



# Authenticity and Activism in Cultural Leadership:

Should we step lightly or bellow from the  
rooftops?

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Clore Leadership is a dynamic and inclusive resource for leaders and aspiring leaders in the arts, culture and creative sectors.

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## About the author

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As Curator at the Freud Museum, Sophie is responsible for managing, curating and advocating for the collections, working with artists and fundraising.

In previous roles at the V&A, Sophie worked with the metalwork and photography collections, as well as on other projects such as Friday Late events and writing the V&A's annual review. She previously worked in publishing at the National Trust. Sophie is also a mentor for the museums sector and a Trustee of Goldsmiths Student Union.

“Be authentic, learn about yourself, your strengths and your weaknesses, and be yourself.” These words of advice were offered and emphasised by leaders during my Clore Fellowship. Authenticity is a buzz word, and, relatively new to the language of leadership, I was keen to interrogate its meaning and implications. In this paper, I want to focus in on the point where authenticity (being true to oneself, living out one’s values) meets activism. I take activism to mean acting to make a change (rather than the Oxford English Dictionary definition of “vigorous campaigning to effect social or political change”, but this point is a separate provocation). How can authenticity help or hinder an activist cause? Just how true to personal values should or can a leader of an organisation be? I spoke to UK-based leaders who work in the arts to gather their personal views on authentic leadership and activism, and in this paper I lay out my case for the authentic activist.

### The meaning of authenticity

What is authenticity? Today, to be an authentic leader means to live by your values, to be driven by your core beliefs and intuition. Authenticity in leadership is arguably about knowing yourself well, your strengths and your vulnerabilities, your values and who you are, and expressing this through what you do and how you do it. It implies braveness, too: to let others see weakness as well as strength. Sharon Ament, Director of the Museum of London, extends this idea of being at ease in your own skin: “Personal authenticity is like a snowball rolling downhill”, she told me, “picking up pace and growing with age, with experience, with knowledge and with confidence.”

Authenticity arguably means living by your values, to the extent that personal values are not (only) spoken about but demonstrated.<sup>1</sup> Early roots of the word ‘authenticity’ place the meaning around action, with the implication that to be authentic is to live out your values.

### Authenticity and activist leadership

To Jude Kelly, former Artistic Director of the Southbank Centre, authenticity is essential and leadership is a call to action. She believes that leaders have to go with their gut feeling. “Leadership,” she offers, “is not a job. It is taking your values and leading forward, bringing people with you, stepping out in front, to make change happen. You can call this activism. You can call this leadership.”

From an institutional perspective, Kelly states that “the most exciting place to be is when your values are utterly aligned with the values of your organisation”. Personally, the most straightforward way for her to achieve this has been to lead organisations from scratch, to build up a philosophy from the inside.

Kelly wanted to grasp the founding values of the Southbank Centre and run with those: that it is there to speak about the past, the present and the future in an

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<sup>1</sup> Thank you to my mentor Carole Souter, Master of St Cross College, Oxford, and Ian Rimington, Arts Council England, for talking this idea of authenticity through.

egalitarian way. She says that this has provoked anger in some people but that she has held to the values that underpin her vision. Publicly funded organisations have a duty to take the whole population into account, she states. She means by this that they include as many people as possible, and the greatest range of people and art forms possible. When I spoke to her, Chineke! Orchestra, Europe's first majority-Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) orchestra, had just re-opened the renovated Queen Elizabeth Hall and Kelly was thrilled with the event, which embodied these founding principles.

David Hevey, cultural producer, documentary maker and Director of Shape Arts, also spoke to me about activism. Shape Arts is an organisation that promotes the social model of disability, where disability is about barriers not impairments, and is a social, often shifting, construct. Society disables people with impairments rather than people 'being disabled'.<sup>2</sup> As a charity and campaign organisation, Shape Arts can remain apolitical as required by the Charity Commission, yet fully support radical activist campaigns by artists. The activism of Shape is to empower artists. As well as making films and working on projects such as the Unlimited Festival, Hevey manages the National Disability Arts Collection and Archive, a heritage story of political art. It tells artists' stories and gives artists agency.

When Hevey plans any piece of work he asks: "How is it a journey into and about challenging barriers?" and "How is it about the way we live now?" If those two questions can be meaningfully answered, it has potential to be a valuable, interesting and engaging piece of art and culture. He advocates the power of evidence-based work and representing many perspectives in his films and outputs. He is interested in how you can show oppression without showing victims. He knows that the personal is political. Hevey feels that his values strongly match those of Shape Arts: "Shape is about a campaign, about the barriers for talent."

