do not disagree much. We play Nebraska nice. This culture of inauthenticity compromises our organizations' access to information, ideas, and possibilities and hinders our ability to learn and adapt.

The world is in transition. How we organize work is changing. How we communicate is changing. How we build and manage organizations is changing. The very concept of community is changing. Also changing are the raw materials that we use to create value. More and more, value is derived from the intangible assets that our employees and members carry within them, things like creativity, curiosity, and social capital.

In this new environment, a robust exchange of ideas and perspectives will feed more aggressive inquiry on the way to making sound decisions, and it will give you the ability to recombine and synthesize toward generating creative solutions and innovation. But we can only do this if people are allowed to be honest.

So, we need more whole human beings with weird ideas, crazy questions, and absurd hopes. We need more of ourselves in our work. We need more authenticity.

And it starts with you. Leaders once responsible for relying on their own experience and training to make decisions are now called to create and care for social spaces that allow them to marshal the experiences, perspectives, and solutions in the people around them to make those decisions. Increasingly complex challenges demand greater cognitive capacity, and innovation requires a diversity of perspectives to intersect. Leaders need to seek out, create, and care for these intersections. This is where the future is found.

## **Set the Example**

As with anything else, the most powerful thing a leader can do is to provide a consistent living example. You need to fly your freak flag. "Being authentic" is simply too safe and passive of a way to say it. Being authentic is activist, and it means that you will at times be the freak or the oddball. Do it anyway. Put your flag up.

Spend some time reflecting on a few basic questions:

- Do you know who you are? Besides your name and your title, how would you describe yourself to someone else?
- What are you here for? What is your purpose for being on this planet? What are you called to do?
- What is your gift? What is your unique contribution?

Once you have spent some time getting some clear answers to these questions, you can then ask the most important question of all: Are you acting accordingly? Does that stuff show up in the world? If you wrote down your answers to those first three questions and read them to your friends, family, and coworkers, would they know who you were talking about?

Make it your job as a leader to bring more of yourself to your work. Set the example for others to follow. Are you able to share your hopes and fears with your colleagues? Can you learn from your failures? Can you allow others to learn from your failures? This is powerful stuff—powerful stuff that we have almost stripped out of "leadership" entirely. You will know when you are stretching to share more of yourself at work because it will bring a certain amount of discomfort and uncertainty with it. Follow that. Fly your freak flag.

### **Build Safe Social Spaces**

In addition to being committed to our own individual authenticity, we can prioritize the kinds of social spaces that we build in our organizations. We can be much more intentional and explicit about the conversations that we have and the groups that we build.

Deliberation and decision making are vital processes, yet most of us take a passive approach to them. While your organization probably has written policies on requesting vacation time and the proper use of email at work, it likely has no public statements about how you make decisions and deal with disagreements. As long as this is the case, these all-important processes will fall prey to power dynamics, mood swings, charisma, personal conflict, and other distractions that get in the way of good outcomes.

Instead, put a roadmap in place. Guidelines as simple as "You are expected to disagree, as long as you do it respectfully" can help clarify expectations and make processes more transparent and safer for everyone involved. People are often not authentic in work conversations because they do not believe it is expected of them or because they are afraid there will be negative repercussions for their honesty. As a leader, you are responsible for creating space that is safe enough for authenticity to happen. Either you will have disagreement in your discussions, or you will have dishonesty. Choose carefully.

### **Protect Novelty**

Last, you must make and protect some space for novelty. Our current approaches to managing and leading organizations greatly favor rational, analytical, linear thinking and remove nearly all novelty, curiosity, and exploration. We act like anything without proof in advance or a clear return on investment is not worthy of serious consideration.

By their very nature, new ideas do not make sense to everyone and cannot be proven in advance. They usually seem silly at first. If you support people in bringing more of themselves to work, they will share ideas, questions, and

passions. This can be powerful magic for your organization, but you have to make safe space to consider these ideas—space for consideration and exploration, not proof and business cases.

Google is not the first to do it, but it gets a lot of love for its 20 percent program, which allows employees to use 20 percent of their time to work on something they are passionate about. This is Google's leaders making safe space for novelty and letting people fly their freak flags. They allow employees to work on something significant to them without having to prove its value in advance. Through a simple embrace of authenticity, Google has benefitted in the form of numerous new products.

Take your freak flag to work with you today. Fly it. Make it safe for the people around you to fly theirs. It will make your relationships more real and robust, and it will make your conversations more candid. It will also generate more conflict, and that's a good thing. As much as we avoid it, a certain amount of conflict can be healthy, and it is simply another opportunity to lead your organization forward.

The world has changed. You cannot afford to keep powerful stuff in your back pocket. Fly your freak flag today.

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