Dare
Accepting the Challenge of Trusting Leadership
by Scott Weiss

Take Off the Mask
Build better relationships through authentic communication.

QUICK OVERVIEW
In Dare, author Scott Weiss addresses the “crisis of trust” that permeates American culture. From politics to the financial industry, to our businesses and even our homes, inauthentic conversations—and in some cases a lack of communication—can cause misunderstandings and meltdowns. Weiss dares his readers to remove the mask of their perfected personas and engage people authentically.

Being relatable and transparent—at home and with customers, as well as with team members and employees—inspires people far more than the “spin” that’s so often used to control or perpetuate a brand or image. He calls for “perfect honesty,” which means telling the whole truth, not just the glossy and misleading essentials. Because telling the truth can sometimes be hard, Weiss offers instruction and insights on how to remove the façade. Starting with the self and then addressing relationships with customers and team members, the author shows how and why honesty can improve the bottom line.

APPLY AND ACHIEVE
Have you ever felt betrayed by an employer who withheld critical information? Perhaps the business was in trouble, and rather than explain the facts, your boss (or someone else) neglected to tell you what the company needed to do to improve…and that without improvement your job would be in jeopardy. By the time you heard the whole truth, it was probably too late; it was time to pack up and move on.

One of the many dares Weiss challenges his readers to accept is to stop sugarcoating the truth. “If we aspire to a genuine trust relationship with our workforce, we must accept that our employees can handle the truth and have the right to know it. Our business is their business, too,” he writes. Explaining the situation may scare some people, but it could very well bring to light innovative, business-saving ideas.

SUCCESS Points
A few things you’ll learn from this book:

- Why you must be honest with yourself
- How your professional persona might be limiting your success
- Why honesty can reduce dissatisfaction and attrition
- How trust fosters collaboration
- How to break through trust barriers with potential clients
In everyday usage, we think of a persona as an image or an impression. It’s an image projected outward for social purposes or public consumption, designed to meet the demands of a given situation.

We forget that sometimes. That a persona is not the genuine personality of an individual, but rather the mask that disguises it. Underneath that mask may be fears and insecurities that don’t seem to fit the part we need to play. If we are in positions of leadership, we may be afraid of disappointing others. We may fear criticism or ridicule. We may be afraid that someone else will outperform or replace us if we appear weak, vulnerable, or emotional. We’re better off, we think, with all that self-doubt concealed behind the masks. We can become very comfortable in those masks, and so convincing to others and ourselves in the roles we assume, that we become completely unconscious of playing a part. We forget that the actor in the center of the stage is not who we really are. And not someone we know, or even someone we really like, either.

My personal encounter with my own executive persona came as a life-changing shock. It occurred in December of 1994 as a result of a “DARE” from Sandy Linver to attend a communication development program. At thirty-five, I was already an executive vice president with Turner Broadcasting, overseeing two divisions and reporting directly to the second most senior executive who soon would be named the company’s CEO. I believed that I was very much at the top of my game, already delivering a lot of high-level presentations, and getting consistent positive feedback. I was more than a little offended by the suggestion that I needed any help at all with my communication skills. But I went.

In spite of my initial resistance, I did my best to participate without revealing my conviction that I felt superior to this target audience that needed help with communication and presentation skills. I wasn’t the least bit nervous when it came time to watch the video recordings of our individual presentations. I was sure I’d done just fine.

With the others in our group, I watched as the executive persona of Scott Weiss delivered his speech from the screen. The guy up there looked pretty good. Very sure of himself. Very corporate. Very buttoned up. I expected to be told, as I always had been before, that I was a very effective presenter. But after a moment, Sandy Linver, the faculty leader who had directed our session turned to ask me a question.

“So,” she said, “as you look at yourself, objectively, how do you perceive this person?”


“Hmm,” she said, “that’s interesting. If you could separate yourself from this person and experience him objectively, would you want to hang out with a person like that on the weekend?”

It was a strange question. But I looked at that person frozen on the TV monitor and thought about it. Reluctantly, I had to tell the truth.

“No,” I said. “Probably not.”

“Really?” she asked. “And why not?”

“Well,” I said, “because I don’t hang out with people like that.”

I needed to find my authentic self and learn how to bring more of my real personality to my vocation.

I’m not sure whether there was a collective gasp from the audience or just a stunned silence, but what she said next definitely stunned me.

“You know, don’t you, that you’re talking about yourself?”

