

International Women's Month: Authentic leadership

By [Millicent Maroga](#), issued by [Heineken South Africa](#)

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The days of ivory towers are well and truly over - and thank goodness for that. Discarding the pretense of being perfect (in other words, embracing authentic leadership) has paved the way for more meaningful interactions in the workplace which, in turn, encourages employees to give of their best.



Millicent Maroga

Authenticity means different things to different people, but for me, it comes down to the gap between who you are in your professional life, and who you are when you're simply hanging out on Sunday morning. How much congruency is there between these two people? Is your work persona very different to who you are as a daughter, friend, sister? How much discrepancy would there be if you asked a colleague to describe you, and if you asked the same of someone in your social circle? If you're striving to be an authentic leader, that gap will be a narrow one.

Authenticity means accepting that nothing will ever be perfect; nor should you strive for perfection, because that sets you up for failure. And, if something appears to be flawless, it merits a closer look: inevitably, you'll find shortcomings lurking beneath that perfect veneer.

This applies equally to your own abilities as a leader. I know very well that, while I have certain competencies, there are also skills I still need to develop and areas of knowledge that I can improve. Take my work with the supply chain, for example. Often, the language used in related activities is highly technical, and I almost always have to ask someone to unpack key terms so that I understand them. While this makes me feel a little vulnerable, I understand that it gives my team a chance to display their incredible wealth of knowledge and expertise. All parties should feel empowered in the workplace to showcase their respective skills.

Being authentic also means staying true to your personality style. Here's a case in point: I work in a very social industry. It's not unusual for us to attend events and, of course, beer is part of these. Naturally, we get chatting over beer, and the more beer we have, the more we chat. That's great if you get your energy from spending time with others, but if you're an introvert, you may reach a point where this ongoing interaction starts to deplete your energy. In this instance, being

authentic means acknowledging your limits – choosing not to attend every single engagement, or limiting your attendance time. It's not about being aloof or preferring not to mingle. It's about understanding who you are, and showing up as that person. That's important, because the alternative is trying to be someone who you are not. And it is impossible to make solid connections under such pretenses.

Being myself also means acknowledging my entire self – goofy bits included. I often use myself as an example to illustrate a point, and I'm not above poking fun at myself. My team members know that I have a habit of looking for my phone when it's in my hand, for example, and it makes me more accessible to them. That said, I am keenly aware that there is a fine line between creating accessibility and oversharing, and I'm careful not to step over it.

I would like them to be accessible to me, too. I take a genuine interest in the people around me: I ask the moms about their kids, and the sports fans their teams. It's a habit that's help me forge deeper connections with people across different functions and, at the same time, it's motivating for the team members. Everyone wants to feel seen and heard.

Linked to that, I make an effort to remember not only names, but surnames – and, in some cases, I'll even greet people by their clan name. It really builds that all-important connection. If someone has a European surname, I'll ask them about its background. I've found that people love others to take an interest in them, and asking about their ancestry is a quick way to break down any barriers.

I borrow a lot from my culture in my interactions with people – another way I stay true to who I am. My tendency to follow the protocols around greeting elderly men and women are an example here – but I am always careful to read a room. Some people take pride in their culture and are pleased to have it acknowledged, while others appreciate a more low key approach in a professional setting. It's important to be able to tell the difference.

I think that South Africans have a natural tendency towards being authentic. I believe that we instinctively understand that people don't exist as an island within the office: they have other roles (many other roles) and these impact on who they are at work, too. It's seldom, if ever, that we would walk into a meeting and get straight to work, without first having a chat about what's going on. *There's an enormous amount of richness in that: it's real – and that realness, that authenticity, has the potential to truly set us apart.*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Millicent Maroga is the corporate affairs director at Heineken South Africa.

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