
The Growing Hunger for Authenticity: Let it Fuel Your Nonprofit's Mission

By Michael Martin, ECFA Executive Vice President

In an age of filtered photos and “fake news,” people are desperate for authenticity. Even so-called reality TV is not real (no shocker there!).

As one scandal after another has plagued corporate America, politicians, and the media, trust has eroded into a major deficit. Sadly, even among nonprofits, only one in five Americans say they highly trust charities that are dedicated to serving the public good.¹

A 2019 Pew Research report includes the headline “Americans’ struggles with truth, accuracy and accountability.” The same study goes on to explain the sobering reality: “Many think America is experiencing a crisis in facts and truth, and they believe this problem ties into the current state of distrust people have in institutions. . . . At the same time, Americans admit they at times have trouble distinguishing the truth from falsehood from certain sources.”²

Clearly, the needle on trust is moving in the wrong direction. As nonprofit leaders, what can we learn from these troubling accounts? How can we earn back trust and be more effective in fulfilling our missions?

The growing hunger for authenticity

Authenticity has always been critical. But in a world devoid of trust, the hunger for authenticity is growing—especially among Millennials and Gen Z.³

Slick imaging and spin on the issues that were once accepted as the norm are now being rejected outright. As people crave connection to what is true, even the hint of phony is a trust breaker.

These trends show no signs of stopping. When ECFA (Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability) asked givers several years ago to rate the single most important quality they desire in a ministry, it wasn't the popular answers you might expect, such as keeping administrative costs low, saying thank you, or avoiding political causes. Instead, in a group of over 16,800 respondents, nearly half of older givers and 56% of Millennials overwhelmingly rated honesty as the top attribute they seek in an organization today.⁴

Nonprofit leaders have focused on maintaining certain integrity standards over the years as the key to building trust, and rightly so. High moral, financial, and other standards are a must—and they remain the expectation of givers today.⁵ Strong stewardship standards including sound

¹ BBB Wise Giving Alliance, *Give.org Donor Trust Report: An In-Depth Look into the State of Public Trust in the Charitable Sector* (2018), 4, available at <https://www.give.org/docs/default-source/donor-trust-library/give-org-donor-trust-report.pdf>.

² Lee Rainie, Scott Keeter, and Andrew Perrin, Pew Research Center, *Trust and Distrust in America* (July 2019), 46, available at <https://www.people-press.org/2019/07/22/americans-struggles-with-truth-accuracy-and-accountability/>.

³ Millennials are now many of today's young professionals and parents around ages 23-38 in 2019 (born between 1981-1996). Generation Z, or “Gen Z” for short, are children, teenagers, and young adults born around 1996 to the present. Michael Dimock, “Defining Generations: Where Millennials End and Generation Z Begins,” Jan. 17, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins/>.

⁴ *The Generosity Project: Full Report* (Winchester, VA: ECFAPress, 2016), 4-5. Visit <https://www.ecfa.org/ProductDownload.aspx?ProductID=109>.

⁵ Ibid. An astounding 92% of respondents to ECFA's survey agreed that it is extremely important for nonprofits to uphold specific standards of financial integrity.

financial management, independent board oversight, and appropriate transparency remain the basic building blocks necessary to leading a healthy nonprofit.

However, it's easy to see now that upholding high standards will not single-handedly build trust. We must also tap into authenticity—another dimension of integrity—to flourish in these low-trust times.

What is authenticity?

Authentic is defined as “genuine or real.” Authenticity, the state of being authentic, is being “true to oneself or to the person identified.” Furthermore, when something is authentic, it is “entitled to acceptance or belief because of agreement with known facts or experience; reliable; trustworthy.” The opposite of authentic is false.⁶

Packed within this powerful, layered meaning of the term, the need for authenticity is evident. If we want our organizations to be accepted and trustworthy, we must be genuine, real, and true.

