



AUTHENTIC LEADERSHIP: BALANCING DOING AND BEING

BY JAMES C. GALVIN AND PETER O'DONNELL

Jill is a manager in a large, multinational company who has been promoted rapidly. Senior executives have identified her as having high potential, and her career path is promising. Jill spends time observing other leaders closely and tries hard to improve her leadership abilities and job performance. Despite all of her efforts, she feels stuck at a plateau. Her sense of passion for interacting with her staff and doing her work is diminishing. When she tries new techniques, she feels as if she is acting out a part in a play rather than truly leading. Tips from friends have been less than helpful: "Find a fast-track executive and do what he does." "Why don't you attend a few leadership workshops?" "Are you reading the latest books for leaders?"

Her search for better advice led her eventually to the office of the chair of the corporation. Bill was 30 years her senior and had successfully guided the company through turbulent waters as CEO years earlier. Every manager she respected held Bill in high regard. By any measure, he was a successful businessman, yet he seemed deeper than other leaders. He came across as more authentic—the real thing. Jill left him a telephone message and was surprised that he responded so positively to her request for a meeting. "Maybe he can give me some direction," she hoped.

At the door to his office, Bill was genuinely warm and personally concerned. "Jill, it's good to see you. What can I do for you?"

Jill described her dilemma. "I've been working hard on developing my leadership skills," she said. "But it seems the harder I try, the less

progress I make. I don't know what I'm doing wrong. I'm trying to follow the suggestions I read in the best-sellers on leadership and to emulate other successful leaders in our company, but nothing seems to be helping. The executives I admire seem different from the rest, but I'm not sure what they're doing that makes them stand out."

"Hmm," said Bill thoughtfully. "Sounds like you're serious about becoming a better leader, but you just can't figure out how to get where you want to go."

"Exactly," said Jill. "Is it something so far beyond where I'm at that I can't see it yet? Or do I just have to work harder?"

"Unfortunately, simply working harder to develop your leadership skills and copying others won't bring you the results you're looking for. You need to learn how to lead from within. Perhaps this is what you're seeing in the leaders you admire. Maybe you need to stop pushing so hard on developing skills and pay more attention to your inner resources."

Hooked on Doing

Jill hesitated. "I'm not sure I understand what you mean by 'inner resources.'"

"I didn't understand it either as a young manager 30 years ago," said Bill. "It took a serious crisis and a lot of people fed up with my leadership habits for me to learn an important lesson: I was hooked on *doing*. I may have acted and sounded like a leader, but I was merely playing a role. I came to the point where I actually began to fake it. I used to joke about putting on my 'game face' for work.

"On my own leadership journey, I discovered that an authentic leader is someone who is concerned about both *doing* and *being*. In other words, *who* you are matters as much as *what* you do. Unfortunately, most workshops and leadership books won't give you much help on the being side. They tend to focus on behaviors and neglect the uncomfortable truth that you have to become a more authentic person if you want to be a more capable leader. The doing side is easier and can bring quick results. The being side is less visible and requires that you spend time going deeper to do some essential interior work."

"As you talk, I'm beginning to see that I *am* hooked on doing. What do I have to do to...?" Jill caught herself mid-sentence. "I mean, what's next?" she said with a grin.

"Becoming a more authentic leader requires hard work, but it doesn't mean moving up or out," said Bill. "It means moving inward to the deeper layers of leadership. The reason you're feeling stuck is that you've only been working on the top layers. As you go inward, you'll start to make the shifts you're looking for."

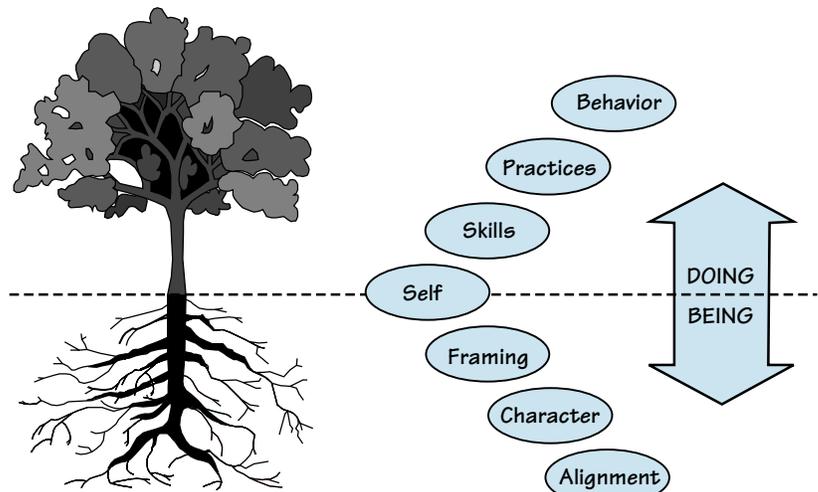
"How many layers are there?" Jill asked.

