

HOW CAN LEADERS BE AUTHENTIC?

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It was a Waiter who first interested me in authenticity, and in the philosophy of existence known as Existentialism. But before I introduce you to this humble servant, let me back-track for a minute.

This article is the first in an irregular series which I am calling “Way To Go”. The premise behind my series is that for you and me to live life well and to lead successfully, it really helps if we have a Way of approaching both. The very wise Thich Nhat Hanh argues that if you have a Way, you can handle with confidence anything that life and work throws at you. And your Way can help you to respond on a daily basis to that nagging question which lurks below the surface: What will be the purpose of my life and leadership? Lots of truly great people and thinkers have developed many different Ways that we could choose to follow, and I am not on commission for any. Some religious figures in history have claimed that they themselves actually are the Way.

It is easy to get confused by the dizzying array of Ways on offer – one witty chap named Neibuhr once quipped that “Every time I find the meaning of life, they change it”. In this series we will explore just a few non-religious candidates for the Way, and they happen to be the ones that most interest me the narrator. My hope is that you might find them valuable and really practical too. After all, a bit of wisdom never went astray. And there is nothing, other than the outrage of the followers of these original thinkers, to stop you from mixing and matching Ways to suit yourself. Frank Sinatra even boasted that he “did it my way”, but most of his fans just enjoyed his voice.

If you are getting ready to call “no way” on this article, let me tell you about my waiter friend before you bunk off. I met him when I was a young student undertaking a History and Philosophy degree at the University of Melbourne. He was a character in a book by a French guy called Sartre, who himself was involved with a very smart thinker called Simone. It is not relevant to existentialism, but some time later I was involved in a relationship with a very smart woman myself and I used to fantasize that we could be an Aussie version of Simone and Jean Paul! Did I mention I was quite naive? Anyway, Sartre reckoned that this waiter chap who was just performing his normal role in this open pre-pandemic café in Paris, was exhibiting Bad Faith, which was pretty much the opposite of Authenticity. And it had nothing to do with the coffee being cold.

“Let us consider this waiter in the café”, writes Sartre. “His movement is quick and forward, a little too precise, a little too rapid ... He bends forward a little too eagerly ... he returns, trying to imitate in his walk the inflexible stiffness of some kind of automaton while carrying his tray with the recklessness of a tight-rope-walker ... All his behavior seems to us a game ... But what is he playing? We need not watch long before we can explain it: he is playing at being a waiter in a café.”

Sartre's longer description of the waiter is contained in his masterpiece *Being and Nothingness*, a book I studied intensely in my youth. When I re-read it for this article, along with Heidegger's *Being and Time*, I was disappointed by the frequent passages that I struggled to understand. Maybe I was like the waiter in my youth, faking my comprehension and acting in Bad Faith by playing the role of the smart philosophy student. Part of the bad faith of the waiter lies in presenting himself as a thing, a waiter-thing and a waiter-role. In doing this he is denying that he is a Free and Responsible Being, and we will look at these fundamental ideas shortly. But treating ourselves and others as Things, as roles, as identities with properties, and denying our moment-to-moment freedom and responsibility, is the act of bad faith according to Sartre. Now you may be thinking Sartre is picking on the poor old waiter and making a mountain out of a mole hill, but life is all mole hills according to Sartre, and these acts of bad faith have lots of significant implications.

For many of us, leadership and management can be a performance: we play the role, we follow a script prescribed by others as the correct values and behaviours, we apply management techniques with machine-like efficiency. "Now I am applying active listening", we whisper to ourselves remembering the steps, but we are not really listening. We revert to treating ourselves and others as things. Maybe we get caught up in our Identity-thing, that story about ourselves as a fixed entity with certain properties, such as "doesn't do emotions", "special", "lacking", or a role-thing such as "I'm an SES Level 2". And we spend a lot of time courting or deflecting the judgements and opinions of others who are gazing upon us as a leader-thing with attractive or unattractive properties. The cheery Sartre described the latter phenomenon as "hell is other people", and I have described it as

judgementalism which hinders relationships, groups and teams from working really well together and being creative and high-performing.