Kwame Kwei-Armah, new Artistic Director of the Young Vic Theatre in London, can be described as an activist leader, as well as a playwright, actor and director. His values filter through the plays that he writes and the organisations he runs. In an interview in the Guardian he said that he realised before taking up the role of running the Centre Stage theatre in Baltimore that he was allowing others to set the terms of his rebellion: "I finally went: 'Stop seeking approval, no matter how subconscious it is. Stop! Just be!' I think maybe that is a difference in me in the last 14 years." So he started doing things just for himself – street theatre, ensuring that at least 50% of the plays he put on were written by women, insisting that the classics were directed by people of colour so they could never be told they lacked sufficient breadth when applying for top jobs.<sup>3</sup> Kwei-Armah told our group of Clore Fellows, "I believe in revolution that looks like evolution. I'm trying to be true to my soul. I'm trying to be true to my children."

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.shapearts.org.uk/News/social-model-of-disability>. Accessed 17 July 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Interview by Simon Hattenstone. Guardian, 1 October 2017.

<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2017/oct/01/kwame-kwei-armah-young-vic-theatre-interview>. Accessed 10 July 2018.

The link between authenticity and activism in leadership is arguably stronger in the arts than many other sectors. Cultural work tends to be “ethically-rich and value laden”.<sup>4</sup> Many people work in the arts because they believe in the ability of the arts to engender change and to broaden perspectives, and they want to contribute to this. As Arts Council England puts it: “We believe that great art and culture inspires us, brings us together and teaches us about ourselves and the world around us. In short, it makes life better.”<sup>5</sup>

## Authenticity and success

From a business point of view, authentic leadership can lead to happier, more effective teams and better results.<sup>6</sup> The reason that more than 1,000 studies on what makes an ideal leader were unable to come up with any universal characteristics, skills or styles, was that, according to the Harvard Business Review (HBR), there weren’t any aside from authenticity: leaders overwhelmingly stated that they had learnt that “being authentic made them more effective”.<sup>7</sup> HBR goes on to claim that ‘it may be possible to drive short term-outcomes without being authentic, but authentic leadership is the only way we know to create sustainable long-term results.’<sup>8</sup> It follows that if you are invested in a cause and you consistently live out your values, your activism will be more sustainable and successful.

Making your authenticity and activism sustainable is a project in itself. During the fellowship I have been encouraged to take time to interrogate and stand by my values. If you can’t act out all of your values at any one time, a useful piece of advice from my coach was to honour these values nevertheless, to keep them in mind. If you were to write your obituary, as I was asked to do on the RD1st coaching course,<sup>9</sup> which values and legacies would you prioritise? Just knowing this can focus and drive you, and also help you to stand your ground in face of opposition. I have been advised again and again: Look after yourself; listen to yourself; listen to others; bring people with you.<sup>10</sup>

David Jubb, Director of Battersea Arts Centre, spoke to me about the importance of distributed leadership and of ensuring all staff voices are heard. Battersea Arts Centre uses a process called Scratch, whereby all initial ideas are shared with staff

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<sup>4</sup> Cultural Value Project, Banks, M. (2015) Cultural Industries, Work and Values, University of Leicester, p.42. <https://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/media/people/professor-mark-banks/mark-banks-ahrc-cultural-value-project>. Accessed 17 July 2018.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/about-us-0>. Accessed 17 July 2018.

<sup>6</sup> For the purposes of this essay I bought a book called *Authentic Leadership: HBR Emotional Intelligence series* (2018) Harvard Business Review Press: Boston.

<sup>7</sup> B. George, P. Sims, A. N. Mclean and D. Mayer (2018) Discovering your Authentic Leadership, in *Authentic Leadership* (2018), p.6. See also this example of advocacy for corporate activism: <http://weneedsocial.com/blog/2017/10/2/corporate-activism-leadership-transformation>. Accessed 17 July 2018.

<sup>8</sup> *Authentic Leadership* (2018), p.36.

<sup>9</sup> <https://relationaldynamics1st.co.uk/courses/the-relational-dynamics-coaching-course/>. Accessed 17 July 2018.

<sup>10</sup> Eve Poole’s book *Leadersmithing* (E. Poole (2017) Bloomsbury: London), pp.100-105, has a section on work-life balance, and covers fuel and sleep.



(and/or audiences/networks) and developed together, iteratively.<sup>11</sup> This means that the organisation and resulting work is developed in an authentic, inclusive way.

Many organisations demonstrate that when their leaders' values align tightly with those of the staff and the organisation, it can have a hugely positive impact within their communities. Case studies in the Gulbenkian Civic Arts Enquiry, such as the Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art, support this point, advocating a wider interventionist, civic role for cultural institutions.<sup>12</sup>

### **When authenticity (and activism) takes a back seat**

The level of activism within an organisation may depend on personal bravery and whether a leader believes he/she is most effective as an individual, striving to meet personal values, or as part of a team meeting organisational values. It may also depend on whether the leader believes the organisation will be most effective being singular and potentially more activist, or whether it needs to be less focused and more collaborative in order to bring more people along with it. These options are not, of course, mutually exclusive.

