

AUTHENTICITY

Authenticity means that “I act according to who I am. I am one with and express my identity. Therefore, I acknowledge my individuality and the uniqueness of my being – even if that means I am separate and apart from others. I accept that I am unique, and I accept others for their separateness and individuality in all parts of my life.”

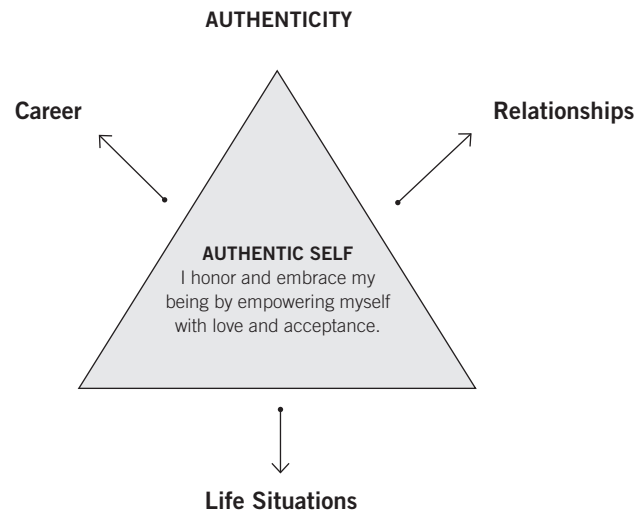
Authenticity is the outward projection of your identity. It is what you project. It is how you live your life in accordance with your values and your truth. In its purest sense, authenticity means not changing the real you to make someone like you or to be accepted by others.

The opposite of living authentically is assimilation (also referred to as conformity). By definition, assimilation means the state of being assimilated. This definition highlights that conformity takes place when a person or minority group, for example, gradually adopts the customs and attitudes of a prevailing culture. If authenticity is more desirable, let's explore why people may assimilate instead of remaining true to their identity.

The reasons for assimilation may be twofold. People may choose to conform so that they will be accepted. They may choose a form of assimilation to avoid suffering the potentially negative consequences of being different if their values, beliefs or personal preferences are different from others. This most often happens when the individual's emotional needs are not met, and they rely on external sources for self-definition and acceptance. As stated earlier, excessive conformity leads to a complete detachment from personal identity.

Conformity may also be imposed on people and, therefore, it is coerced, not chosen. A case in point is cultural conformity that is expected by the majority. Religious and racial groups have most often felt the sting of this kind of forced assimilation. Even in America, historically people have been expected to speak English to communicate regardless of their country of origin, which is representative of a cultural undertone of expected assimilation. Total conformity, for the most

part, does not exist in our country. The current trend, with our global marketplace, celebrates diversity as we strive to embrace differences and recognize the value of individuals.



However, we all assimilate (or conform), to some degree, at different times in order to be a part of a larger system. In a diverse environment like the United States, assimilation may be necessary in order to preserve economic survival. People may need to adjust language and lifestyle practices in order to secure a job and a safe place to live for their families. As long as core values and beliefs are not sacrificed, assimilation may be necessary for survival and, therefore, acceptable.

In an idealistic world, individuals would always be free to be who they are (consistent with their values and beliefs) without fear of rejection or consequences. There would be no expectation of assimilation or conformity. True diversity would be appreciated, the world would be richer, and human differences would be celebrated and valued. Being authentic would be consistently rewarded, regardless of the presence of divergent viewpoints.

In the real world, complete with political, economic and social pressures, however, people are not always able to sustain the purest form of authenticity at all times. When individuals are not authentic, they may experience negative consequences that impact their health and well-being. So the question remains, how can you hold firm to your authentic self while coexisting in a world with expectations and group pressures? The answer lies somewhere between conformity and compromise.

If conformity means that an individual has to deny his core values and beliefs in order to exist within a group or an organization, then his authenticity is diminished or eradicated. If, however, in order to succeed in a society, community or organization, individuals adjust their behavior to be accepted (or to achieve personal goals) while keeping their core values intact, then their authenticity is not sacrificed.

In business today, it is necessary to conform to organizational norms, beliefs, ideologies and social practices in order to be accepted, be evaluated as “effective” and/or advance to a desired position. Often there is a great deal of pressure to conform, and the consequences for not adhering to expected practices may result in loss of employment. Some feel that conformity is a form of “selling out” because it may involve denouncing one’s preferences (or values) in lieu of the corporate norm, which is akin to “selling your soul.”

There are a few things to consider in relation to authenticity and assimilation if you are working in today’s business community: First, there are modifications that all individuals need to make in order to “fit in” or adjust to different corporate cultures. Usually these changes pertain to behaviors rather than beliefs. The extent to which a person conforms is an individual choice and one that must be made in alignment with his or her core values. These are the choices people make every day in their employment. As long as these choices don’t contradict your core values, then you can still be authentic. You need to always trust your internal truth even in the midst of accepting or participating in alternative behavior.

Also, when you are in a position or in an organization that does not support your authenticity – one that is not aligned with your values, you create the potential for great internal emotional and physical suffering that results from the incongruity between your behavior and your values.

One of my clients found herself in a position that did not match her personal ideology. She compromised her belief system because the position paid well, but at the time she did not recognize how the situation was taking its toll on her health and well-being. Her job falsely met her emotional need for security, but it did not feed her emotional need to feel effective, valued and engaged as her authentic self. She ultimately felt emotionally depleted and physically ill. She stayed in her job at severe personal cost.

Another man, who was extremely creative and free-spirited, with a generous habit of helping others outside of his regular responsibilities, was in a position reporting to the president who had a very different style than he. More importantly, the president’s values were dissimilar from his. She was authoritative and demanding; he was engaging and supportive to his direct reports. In order to conform to her

performance mandates and behavioral expectations, he had to give up his natural approach. He was expected to do his job exactly as she prescribed. This left no room for creativity, and it was not aligned with his most effective communication and performance style.

He had a choice: to conform to his manager's rules of conduct and hold his employees accountable to her expectations or to lose his job. His decision was easy – he was true to himself and made the decision to leave the company and find a position that allowed him to be authentic. He did not want to work in an organization that expected conformity to a singular authority, nor did he want to spend his time in an environment where he could not utilize his talents to empower others and achieve his best results.

Perhaps you have found yourself in a challenging situation that resembles either of these two examples. Or you may be wondering how to avoid this type of situation in the future. The answer is to choose an organization that *fits your values* or one that celebrates diversity (including diversity of cultures, lifestyles and thought) so that you don't have to compromise to be accepted. Adapting to a new or different culture, while expected, should not require you to compromise your sense of identity or core values. Choosing to be authentic, in some circumstances, can be difficult. Making the choices necessary to achieve your goals and succeed in all of these situations requires self-esteem and confidence.