The Seven Layers of Leadership

Bill responded, "There are seven layers, actually. But before I describe them, let's look more closely at the difference between doing and being. Compare a leader to a tree, with a trunk, branches, and leaves above the ground and clearly visible, and roots below ground that anchor it in storms and provide water and other nutrients. Similarly, a leader has an outer,

clearly visible side and an inner, largely invisible side. Just as a tree needs both leaves and roots to grow, leaders need to tend to both their doing and being sides in order to develop. Trees with weak roots can blow over in a storm. Leaders who neglect their inner lives are the ones who collapse when times get tough. They are the ones who make the kind of ethical blunders that destroy their careers and sometimes cripple entire organizations.”

Bill drew a picture of a tree and seven circles. “I’ll tell you about each layer starting at the top and moving down. We’ll begin with the leaves and branches and gradually move down to the roots” (see “Seven Layers of Leader Development”).



Becoming a more authentic leader means moving inward to the deeper layers of leadership. Just as a tree needs a trunk, branches, and leaves above the ground and roots below ground, leaders need to tend to both their doing and being sides.

Behavior. “The top layer, *behavior*, is the easiest to understand. It includes all of a leader’s observable actions and activities, from how you answer the phone and manage your time to how you run staff meetings or negotiate contracts. The way to improve on this layer is to look for practical tips and techniques for your ‘leadership toolbox.’ Using them appropriately often brings immediate results in the way you execute tasks. For example, if you attend a good workshop on how to conduct effective meetings, you can become more proficient in running meetings the next day.”

“If this layer includes everything you do, then what is left for the other layers?” asked Jill.

“The other layers represent everything that supports our observable behaviors. They serve as the foundation for our actions. This layer is important because it’s where results come from. But it’s also susceptible to management fads, quick fixes, and helpful hints, because people usually gravitate to what’s practical. In other words, it’s the most superficial layer, yet it’s where people tend to focus their leadership development efforts.”

Practices. “The next layer down, best *practices*, focuses on well-established, repeatable patterns of behavior that are transferable to a variety of situations. If you’re familiar with bench-

Layer	Definition	Indicators	Development
Behavior	Directly observable actions and activity	Effort and immediate results	Look for tools, tips, and practical techniques to improve your execution
Practices	Well-established, repeatable patterns of behavior	Consistency and transferability	Look for best practices that you can adopt to improve effectiveness
Skills	Acquired knowledge and proficiency	Competence and efficacy	Develop your abilities to increase your capacity and performance as a leader
Self	Unique capabilities and limitations of body, mind, and spirit	Personality, strengths, and style	Develop a growing awareness of who you are at your best
Framing	Assumptions and mental models in use when engaging the world and others	Connection to reality and to others	Examine your worldview and engage others in thinking deeply and learning together
Character	Internalized principles that drive choices and behavior	Values, ethics, and integrity	View your greatest challenge as becoming a more authentic person
Alignment	Being in step with a larger purpose outside of yourself	Sense of calling, synchronicity, and flow	Ask yourself, “What is trying to happen through me?”

marking, you understand how this layer operates. For example, I had a lot of difficulty with delegation until I mastered a proven approach to communicating the assignment and getting employees to reflect back their understanding of it.”

“We adopt best practices in manufacturing for our division, of course,” said Jill. “But I never thought of identifying them for what I do as a leader.”

Bill continued, “Identifying best practices requires that you intentionally take time to research what is proven to work and integrate those practices into your leadership, as appropriate. But you can’t stop there. You also need to apply them effectively, and that requires knowledge and skills.”

Skills. “The skills layer refers to gaining proficiency in a wide range of

core competencies, which most business schools teach, such as planning, decision-making, and function-specific skills. It also includes the ‘softer’ skills related to communication, managing people, creating a supportive work environment, and encouraging organizational learning. Since all of these can be learned, you can improve in this layer by setting a learning goal, getting the necessary training, and putting what you’ve learned into practice. The stronger your foundation of core skills, the easier it becomes for you to improve your practices and behavior.”

