

## Authenticity and imperfection

### Description

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In 1982, Johnson&Johnson had one of the biggest crises in its company's history. Someone had poisoned some Tylenol capsules with cyanide, and when discovered it could have been the end of the company. But after a month of taking action, James Burke Johnson&Johnson CEO gave a conference where he laid out in great detail what the company has done. Most leaders would have tried to distance themselves from what was clearly not their fault. But he put customers first at great expense to his company in the short term by recalling everything and going through extra steps to protect the integrity of the medication they sold. The result of that authentic concern for their customers made the company even more successful and recovered its value after only two months.

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NY Times article about the 1982 Tylenol poisonings and James Burke's leadership

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To me, there is nothing more important in being an effective leader than being authentic. We expect perfection from our leaders and that is why we are so disappointed so often by people we would hope to follow. Politics has devolved into an endless cycle of spin, deception, journalism digging up the deception, more spin to downplay, avoidance, blame, and efforts to stay elected by saying nothing "controversial" ever.

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That system has created itself and developed an intense fear of authenticity. When someone is genuine and says exactly what they think, more often than not it creates followers and haters. We see this all the time on twitter for example; a tweet about creating divisiveness. But politicians are taught to fear being authentic because the critics are loud and vicious.

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It takes courage to stand up and say exactly what you think, and work to enroll people in your ideas. You will get resistance, ridicule, and even potentially hatred. People may work actively against you or try to undermine you subtly because they fear what you have to say.

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But being authentic in the face of all that crap is the courage of leadership. Being vulnerable to the attacks while standing your ground and say what you think and believe in is the purest form of leadership to me. If the definition of leadership is to make an organization achieve something that

wouldn't have happened if you weren't there, then isn't being controversial and authentic in your ideas the best way to move the needle? I think so.

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I recently had to let go of a manager that I hired 6 months earlier. It was a hard decision to make not only because I believe in giving people a chance to learn and grow, but also because it was my mistake. But I had to acknowledge it was best for the organization, and when I did it I told everyone in the company exactly that it was my mistake and I would work extra hard to make it right and find the best person to take the role, with their help too. I did get some feedback from people that they appreciate my honesty. I think it also helps show your team that mistakes are ok if you can learn from them and be authentic and honest about them. It is scary to admit those mistakes and make that decision, but I believe it helps bring your team closer and more aligned with your leadership.

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Can you be a leader and be imperfect? Can you promote the idea of racial equality and tolerance but then be caught wearing blackface at a costume party, for example? The case of Justin Trudeau's imperfection is an interesting one. His apology came close to authenticity but was it truly genuine or more political spin?

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I want to begin by saying a few words directly to racialized Canadians who face discrimination every single day in their lives even in a country like Canada. What I did hurt them, hurt people, who shouldn't have to face intolerance and discrimination because of their identity. This is something that I deeply, deeply regret. Darkening your face, regardless of the context of the circumstances is always unacceptable because of the racist history of blackface. [I] should have understood that then and I never should have done it.

*Justin Trudeau, September 19, 2019*

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The trouble with his apology is that it's too late and too evasive to feel 100% authentic. His actions were terrible and insensitive, and he hid them until he was caught. He said what he did was wrong but doesn't think he's a racist. He says he's learned that it's wrong but hasn't taken any personal new action to address racism, nor accepted any personal pain as a result of his actions. He wants to apologize and then move on with his career. I think on some level he feels bad about what he's done, but he's too concerned about his immediate political success versus being authentic in addressing how much he has hurt people with his actions.

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This is really difficult to do, but it's the mark of greatness to accept responsibility fully regardless of the consequences personally, and in my mind, he didn't strike me as authentic.

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What do you think?

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1. Uncategorized

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