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People First

The value of authenticity

The smallest behavior can be effective — or terribly destructive

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People, for the most part, believe what they see. Images have a sharp impact on our thoughts, attitudes and behaviors. The power of a first impression, our “gut” feeling, is based on our image of the situation. 2009 in many ways is unprecedented. Institutions we thought were indomitable have failed. People we thought we could trust are not who we believed them to be.

When situations don't add up and what we see doesn't match with what we believed, alarms go off. Genuineness is a controlling principle of trust: This person, place or thing ensures, on some level, your survival. That's the only reason we throw our lot in with theirs. Businesses today must be aware that the smallest behavior has an equal opportunity to be amazingly effective or devastatingly destructive. Legitimacy isn't a quick fix; it's something you are 24/7.

When Wall Street crashed and the big boys ran for the bushes, Brian O. Casey, CEO of **Westwood Holdings Group Inc.**, stood tall and was indignant to the greed displayed by so many.

“When a company puts its interest ahead of its clients, it is rotten to the core,” Casey emphatically says. “While the market environment certainly influences the success of any business, those with unique strengths and core values will ultimately prevail. It's not difficult to stay true to your roots when you don't know any other way. We put our clients first. This is not just a mission statement; it is how we live.”

Alston + Bird LLP is a law firm that understands the power of authenticity. “You must take the mission statement off the wall and put it in the hearts and minds of people every day,” says Linda S. Newman, director of employee development.

First, the firm understands that people need information that could affect them. Secondly, they need to be actively involved in empowering themselves to deliver great service. Both bring a real sense of shared common interest and commitment to

goals. Newman designs The Top Echelon Times, (TE) a newsletter that reaches 975 employees who are in nine office locations (Atlanta, Charlotte, Dallas, Los Angeles, New York, Raleigh, Silicon Valley, Washington, D.C., and Ventura County) aligned to the firm's culture on a daily basis.

TE arrives daily in employee's inboxes, with:

- Daily focus, a thought for the day.
- Dialogue sections that illustrate a core value and how this value is translated from the top down and how everyone can demonstrate this value, or topics that are "in the moment" like rolling out new technology or a specific challenge the firm is facing.
- Weekly themes keep discussion focused: The theme for the week of Sept. 7 was preparedness in honor of 9/11. The theme provokes interoffice and regional projects and daily group discussions.
- Consistency: At the bottom right of this one-page document is a small box. Printed inside is "Prioritize Today's Activities."

At the same time, every day departments across the nation have TE Time discussion groups.

TE is an invaluable tool that transforms attitudes. The concept is brilliant.

We may be living in a cotton-candy world, but anyone with a whiff of sense knows it's just spun sugar.

It looks one way and actually is another — there's nothing there that will sustain you. Businesses that bend with the times and literally leave their values on the wall are pretty much cotton candy. As we evaluate who we are individually and as a whole, what's real, solid and good has its appeal and its benefits.

Being authentic affords you personally:

- A clear understanding of your strengths and weaknesses;
- An ability to evaluate the source of a compliment;

- People's judgments will have less impact on you;
- You will believe that you are entitled to assert your own interests and needs;
- You will be an impressive negotiator.

Professional benefits:

- Look at situations and realistically evaluate resources;
- Your ideas and actions will be integrated;
- People will trust you and the judgments you make;
- You will have a stronger sense of yourself and be less defensive of opposition;
- You will be able to make your colleagues feel understood and appreciated.

Author Ayn Rand, who predicted our current economic and moral challenges 60 years ago in her novel "Atlas Shrugged," said this, "To live and work authentically requires that you respect reality as the ultimate virtue and consider avoidance and delusion the devil."