“I can see how each layer is strengthened by the layer below it,” said Jill. “In fact, I did learn many of those skills in grad school.”

“I’m sure you did,” agreed Bill. “But how readily you learned and applied those skills is strongly linked to your natural strengths and abilities. What I’m referring to is the next layer you need to be aware of, *self*.”

Self. “This layer includes what each of us personally brings to leadership—our unique capabilities and limitations of body, mind, and spirit. There are many dimensions to self, such as personality, temperament, passion, values, and leadership style. Some people are more self-aware than others, while some are more uncertain about their strengths than others. You grow at this level by becoming more aware of who you are at your best. Personality tests and exercises to identify strengths and natural abilities are useful for development in this layer.”

“This layer must be pretty complex if it includes body, mind, and spirit,” said Jill.

“You’re right,” said Bill. “Self is like the trunk of the tree. This layer connects the layers above ground with those below. Part of who you are is visible to and part is hidden from others and possibly also to you. Getting to know yourself is the beginning of the interior journey necessary for working on the being side of leadership.”

Framing. “The next layer down can be hard to grasp. *Framing* is a term to

describe *what* you’re thinking and *how* you’re thinking. It includes your assumptions, mental models, concepts, and ideas—most of which are invisible to us at any given moment.

Improving how we frame things is important because the way we think affects our behavior. When you increase your awareness of your hidden thoughts, you become more able to see what is really happening around you, more connected to people, and more open to new ideas. You’re more willing, and better able, to leave old frameworks behind.”

“This layer does sound important. How do I go about improving how I frame things?” asked Jill.

“Getting to know yourself is the beginning of the interior journey necessary for working on the being side of leadership.”

Bill replied, “Well, a key activity is having more open conversations with people, in which you engage others in thinking deeply and learning together. Through such conversations, you start to examine your own worldview and get closer to others. Instead of simply pushing forward your own opinions, you try to understand how others see the world differently and even invite them to help you explore your own assumptions. Then, instead of just reacting to circumstances, you start observing the system and people around you more objectively. You’re able to see the whole as well as the parts—especially the relationships within the system.

“So this layer is really about the quality of thinking,” mused Jill.

“Yes, it’s related to seeing more clearly and thinking differently. The more rigorous your thinking, the more results you can achieve. There is a lot of power in this layer, yet far too many leaders neglect it.

“You know,” said Jill thoughtfully, “I’ve read a lot about mental models and how my paradigm can restrict my ability to see reality, but I haven’t spent much time working on this layer. I’ve always assumed that people

wanted to see me *do* something as the leader, not watch me *think*.”

“Me, too,” said Bill. “I also tend to worry more about what people are thinking of me than to reflect on my own thinking patterns. One of my big breakthroughs was realizing that if I was going to become a more authentic leader, I would have to think more deeply. That’s not easy for an action-oriented guy like me.”

“I can see that I have some work to do here and that I’m going to need to find someone to help me with this,” observed Jill. “But I gather there are still two more layers to hear about.”

Character. Bill continued, “Yes, there are, because more rigorous thinking alone won’t make us more authentic people. Our thoughts are heavily influenced by our character—who we are when no one is watching. *Character* refers to the internalized principles that drive our choices and behavior. Some people’s character is strong, others’ is weak. Have you noticed that the leaders you admire tend to have strong character?”

“That’s true,” Jill replied. “But how can we evaluate character when we can’t see it?”

“Character shows itself through the decisions we make and the way we treat people. It is especially evident in the small actions that don’t seem to matter and is reflected in our behavior over time. A leader with strong character treats people with respect, not as objects; presents the facts as honestly and concisely as possible; and inspires trust in others. On the other hand, a CEO who encourages dishonest accounting practices has an obvious character flaw. So does a middle manager who is always gracious around the boss but bullies her direct reports, or a male employee who harasses female coworkers. Fundamentally, this layer comes down to a commitment to do the right thing regardless of circumstances.”

“I’m often amazed at the differences in what people see as important and how hard it is for someone who takes unethical shortcuts to stop that behavior. Do you think it’s possible to improve our character?” asked Jill.

“Yes,” Bill replied, “but it isn’t easy. It requires consistent effort over a long period of time. If someone tends to stretch the truth, he can learn to stop lying but it will take a long time for complete honesty to become second nature. Essentially, improvement on this layer means working on becoming a more genuine person. Let me sum it up this way: If framing is about your head, then character is about your heart. I would also say that working on improving your character is almost impossible to do alone. You need the help of someone just as committed as you are to this deeper journey—someone with whom you are willing to be open, vulnerable, and accountable.”

