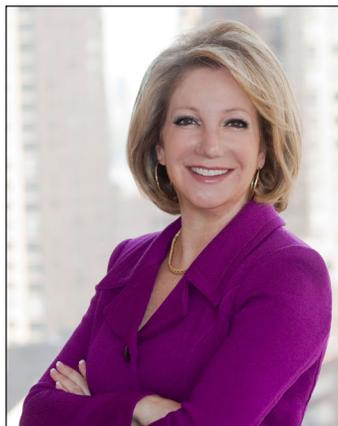


Leadership: An Affair of the Heart

An interview with Susan Tardanico, CCL Executive in Residence



"Leadership is as much an affair of the heart as it is of the head," says Susan Tardanico.

"It's hard to imagine getting up every day, putting in long hours, doing all the hard work it takes to get extraordinary things done — without our hearts in it," Tardanico explained in a recent interview. "Bringing our authentic selves to our work, to our leadership, is one way to ensure that our hearts stay in it."

Tardanico is [executive in residence at the Center for Creative Leadership](#), founding partner of the Authentic Leadership Alliance, a leadership speaker and consultant, and former corporate senior executive and television reporter. She shared moments from her personal leadership journey, as well as insights about leading with authenticity.

CCL: How did you become passionate about authentic leadership?

ST: I've been on a journey toward authenticity my entire life, even if I didn't know it every step of the way. Little pieces — various "ah-ha" moments — emerged, and by the time I was midcareer, I was keenly aware of the importance of authenticity and authentic leadership.

After many years of living, leading and learning, I developed a philosophy that leadership is, first and foremost, all about you. People often have a misguided notion that leadership is about everyone else. But if leaders don't journey inside first to get clear on their values, strengths, passions and purpose, their lack of grounding will undermine their leadership effectiveness every step of the way. Our ability to achieve greatness as leaders hinges on our ability to know ourselves, know what matters and act in accordance with who we are as people.

CCL: You mentioned some "ah-ha moments." Tell me more.

ST: One defining moment came early in my career as a broadcast reporter in Boston. I spent my entire childhood dreaming about being a reporter. It was all I ever wanted to do. If you recall the story of the Challenger disaster, Christa McAuliffe was the first teacher in space. She lived and taught in our station's viewership range. On launch day, we were all crowded around big monitors in the newsroom to watch this momentous event. The Challenger lifted off, and less than two minutes after launch, it blew up — disintegrating and disappearing right before our eyes.

At first, everyone froze in stunned silence. Then all of a sudden, the place erupted in giddy chaos. People knew that this was the story of the year, possibly the decade. Our region was going to be the epicenter of coverage, and it was going to make careers

for aspiring news reporters like us. Ratings were going to soar, and the place was frenetic with excitement. All 14 reporters were dispatched to McAuliffe's hometown. We were told to camp outside her home, her school, her grocery store, her parents' home, her best friend's home, her church — and we were not to come back to Boston until we had "tears on tape." I felt a dissonant churning in my gut. I didn't understand it at the time; I just knew that something felt wrong at a very visceral level.

Long story short, I did what I had to do. I spent three days chasing people around, sticking cameras in faces and trying to get the tears. I was a voyeur, spying on the private grieving of people, then beaming it over by satellite so all the world could see. I must have done it well, because I got a promotion. But I felt no excitement or sense of gratification. I hated myself for what I had done.

That was my first true values clash. Until that moment, I hadn't realized that for me, there was a very definite line between the public's right to know and a person's right to privacy, and that when that line was crossed, it would assault the very core of my being. For me, it was a matter of integrity. A matter of fairness. It took a few more situations like that for me to realize that my career choice — in fact, my dream — was misaligned with my values. And I ended up leaving TV news because of it.

Later in my career, I had personal experiences with some leaders who were authentic and some who weren't. It literally made the difference between being engaged in a job versus being totally disengaged. The contrast was so dramatic that I began to pay attention to the subject of authentic leadership, beginning with my own. I can say unequivocally that if there's a disingenuous leader in your midst, you do not willingly follow, you do not willingly offer the extra mile, and you do not willingly cover that leader's back.