Yes. I was. I had just admitted that the person I was projecting was not someone to whom I could relate. He wasn’t even someone I really liked!

In the weeks following that close and uncomfortable encounter with my own executive persona, I did a lot of thinking. I examined what I had learned about how others actually did experience me, and thought about how I wanted people to experience me. There was a gaping abyss between those two extremes, and I realized that I had a lot of work to do to bring them closer together—to become more congruent as an individual and as a leader. I needed to find my authentic self and learn how to bring more of my real personality to my vocation.

From my own experience, and what I have learned from many I’ve worked with, I know that if we are honest and forthright with that most primary, all-important audience of ourselves, our communication to the rest of the world becomes, if not always easy, at least authentic. Our messaging then comes from our true inner voice. That’s the voice that will stir people, inspiring them to act, to believe, even to change.

WHEN WE DON’T HAVE THE ANSWERS

The assumption is that leaders always know where they are going and how
they're going to get there. Most of us weren't trained to like confusion or to admit when we feel hesitant and uncertain.

In our schools and organizations, we place great value on sounding assured and confident and knowledgeable. Uncertainty has yet to emerge as a higher-order value or behavior that organizations eagerly reward.

Even good leaders don't always have all the answers. And the great leaders aren't ashamed to admit it. Surprisingly, when leaders reveal uncertainty, and acknowledge that uncertainty with a little humility, the result is not less, but more respect and effort from the workforce. In the landmark five-year Good to Great study conducted by Jim Collins, personal humility was one of the most essential attributes of a great leader. That's also the implication of a study led by Zakary Tormala of the Stanford University Graduate School of Business. “Expressing uncertainty, as opposed to utter confidence, draws people in,” Tormala says.

Leaders who already know everything, or try to give the impression that they do, are closed to growth, innovation, and change. They present themselves as unteachable and unreachable and fail to make authentic emotional connections. When leaders admit fallibility and reveal themselves as vulnerable, they engender a very human desire in employees to help that leader, and the company, find a way out of the quagmire. The quid pro quo is that employees usually work harder, with an energized spirit of cooperation.

When we drop the mask, stop trying to be the person we think we're expected to be, and simply become the person we are, we open doors, making room for others and the solutions they may have.

DARE!

Authentic leaders don’t hide facts or sugarcoat realities just because they can. They dare to see their rank and file as partners, capable of understanding the complexities of the business, and entitled to the good news and the bad. When necessary, authentic leaders are strong enough to admit mistakes or acknowledge uncertainty, allowing others to see their human vulnerability, their willingness to accept help, and their openness to new ideas.

I dare you to think about what really motivates you. Ask yourself how important honest and straightforward information is to doing your best job. Recall how betrayed you’ve felt in the past when someone you trusted withheld critical information from you. If we aspire to a genuine trust relationship with our workforce, we must accept that our employees can handle the truth and have the right to know it. Our business is their business, too.

THE SELF-AWARE LEADER

There’s a lot of overlap in the thousands of books, hundreds of websites, and scores of articles and papers that offer up lists of the most important skills of successful leaders. Few of them include what may be the least acknowledged leadership competency: a high level of self-awareness. And yet, self-awareness forms the very foundation of many of the skills that these lists promote.
It's the cornerstone of the social competence on which transformational leadership depends and the basis of the emotional intelligence that theorists like Daniel Goldman have found to be twice as important as IQ, technical skills, or analytical reasoning for highly effective leadership.

A low level of self-awareness accounts for the poor interpersonal skills that make it hard for leaders to connect to others and all but precludes transformational leadership. But a lack of self-awareness also prevents us from really knowing our own values and priorities, making us susceptible to ethical fading and the temptations of money and power that have brought down so many in the last decade. It blocks us from acknowledging our own weaknesses and thus impedes the skill development that we may desperately need. At the same time, it also keeps us from discovering our own values and priorities, our own emotions and drives as well as to their effect on others. To use the analogy of Gestalt psychologist Fritz Perls, “They live in a house of mirrors and think they’re looking out.”

The flip side of self-awareness is self-delusion, which is precisely why the path to self-awareness is so challenging. We simply don’t know that we don’t know. Unfortunately, for many individuals, self-discovery never happens. For others, when it does, it often coincides with an existential crisis. The spouse who we didn’t know was unhappy suddenly asks for a divorce. A friend suddenly and inexplicably distances herself. The company that we believe we are serving well passes us over for promotion or decides to let us go. Some other event may shock us into the realization that others perceive us quite differently from the way we perceive ourselves. We learn, abruptly, that we are not at all the person we thought we were. In my own case, it was that epiphany, eighteen years ago, when I learned that the Scott Weiss I thought I was projecting was not the one being received, and the one being received was not one I liked. Events like these have started many people on the path to self-awareness, but it needn’t take a crisis.