“I think I understand,” said Jill.

Alignment. “The last layer is alignment,” Bill said.

Jill asked, “So does alignment mean you get all of these layers working together?”

“The layers do work together as a result of *alignment*, but because of what alignment is, not what it does. Alignment deals with matters of ultimate purpose, meaning in life, sense of calling, and the way life is unfolding before you. It’s about getting in step with something larger outside of you. In other words, do you have a gut feeling about what you were put here to do? We all know of leaders who have been driven not by money, fame, or power, but by something deeper. They seem to have an internal compass that keeps them on course,” Bill said.

“I’m not at all sure what I was put here to do,” said Jill. “Does this feeling come from inside or outside of you?”

Bill paused. “Well, this layer is about taking the deepest part of you and aligning it with a larger purpose outside of you. Remember the question we explored at our last planning retreat: What is trying to happen through me? That question gets at this layer. People leading from this layer tend to experience a sense of calling, synchronicity, or flow as they lead.”

“So where do I begin if I want to work on this layer?” Jill wondered.

“You need to connect with a

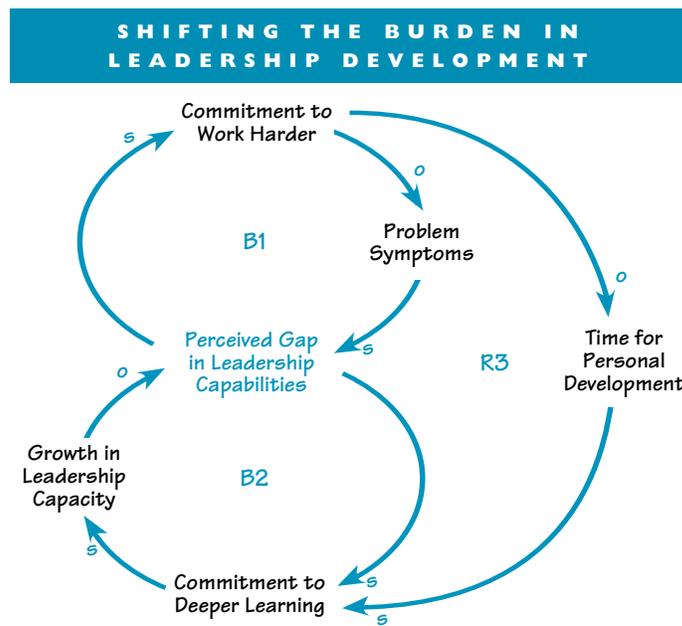
larger purpose outside of you. Books on subjects such *synchronicity* and *presencing* can be useful in showing you how to do this, as well as some books on spirituality. I find that my personal faith brings many insights and helps me make this connection. For others, alignment comes from serving an important cause or seeing how their work contributes to a larger purpose that is important for humankind.”

The Layers Working Together

“Now back to your comment about all of the layers working together,” said Bill. “The being side of leadership—framing, character, and alignment—are the leader’s root system. Though hidden from sight, roots are vital for a tree’s growth. In fact, the roots of a mature tree are often twice as long as the branches above ground. Authentic leaders who combine doing and being grow an extensive root system. That’s why they seem deeper and stronger as people.”

“That’s why I’ve hit a plateau,” mused Jill. “I’ve been focusing only on the top layers of the tree, and my roots are too weak to support the kind of leadership growth I want to manifest.”

Bill added, “Actually, lack of a deep root system is one of the key reasons why high-profile leaders fail. Many of them are talented individuals with drive and charisma, highly skilled at integrating best practices into their organizations. They make poor decisions and ethical blunders not because they can’t *do* the job but because they can’t *be* the leaders they need to be. They are hooked on doing and fail to devote enough time to developing the



When individuals experience a gap in their leadership abilities, they can decide to work on leading from a deeper place or committing to work harder. In both cases, the problem seems to be solved over the short term. But over time, the quick-fix approach interferes with people’s ability to develop their inner resources.

being side of leadership; as a result, their root system is simply too fragile to support the tree.”

Doing Is Addictive

“So why don’t more leaders go deeper?” Jill wondered. “Why do we get hooked on doing?”

