

## **Authenticity**

### **Becky Park**

Over the past couple of weeks, we have thought about how important it is to lead from the inside out, and the consequences of losing sight of this to power and position. This week I'd like to take a few moments to stop and think about what it means to be authentic and why being authentic is so important before we get stuck into how we can build on Mary's ten traits over the coming weeks.

One thing that was important to us when we were developing this programme was that it was authentic in itself. So, as we follow the chapters of Lead Like Mary each week, Tim and/or I are sharing with you our personal experiences, views and little snippets of our own journeys to leading like Mary in order to try and knit together the leadership material with the development of your career in conservation. It's quite a personal thing to share – the ups and downs of what might seemingly be just our careers but is in fact the development of your own character, beliefs and values. There are moments when it feels quite vulnerable to write with genuine sentimentality, whilst simultaneously feeling insincere not to do so. As Barry stresses, Mary isn't perfect, and neither are we – and we know it. So, bear with us, I hope our anecdotes help to make your journey that little bit easier than ours.

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We live in a time of conflicting-information overload and it is increasingly easy to portray yourself as something you are not. Amidst the distrust, fake news, immoral journalism, contrived social media, science-denial, reckless politics, hypocrisy and selfish ambition (to call out a few) authenticity seems a rare commodity these days – which only makes it more important on both an individual level within the conservation sector, as it is for the organisations and movement as a whole. Because there is only one way to be believable, and that is to be exactly what you say you are.

Authenticity has a focus on actions, those self-expressions of the morals you live by and the things you believe in. There is a level of charisma and sincerity that comes from authenticity that attracts attention and admiration, builds trust, inspires others and ultimately enables you to influence them in the right way. It's no good going through the motions, striving to prove to be something you're not, those around you can sense it and will distrust you for it. You must be true to yourself and your own ethics and if you find you are unable to then something's not right.

Barry mentions four key traits of authentic leaders, as defined by Bill George in his book "Authentic Leadership".

1. **Self-aware and genuine**
2. **Mission driven and focussed on results**
3. **Lead with their heart, not just their mind**
4. **Focus on the long term**

I don't know about you, but when I read these traits, I can instantly recognise them in lots of the people I've met in the conservation community. I'd go as far as to say that the majority of people I've worked with are mission driven and results focussed – conservationists tend to view their job as "not just a job", it's not about ego, power or money. We are completely driven by our desire to protect the natural world and the results we want to see are not financial. We also don't work in an industry of quick fixes – our focus is very much on long-term, sustainable results. What seems to be less common in my experience, is self-aware, genuine conservationists who lead with their hearts as well as their minds. What strikes me most is that having the combination of all four of these traits is what sets apart those I admire as being people I feel are really making a difference as leaders. In my experience, conservationists who show a genuine emotion for their work and those they work with, whilst demonstrating their sincere belief that the work they undertake is meaningful are those that have their voices heard, who others follow

willingly and for whom others have a will for them to succeed. Consequently, they engage others in their mission, get the right results and remain on track for long-term success.

Authenticity is one of the main reasons I wanted to work with the Osprey Leadership Foundation (OLF). I had worked with Tim for many years and witnessed him develop in to one of the most authentic leaders I know; he demonstrates all the four traits talked about above. Even before Tim began consciously working on his leadership style, he was a natural leader. His enthusiasm for conservation, his kind and calm approach to people and the fact that he doesn't take himself too seriously attracts the right kind of attention and admiration. His natural charisma gained him support and respect from people at all levels in our organisation and as a result he was able to undertake some innovative and inspirational work that others wouldn't have had the courage or the confidence in them from others to be able to. I'm not putting Tim up on a pedestal, he has his flaws just like the rest of us and we've supported each other through some tough learning curves. He's not afraid to admit when he's wrong or made a mistake and he's not too proud to apologise either. But if there's one thing I'm certain of it's that his heart is always in the right place.

When Tim offered me the opportunity to work with OLF he told me that he sincerely wanted to work differently, in a style which balanced the wellbeing of his team with the wellbeing of the charity. I knew I could trust that he would do things the right way, for the right reasons according to his beliefs and values – which are more honourable than any line manager I have known so far.

Tim has remained true to his word. He has built a small team of equally authentic trustees who are completely aligned with his and the charities values and they all make it so easy to enjoy working with them. I work from home, with complete trust to work my hours effectively to suit my own schedule and that of OLF. In a way that is completely at odds to what I have been used to, Tim places a value on my personal life because he knows that the better my wellbeing the more energy and enthusiasm I will have for my work. I know he doesn't have to do this, and his empathy is what makes me determined to do the best I can for OLF, and not let them down. It has evoked loyalty and a willingness to go above and beyond in return.

The way we work requires a huge amount of trust in each other, and complete honesty, which I don't think would be possible without both of our authentic natures. For me, therefore being authentic is so important – because when one person behaves in a genuine manner, it creates a safe space for others to do the same. It's why we feel so passionate about helping the next generation of conservationists become better equipped with these leadership skills early in their career. We've experienced the advantages of being able to express your authentic self, and the benefits this genuinely engaging manner can have when it comes to making a difference through truly meaningful work.

So why is it so hard to be authentic in the workplace? I'd love to hear your thoughts.