



HOW TO BE YOURSELF IN FRONT OF AN AUDIENCE

by **Suzanne Bates**

Effective leaders know how to be real, and they aren't afraid to convey their own, authentic personal style. When you think of Jack Welch, Rudy Giuliani, or Bill Gates, an instant impression comes to mind. Most of what you know about a public person is based on what you see and hear when they speak. The best ones come across as real; they are who they are.

The ability to connect with the audience and convey who you are is a skill that will take you to the top of your industry. Be authentic with an audience of one or 1,000 and you can make things happen. When people connect with you, they are more inclined to listen and more apt to believe in you. Clearly, it's invaluable that in developing your speaking skill to allow the "real you" to shine through. As Abraham Lincoln said, "You can fool some of the people all of the time, and all of the people some of the time, but you can not fool all of the people all of the time."

What is authentic? "It's what you believe," says John Hamill, chairman and CEO of a major bank. "I think what works is when you are excited about what you are saying. It isn't just the idea, but the emotion behind the idea that makes you successful."

Audiences know when you believe what you're saying. All the acting in the world won't convince people if you are not speaking your truth. Jack Welch's book, *Straight from the Gut*, discusses how he learned early in his career to be true to himself.

As most people know, Jack Welch shook up the culture at GE and became one of the most admired CEOs in the world. A large part of his success was the fact that people regarded him as authentic. Welch grew up as the son of an Irish-American railroad conductor, and many of the values and qualities he learned in his childhood stuck with him throughout his life, especially the fact that he is brutally honest.

In his autobiography, Welch says that when he got promoted, he considered conforming to corporate norms. As a newly minted Vice Chairman, he showed up at one of his first board meetings in a perfectly pressed blue suit, a starched white shirt and crisp red tie. A long-time colleague came up after the meeting, touched the suit, and said, "Jack, this isn't you. You looked a lot better when you were just being yourself."



Look up authentic in Webster's and you'll find something like "genuine, or known to be true." When you authenticate something, like a painting or an antique, you determine there is evidence of origin and value. Leaders who are authentic project something genuine about themselves. They aren't afraid to let people see who they really are.

"Even the best CEOs have a difficult time in front of an audience," says Peter Rollins, who hosts the ultimate power lunch: the CEO Club of Boston College. The CEO Club gets top-shelf CEO speakers from Ted Turner to Peter Lynch. "It's trite but the only way to be authentic is to be yourself; as long as you have the content. Instead of being an actor, just be you," he suggests. "You can't fake it," adds Talbots CEO Arnold Zetcher. "Audiences know when you're being real."

Leaders who can't be themselves in front of an audience create an authenticity gap, and an authenticity gap is a real problem. If you don't appear or sound genuine, people pick it up and tend not to trust you or listen to what you have to say.

The authenticity gap creates a disconnection between a leader and the audience. The audience doesn't buy it so the leader has a hard time building real relationships. People don't like or trust people who don't seem genuine.

How do you close the gap? Share your beliefs. Talk about your values. Be candid. Reveal your challenges. Share yourself. Allow that to extend to style as well as substance. If you're from Texas, you talk like a Texan. If you're a bank CEO, you wear a conservative suit. If you're a family person, you put photos of your kids on your desk. There is no formula; you just have to let a little of you shine through.

Authenticity is about letting people "see" you, and you have to be consistent. While you adapt your message to the audience, you should not be a chameleon or adapt your persona, but, instead, be yourself and tailor your message to each audience's unique interests.

The best advice in absolutely any situation is to be you. If you have a hearty laugh, then laugh. If you love loafers, wear them. If you would rather play squash than golf, then play squash. Being you always works. Being somebody else never does. To be authentic is to bring YOU into a leadership role.

Oprah Winfrey, one of the wealthiest and most successful business leaders in the world, has made a living being herself on television – allowing her personality to come through has connected her to millions of viewers. "What we're all striving for is authenticity, a spirit-to-spirit connection," says Oprah.



One of the primary ideas we try to convey to the people we work with is that leaders need to be genuine. Honor your uniqueness, and share it with others. Don't be afraid to let a little of you shine through. With authenticity, you will win trust and respect from colleagues, clients, audiences and employees.

Material from this article was adapted from:

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To purchase a copy of *Speak Like a CEO*, go to Bates' online store or www.amazon.com.