



If you're trying to hit the bestseller lists (which may be a debatable goal), one crucial note is that you'll need to ensure the copies are ordered through a service (such as 800-CEO-READ) that reports to BookScan, a service that tracks book sales. In addition, the orders can be placed in advance, but you'll need to specify to the bookseller that the sales need to be recorded during launch week, to concentrate the impact of your momentum. Some bestseller lists deliberately don't count bulk orders, but their methodologies are often opaque, so it may be worth a try to cluster your sales.

Launching a book is more challenging than ever in this crowded and noisy media environment. But, by following these four strategies, you'll be far ahead of many competitors, who sit back without a clear plan and hope their book will somehow get noticed.

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**Dorie Clark** is a marketing strategist and keynote speaker who teaches at Columbia Business School and has been named one of the Top 50 business thinkers in the world by *Thinkers50*. Her latest book is *The Long Game: How to Be a Long-Term Thinker in a Short-Term World* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2021).



## RESEARCH

# 11. Why Leaders Should Be Open About Their Flaws

→ by LI JIANG, MARYAM KOUCHAKI, and LESLIE K. JOHN

IN THE LATE 1980s, Canon ran a commercial with professional tennis player Andre Agassi that launched an infamous slogan: Image Is Everything. For many years leaders of all respects have embraced that sentiment, doing everything they could to come across as powerful, strong, and flawless. Yet, recent research has found

that effective leadership isn't about always being perfect but about being genuine. When followers believe their leaders are acting as their authentic selves, they experience greater well-being, trust the organization more, perform better, work harder, and make more-ethical decisions.

However, breaking out of the "Image Is Everything"

mindset is difficult, and leaders often find it challenging to come across as authentic. Our research finds that one reason leaders struggle is because they frequently choose to present their strengths and intentionally avoid disclosing their weaknesses. We saw this play out in a pilot study when we asked leaders in various organi-

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zations to write how they would introduce themselves to prospective workers. Most leaders revealed only their strengths. Rarely did anyone mention their weaknesses, most likely worried that sharing weakness would damage their image.

In contrast, our research shows that leaders' self-disclosure of weaknesses can foster perceptions of authenticity, meaning that many leaders miss an opportunity to develop rapport with their workers when they choose to exclusively talk about their strengths. We found that disclosing weaknesses increased perceived authenticity for both male and female leaders, garnering benefits regardless of gender. In addition, the higher the status of the discloser, the stronger the positive outcomes were. It matters not only that you share your true self, but that you do so when you have a lot at stake.

As an initial test of this idea, we conducted a series of vignette studies in which we experimentally varied whether the leader did or didn't disclose a weakness, such as being bad at public speaking or struggling to keep up with current technologies. Consistently, our results showed that when leaders disclosed their weak-

nesses, they were perceived as more authentic but no less competent or warm. Sharing flaws, therefore, resulted in benefits with no apparent drawbacks. Importantly though, we are not saying that leaders should *always* share their deepest and darkest secrets. We found that these benefits of self-disclosure of weaknesses were restricted to relatable human foibles—they did not hold for disclosure of serious flaws, such as having a panic attack in a speech. And they probably don't hold for transgressions, such as being rude to an employee or behaving unethically.

To see how sharing weaknesses works for leaders in a more realistic setting, we asked a Google executive to give a speech and disclose a weakness to prospective employees. We recorded his speech and then edited the video to generate two clips: in the *experimental* condition we included the self-disclosed weakness, and in the *control* condition we omitted it. We then randomly assigned working professionals to watch one of the two clips and evaluate the authenticity of the executive. When the executive disclosed a weakness, the workers believed he was more authentic, even after

controlling for perceived competence and warmth.

In a subsequent study we then asked how people think about the discloser's motives in giving the speech. People who saw the speech that *didn't* include a personal weakness thought the leader was motivated by strategic self-presentation—he wanted to come out of the speech looking great. Those who came across the speech that *did* reveal a personal weakness, however, inferred that the executive didn't filter out information, was not acting strategically, and therefore was authentic.

Importantly, simply exposing a weakness isn't enough to make a leader seem authentic: They must disclose that weakness *voluntarily*. When making inferences about a person, observers take intentions into account. So, if a leader shares a weakness because they're required to or got "caught," the intention is muddled.

From prior work, we know that people frequently guess at what motivates others' behavior and make judgments based on those guesses. And in subsequent studies, we learned that prospective employees were more interested in continuing to work with their manager

and transferred more money to the manager in a trust game when that manager disclosed a weakness, telling us that authenticity earns cooperation.

Moving forward, we hope leaders come to appreciate that it can sometimes be beneficial to shift their mindset from "Image Is Everything" to "Authenticity Is King." Trying to keep a perfect, strong image can lead others to believe you're showing only a narrow "sample" of your true self. Opening yourself to the vulnerability of sharing human, relatable flaws instead leads people to see you as an honest and trustworthy leader. ■

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**Li Jiang** is an assistant professor of marketing at George Washington University School of Business. Her current research focuses on consumer behavior, self-disclosure, and privacy. **Maryam Kouchaki** is a professor of management and organizations at the Kellogg School of Management. Her research explores ethics, morality, and the complexity and challenges of managing ethnic and gender diversity for organizations. **Leslie K. John** is the James E. Burke Professor of Business Administration at Harvard Business School.

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