We can learn so much about this attribute from Jesus who was the greatest leader of all time and the ultimate example of authenticity.⁷ People were drawn to Jesus because He spoke openly and honestly; he was a humble leader who demonstrated true compassion to all. At the same time, Jesus was authentically bold and not afraid to expose hypocrisy. He directly confronted the religious leaders of His day (the Pharisees) who were obsessed with the outward appearance of perfection but were rotten on the inside. In a sense, one could argue that the Pharisees were so busy striving for a certain degree of outward “integrity” that they lost their authenticity and effectiveness in ministry.

How can our nonprofits demonstrate authenticity?

It's clear that authenticity is a must these days for leaders and organizations to build trust. But where do we begin?

Consider these five practical starters—drawn from ancient wisdom, the latest research, and yes, even lessons learned the hard way by others in the midst of a shifting culture.

1. **Model authenticity from the top.** Simon Sinek puts it so succinctly: “So goes the leader, so goes the culture . . . So goes the culture, so goes the company.”⁸ When leaders live authentically, it spreads throughout the organization and becomes part of the culture and DNA. On the other hand, when leadership lacks authenticity, it corrupts the organization, and it's just a matter of time before public perception will catch up.
2. **Embrace a posture of humility.** There can be no true authenticity without humility.⁹ A prideful leader puts on the public face of perfection, but a humble leader and organization will admit their limits. It seems obvious but is often overlooked: People can relate far better to an organization that they see is imperfect just like them!

⁶ See the definition of “Authentic,” <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/authentic?s=t>.

⁷ “Despite being executed as a criminal, Jesus managed to start a faith that now has more than 2 billion followers and has lasted almost 2,000 years. Clearly, Jesus knew a thing or two about leadership.” Geoff Loftus, “The Greatest Leader Of All,” April 2, 2014, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/geoffloftus/2014/04/02/lead-like-jesus/#7498e44963b9>.

⁸ Simon Sinek, *Leaders Eat Last: Why Some Teams Pull Together and Others Don't* (New York: Penguin, 2014), 127, 137. See also Dr. Stephen Macchia quoted in Dan Busby and John Pearson, *More Lessons from the Nonprofit Boardroom: Effectiveness, Excellence, Elephants!* (Winchester, VA: ECFAPress 2019), 22 (“As the CEO goes, so goes the ministry. And as the soul goes, so goes the CEO.”).

⁹ “The chief mark of counterfeit holiness is its lack of humility.” Andrew Murray, *Humility* (Radford, VA: Wilder, 2008), 23. In their latest commentary on excellence in board governance, two of my personal heroes and governance gurus, Dan Busby and John Pearson, issue these major warning signals of a leader's troubled soul: lack of humility and self-interest. See Busby and Pearson, *More Lessons from the Nonprofit Boardroom*, 23.

3. **Speak openly and honestly about the journey.** Adding spin or choosing not to tell the whole story is one of the root causes for the growing distrust in businesses, the government, and other institutions. There is certainly a line of appropriate transparency, but it's important to be open and honest about the journey and share as many facts as possible with stakeholders who have

come to expect it in this information age. Like accountability, authenticity comes with a certain degree of vulnerability, and the reward in trust earned far outweighs any temporary discomfort.

4. **Invite others in.** Whenever possible, find ways to invite others into your work. Affirm their voice is heard and matters, and that they are a critical part of your organization's mission. The most successful brands in business realize this principle and welcome user reviews and feedback about their experience. They also explain how their processes work, not just deliver the glorious end product. Another practical tip for demonstrating authenticity: Share behind-the-scenes photos and videos to create an "insider" feeling among your supporters. Always ask: How can we empower others in our community to realize their important contribution to our mission—whether it's through giving, serving, or in other ways?
5. **Be sincere in embracing authenticity.** Finally, authenticity is all about sincerity. We shouldn't strive for authenticity simply because it's the latest Millennial buzzword or a productive strategy to be considered relevant in today's changing culture. We should be authentic for authenticity's sake. People will quickly sense if a leader or organization has an ulterior motive for suddenly becoming "authentic."

In an increasingly skeptical world that doesn't know who to trust or where to turn, integrity remains foundational to leading a healthy, confidence-building nonprofit. And as we exude authenticity from the deep wells of integrity, we will fuel our missions to even further levels of impact.

As we serve and lead with authenticity, may our organizations turn the tide on trust!

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