At least Sartre's waiter was playing the role of an enthusiastic waiter. I started avoiding my poorly managed local bakery before it recently shut down – maybe it was because the shop assistants were playing the roles of bored-out-of-their-brain shop assistants, and relating to their customers as nuisance-things? Sometimes I was the only customer in the shop, but a vacant shop assistant staring into some space way above my head would yell out in a loud voice: “Who is next?” And the “have a nice day” routine mumbled at my departure failed to console me as I chafed at being reduced to a thing. I politely raised the issue once with the manager when he was serving me in an empty shop, and he stared at me angrily demanding to know: “What is your problem mate?” There is an important gain in customer loyalty to be won from dialing down the Bad Faith. Of course, decent pay and conditions might encourage more warmth and authenticity too.

You may be thinking I am down in the weeds at the moment with these stories of waiters and bakery shops, when I promised something high-minded like the purpose of your life. Well this is a philosophy of existence – it is about every day existence and it draws from lived experience. That is why it has so much to offer for our lives and the daily practice of leadership. “Existence precedes Essence”, Sartre famously and controversially asserted, thumbing his nose at many of the stuffy theories and rules which preceded him.

Simone de Beauvoir demonstrated how ground-breaking and influential these ideas of bad faith and authenticity could be when she applied them to the question of gender roles and gender politics. Her foundational book on feminism, *The Second Sex*, was published seventy years ago just after World War 2. In it she argued that society treated

women as an inferior Other. It was an act of bad faith to reduce women to Things, especially sexual things, with some attractive but largely inferior properties to men. It was also bad faith and an assertion of male privilege to restrict them to a narrow set of women-roles. She developed a set of key philosophical ideas, especially around the notion of Appeal to others. Individuals cannot freely exercise choice unless they can effectively appeal to a large number of allies collectively to support those choices, and if individuals themselves accept responsibility for the freedom of others. This is particularly important for individual women if they are to have any realistic chance of exercising their freedom in a male dominated society.

It seems to me the curse of racism is also a product of bad faith. In order to maintain our superiority or privilege, we deny the humanity of whole groups of people who we treat as things with inferior properties such as “untrustworthy”, “criminal”, “lazy”, “unintelligent” or “uncivilised”. Racism is disgusting, it is both lazy and malevolent, and it is rife in the world right now. There are very few of us who don’t indulge in it, even though we inauthentically deny it to ourselves, or snidely share it with our friends.

Existentialism is a very liberating and empowering philosophy based on the possibilities of Freedom, Responsibility and Authenticity in our lives, but these notions paradoxically emerge from some rather grim analyses of the human condition. It is no accident that existentialism is responsible for novels with breezy titles such as *Nausea*, *The Plague* and *The Outsider*. One of its’ rather grim foundational claims is that dissatisfaction is an unavoidable and permanent feature of the human condition. This arises it is argued because human consciousness is always intentional and it has a future-orientation or relationship with time. We are always Becoming, says Heidegger. Our Futures Thinking friends will be delighted with this emphasis! It accounts for our human

achievements because we are always striving with intentionality towards some future state, but it also leaves us dissatisfied because we have not yet realized our intention, and as soon as we do, we immediately orient towards the next unrealized future. No smelling the roses for us humans apparently! Eastern thinkers and practitioners who I will examine in my next article concur about the underlying dissatisfaction in human existence, but they assert that contentment is available to everyone in the stillness of the present moment. Given that I am a mere amateur here, I will drive the purists mad and simply allow myself to mix and match from both views.