Bill grabbed another sheet of paper and began to draw. “Here’s how it works. You start by experiencing a gap in your leadership abilities. For example, you find yourself in a situation demanding more from you than you have to give. You have a fundamental choice: Either you decide to work on the being layers to lead from a deeper place or you do a quick fix. Typically, you have to make this choice when you’re under pressure, short on time, and perhaps anxious about how this gap reflects on your performance. So you patch up the gap by quickly fixing it or working harder. For the moment, the problem seems to be solved—or at least it’s less apparent (see “Shifting the Burden in Leadership Development”).

“It’s at this point, when there’s no longer an immediate need to deal with your leadership shortcomings, that you have another choice. Either you can

learn from the experience and commit to working on the deeper layers or you can wait until you experience the next gap. If you continue to patch each gap with tips, tricks, and trying harder, then you find yourself increasingly relying on quick fixes. Over time, making the choice to go deeper becomes increasingly difficult, and you end up hiding your inner self and focusing more on looking good. Eventually, your ability to be aware of your inner condition erodes. You show little interest in framing, character, and alignment because you are entirely focused on immediate results, and you end up with a weak root system as a leader. You experience a plateau because you're trying to grow by adding more surface layer techniques. But only a commitment to deeper learning can produce long-term growth in your leadership capacity."

Getting Unhooked

"I can understand why so many leaders get hooked on doing," said Jill. "The pressure to show immediate results is so powerful. But I can also see why it's important to break this addiction you describe and go deeper. I'd like to try. What's your advice, Bill?"

"My suggestion is that you decide to invest time in doing the internal work, that is, in developing your *self* as a person as well as your *skills* as a leader."

Jill asked, "Which direction should I start? Is it better to start at the top and work down or vice versa? Or should I start with the self layer and work in both directions?"

"You can start at any layer and move in any direction. People develop in nonlinear ways, taking different paths depending on our needs and desires. You should begin where you need to begin. Start with one layer and look for resources and people that can help you. Just remember, it's extremely difficult to go deeper on your own. We all need others to assist us with the being side. So look for those who will give you honest feedback. Find someone you respect who will be your mentor in this area, and discover what they do to grow in each of the layers and to balance the doing and being sides.

"Another thing you can do is identify individuals interested in growing deeper and form an accountability group. Together you can explore questions such as: What is a quality life? In what way do I need to develop my character? If my spiritual nature is undernourished, how can I fill that void? How am I treating other people, especially those closest to me? What is the next obvious step in my quest to become a more authentic person? What do I want my life to count for? These are the kind of questions that helped me when I was hooked on doing."

"Thank you for your insights, Bill. This conversation has been very helpful, and I believe I'm going to be a better leader because of it. I also sense that I'm heading on a very long journey."

"Yes, it is a long journey, but an exciting one, Jill. And I can tell from this conversation that you've already started on it. Your next step is to imagine what would change if you actually made the commitment to becoming an authentic leader who leads from within. Our business and our world desperately need this kind of leader."

"This journey is bigger than I imagined," Jill observed. "It could change everything for me and those I'm leading."

"Absolutely, and your efforts could change our business. We can't compete if our employees only follow at a level of compliance. We need people to be fully engaged at work and to operate at a deep level of trust with management. This type of environment can only emerge when we have authentic leaders in charge." ■

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For Further Reading

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Senge, Peter and C. Otto Scharmer, Joseph Jaworski, and Betty Sue Flowers. *Presence: Human Purpose and the Field of the Future* (Society for Organizational Learning, 2004)

NEXT STEPS

- If you have participated in leadership development programs, within your organization or elsewhere, analyze whether the focus has been on "doing" (what you do) or "being" (who you are). What did you come away with from these sessions, and how did you apply your learnings in your organization? If you have participated in both kinds of sessions, which has had the most lasting impact?
- List some of the symptoms that you or your organization may be "hooked on doing." What changes in practices, infrastructure, reward systems, and so on would need to take place in order for you and your company to shift to an authentic leadership model?
- Identify individuals interested in developing a deeper leadership capacity and form an accountability group. Explore questions such as: What is a quality life? In what way do I need to develop my character? If my spiritual nature is undernourished, how can I fill that void? How am I treating other people, especially those closest to me? What is the next obvious step in my quest to become a more authentic person? What do I want my life to count for?
- Look for leaders with "deep root systems" who model authentic leadership behaviors. Learn from them by observing how they communicate with others, make decisions, and handle conflict.

—Janice Molloy