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CCL: How can personal authenticity help us as leaders?

ST: As leaders, if we're grounded in a clear understanding of who we are — our values, strengths, passions and purpose — it becomes an invaluable compass for decision-making, whether we're choosing an organization, career path or job, figuring out the best team composition, navigating political issues, deciding where or how to engage in a project, etc.

If you're in a place where you've *chosen to be* and it fundamentally *suits you*, then you can weather the ups and downs more easily. Leaders who don't have that grounding — that clarity — get bandied about by the winds of change or they pander to whatever audience is putting the most pressure on them. This undermines their credibility, which is the single most important attribute of successful leaders. If we aren't authentic, we certainly cannot achieve credibility.

CCL: You mentioned four aspects of authenticity: strengths, values, passion and purpose. Talk a bit about each.

ST: We'll start with **strengths** — our innate talents. As a leader, job No. 1 is to surround yourself with the right people and build a team with complementary strengths and diverse perspectives. You have to have the right people in the right jobs throughout the organization. How can you effectively accomplish this if you don't understand your own strengths and, in turn, recognize the strengths in others? In business, we're conditioned to focus on fixing weaknesses instead of unlocking the potential in people. This translates into missed opportunity for us as leaders and organizations.

Next, **values**: Values are our deepest-held beliefs and principles. They're the stuff of our character, our convictions about the things we deem most important

in life. This is about finding your truth and your voice as a leader. Organizations go to great lengths to define institutional values, but many people overlook their personal values. The most admired leaders throughout history had strong beliefs about matters of principle. What are yours? If you have trouble articulating them, then you may be leading according to what everybody else is telling you, versus what you truly believe. CCL's [Values Explorer™](#) tool can help you get clear on this.

Passion is what lights your fire, what jazzes you. As a leader, how can you inspire without being inspired? Our passions are the things that fill us with palpable energy and emotion. How do you answer the question I absolutely love to . It might be *I absolutely love to solve problems; I love helping people; I love analyzing data, fixing things, cooking or being outdoors — anything.*

If you're unclear on what you're passionate about, the best thing you can do is pay attention. Only you will know how you feel as you move through the situations and activities of your life. Where do you find your greatest joy? In what circumstances are you in "the zone," filled with unending energy? When you bring more passion into your job, it becomes less like work.

Finally, on to **purpose**. Some people call this *vision*. It's the higher calling; it's the destination; it's the picture you are trying to achieve. Like values, organizations invest enormous time, energy and money in crafting their institutional vision. How many of us have done the same for our lives?

CCL: I haven't.

ST: Most people haven't. Of all the people I've interacted with in the last two years, only a few have had a personal vision statement. But this is probably

the single most impactful thing that I've done with students and clients alike. It's an arduous process, but when somebody gets to the point where they have literally written down a vision for their lives, it is a transformational moment. Knowing our desired end-game gives us direction and becomes a very powerful lens for decision-making — as leaders of our lives and leaders of others.

CCL: What about the bottom line? Why should authenticity matter to companies?

ST: In a nutshell, it comes down to leadership credibility and its impact on organizational performance. A number of studies show that credibility is the single most essential leadership success factor. A study by James Kouzes and Barry Posner is one of the most significant. They've been doing an ongoing study on leadership for over 30 years. Every time they go back and retest, they reach the same resounding conclusion: that *credibility* is the single most important characteristic in leaders that people *want* to follow. And that's regardless of where you are economically, culturally, your political environment, generation or type of organization. When people want to follow their leader, they become more engaged in their work. And there is lots of research that shows a direct correlation between employee engagement and financial performance.

The bottom line of the credibility research is that people need to believe you're the real deal if they're going to follow you. How can you be the real deal if you're not authentic, if who you are on the inside does not align with what you project to the outside world?