Life is worse than unsatisfying though, according to the existentialists. It is meaningless and has no inherent purpose. All meaning is just made up. Again, existentialism shares this view with some Eastern philosophies. For folks like Camus, existence is downright absurd, because it involves human beings who incessantly search for and attribute meaning, living in a universe which actually has no inherent meaning. Talk about the ultimate Catch-22! But this is also the well-spring of one of the most uplifting proposals from the existentialists – we are free to invent the meaning and purpose in our lives, and in our leadership. Further, we have a responsibility to invent such meaning if we want to live an authentic life. No one else is providing the script or directing the story, unless we let them. We get to be the authors of our own story, even if our surrounding circumstances and structures militate against us. Fellow-traveler Viktor Frankl, argues that he and others who survived the horrors of Auschwitz were extremely lucky, but they avoided total despair by holding onto their own story about something they still needed to accomplish. So, what in life is left undone for you, I wonder? What is the purpose you are inventing for your leadership role?

Camus wrote his novel *The Plague* about World War 11 also, and his references to illness and quarantine touch a nerve in our era of pandemic. But his novel was equally a metaphor for war, the surge of fascism and Vichy France collaborating in mass murder. All pretty grim stuff! Despite this, it became a classic in post-war France because it also represented the heroism of those who chose to make their own meaning through the Resistance. A recent retrospective review in the New York Times suggests that Camus who is so eloquent in describing the absurdity of human existence, also takes a long view in *The Plague* and he is arguing that it is not just plagues or Nazism, but hatred itself, that humans and societies need to “inoculate” ourselves against. We see again in existentialism this juxtaposition of meaninglessness, giving rise to humanism and heroism. And so the challenge falls back onto our shoulders: Are we willing to be humanistic and heroic in our life and in our leadership?

One of my favourite writers and thinkers is Irvin Yalom, Emeritus Professor of Psychiatry at Stanford University. He has written the textbook on what he calls Existential Psychotherapy, as well as writing a raft of wonderful novels featuring famous philosophers as his characters. A big feature of his approach to psychotherapy is to view “problems” such as anxiety or depression, as possible ways that humans can choose to deal with the human condition. We all face the same existential challenges: how to handle meaninglessness, mortality, isolation and our freedom. There are better and worse choices to make in dealing with our shared human condition, and the psychotherapist is in the same boat as the client in needing to make these choices in their own lives.

Yalom also inspired me with his work with Groups, especially his tendency to break the rules about the separation of the leader from the group or in any relationship. My own approach to leadership

development in groups and teams has been influenced by his methods. He, along with Ron Heifetz another psychiatrist, contributed to my thinking about what I have called the “Locational Dilemma” of leadership. The classic temptation for leaders and teachers has been to keep ourselves separate from the people we lead by locating ourselves either above them or a step in front of them. This approach supposedly asserts or protects our authority, and while it can be needed on occasions, the separation threatens to undercut our effectiveness and fulfilment as leaders because relationship is everything. It happens in life too -traditional fathers have suffered from this same unsatisfactory dynamic with their own children.

Sarah Bakewell in her recent terrific book titled *At The Existentialist Café*, which is an accessible and entertaining introduction to the “quirky” existentialists themselves, has a neat summary of the two key ideas of freedom and responsibility: “other entities are what they are, but as a human I am whatever I choose to make of myself at every moment. I am free ...and therefore I am responsible for everything I do, a dizzying fact which causes anxiety”. And Ron Heifetz argues that this responsibility and the accompanying anxiety, is a distinguishing feature that defines leadership, even more so than authority.

A guiding principle of existentialism is the notion of authenticity. To live and lead authentically is to honour our freedom and responsibility and to avoid acting in bad faith. It is not the same as saccharine sincerity or a list of values. As Sartre’s novels explore extensively, authenticity also requires us to be true to the choices we have made and not to forsake them under pressure from norms or expectations imposed by society, or by roles and professions, or by relationships and organizations. Living authentically and leading authentically may not suit the faint-hearted. But what the heck- you can always get a job as a waiter instead!