Some leaders may feel conflicted in acting on their values, especially around funding. In arts organisations where funding is always being sought, it may be hard to say no to offers of money. These offers may pit personal or organisational values (or both) against organisational needs. This, in many cases, is where pragmatism overrides other considerations. Think for example, of ethical outrage and moral dilemmas facing arts organisations in 2018 as they decide whether to take Sackler family money, or face protests against BP sponsorship of exhibitions, or indeed how BAE systems withdrew its sponsorship of the Great Exhibition of the North.<sup>13</sup>

At some museums, directors said they had to be less activist, more pragmatic. "Why would I want to make our paying visitors uneasy? Why would I want to pose difficult questions for them? I want them to come and have a good time," one challenged. A museum might have activist values and an activist mission but this sits alongside the necessity of attracting paying visitors.

There is a risk that, however authentic a leader is, if his or her values don't align with those of the governing body, the leaders' position may be untenable. An example of this from the United States is the resignation of President and Executive Director of the Queens Museum in New York, Laura Raicovich, in January 2018. Raicovich resigned because her governance board disagreed with her programming protest-

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<sup>11</sup> [https://www.bac.org.uk/content/39534/create\\_with\\_us/scratch/what\\_is\\_scratch](https://www.bac.org.uk/content/39534/create_with_us/scratch/what_is_scratch). Accessed 10 July 2018.

<sup>12</sup> <http://civicroleartsinquiry.gulbenkian.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Civic-Role-of-Arts-Phase-1-REPORT-SINGLE-PAGES-5-7-17.pdf>. Accessed 17 July 2018.

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/feb/16/sackler-family-blood-money-disgrace-museums> / <https://cultureunstained.org> / <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-tyne-43324069>. Accessed 17 July 2018. See the toolkit *What Next?* developed with support from the Theatre Development Trust and Paul Hamlyn Foundation to help organisations meet ethical and reputational challenges: <http://www.whatnextculture.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Meeting-Ethical-and-Reputational-Challenges-Guidance.pdf>. Accessed 17 July 2018.

poster making workshops on Donald Trump's inauguration day. Her values were in line with those of the museum, but not of her board.<sup>14</sup>

From the perspective of the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF), Stuart Hobley, Head of HLF for London, observes that often it is activists who start an action (for example, saving a building) but that once those activists have mobilised a community, become a charity and got the funding to make a change, they often find their skills and values are not suited to running the resulting organization. The resulting organisation then has to recruit someone who is a better fit. Sometimes the founding activists may not want to compromise as much as funding and the process dictates, or they simply may not want to manage a project.

Jude Kelly is an example of an activist institutional leader but she does understand that being an activist running a campaign and running an organisation often require very different skills, energies and processes. She can do both, and she puts this down to her background as a theatre director. "I know that with theatre you have to build a rehearsal process that has a daily momentum. You have to build alliances, and, when the play opens, it has to run on its own, without you. You are building something to last." She aims to galvanise people to take on the organisational values, be courageous and act for themselves.

Some directors I spoke to raised a potentially negative effect of authentic leadership: if we are striving for authenticity, for our values to be borne out by an organisation, do we risk egotism? And, following this to its logical conclusion, if the values of an individual override those of an organisation, isn't this damaging? A single leader may have a very particular style and agenda and for this reason, activist-led organisations are often "like marmite", to use the Director of The Field, Sholeh Johnson's, simile.

The best leaders, as Caroline Collier, Tate's former Director of Partnerships and Programmes, argued, should seek to seize the essence of an organisation and drive it forward, putting this essence to the fore. This is what Jude Kelly explained she had done with the Southbank Centre. Ament reminds me that an organisation is an organism, constantly changing, and it is the job of its leader to shape this change.

Ament issues a tangential warning that we have to be careful with authenticity so it doesn't become another way of judging or measuring ourselves. We already have so much to negotiate every day that adding authenticity to the mix might not be helpful, although it is good to bear in mind. "If you are constantly in a position whereby to survive you have to negate your values or true self then that is corrosive over time," Ament muses. Her advice: be true to yourself but don't break yourself striving for authenticity. Go with your gut feeling and get on with it.

My conclusion (for now) is that authentic leadership demands not simply stating values but acting on them; not just writing a manifesto but striving to live by it. Being authentic can make activism more sustainable and effective. The more that leaders' values align with those of their organisations, the more effective they and their

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<sup>14</sup> E. Mara de Wachter (7 February 2018), *After the Nymphs Painting Backlash: Is Curatorial Activism a Right or an Obligation?* <https://frieze.com/article/after-nymphs-painting-backlash-curatorial-activism-right-or-obligation>. Accessed 30 June 2018.



organisations can be. To be an authentic activist is to accept a challenge to go slowly and make time to clarify your values. It is to be brave and honest, to negotiate controversy thoughtfully. It is to listen and to stand your ground, to back up what you/your organisation does with evidence. It is to bring people with you, and, whether you bellow gracefully from the rooftops or not, to make change happen.

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