Self-awareness is certainly not a personality trait. It’s not a cognitive skill like analytical reasoning. It’s not an innate talent, but rather a capability subject to learning and thus within reach for all of us. It’s the deep process of discovery and exploration of how people experience us as human beings. In theory, it should be the life-work of all of us, but for leaders who are charged with guiding others, it may be the single foundational competency most worthy of attention and development.

The first step to self-awareness is the willingness to listen to those around you. That means actively soliciting feedback from others, working to constantly improve that feedback, and continually communicating and demonstrating that it will be used constructively. We can make huge gains in self-awareness by finding out what others know about us that we don’t, but we’ve still got to process that information. We need the time and space to focus on our strengths and weaknesses, our drives and personalities, our habits and values. In short, we need time to think about our process of becoming and what we feel. This is why I would rank self-reflection and introspection as inestimable leadership values.

Self-Reflection

We can’t guide others until we know what guides ourselves. Without first clarifying our own essential values, beliefs, and intentions, it seems impossible to communicate a vision that others can share. We won’t exhibit the consistency that makes others see clearly what we stand for, trust us, and want to share in the sense of purpose out of which collective action grows.

Vulnerability

Acknowledging vulnerability is not about looking weak. It’s about allowing yourself to be exposed to your own emotions and the emotions of others. Identifying with the frustration in customer complaints, empathizing with the disappointments or personal losses of team members, or simply sharing how you really feel in the moment are evidences of our basic humanity.

Acknowledging vulnerability is not about looking weak. It’s about allowing yourself to be exposed to your own emotions and the emotions of others. Identifying with the frustration in customer complaints, empathizing with the disappointments or personal losses of team members, or simply sharing how you really feel in the moment are evidences of our basic humanity.
Honesty and Transparency

As a human value, transparency is akin to what we call “perfect” honesty, or honesty that goes beyond the call of duty. The differences between simple honesty and real transparency are subtle but significant. When our doctor tells us that we’re forty pounds overweight, she’s being honest. When she tells us that, unless we immediately and radically change our lifestyle and diet, she foresees our early death, she’s being transparent. Brutally so, we might feel at the moment. But with only a little reflection, we recognize that the stretch to perfect honesty has been for our own good.

BECOMING AS GOOD AS OUR WORD

When our customers begin finding more alignment between what we say and what we do, their mood will improve. We’ll be spending less energy and fewer resources on defense, and more on really helping our customers to make the best use of our products and services. Through a more genuine dialog, we’ll make those products and services better, and glean new, innovative ideas for the future.

When our employees sense that the old “We vs. Them” battleground has been replaced by a more collaborative playing field where communications are open, safe, and honest, we’re bound to have a more engaged and energized workforce.

Understand Your Customers’ Default Attitudes

Let’s imagine that I’m John Q, customer. Assume that I’m considering whether to take a chance on doing business with your company. I may have heard of your products, services, or organization, but I’ve yet to become your customer. We don’t yet have a relationship. Here’s my starting point—the set of attitudes and perceptions I’m most likely to bring to the process. These are the hurdles of doubt and mistrust that I’ll have to get over before I sign on the dotted line or plunk down my cash or credit card.

1. I don’t believe your marketing or advertising.
2. I don’t consider you the authority.
3. I don’t expect that you will stand by your product or service.
4. I will tell eleven other people about a bad experience with your product or service.
5. I don’t expect that our relationship will last.
6. My perception of your company is not good.
7. I simply don’t trust you.
About the Author

Scott Weiss is the CEO of Speakeasy Communications Consulting, where he works to help executives and companies communicate authentically. Weiss started his career on Wall Street and later moved to Turner Broadcasting System (Time Warner). He serves on the Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce, Emory University’s board of visitors, and on the board of the Atlanta chapter of the Entrepreneurs’ Organization. He is the founder and chairman emeritus of the T. Howard Foundation, a Washington, D.C.–based nonprofit that drives diversity in the media industry.

Action Steps

Get more out of this SUCCESS Book Summary by applying what you’ve learned. Here are a few questions, thoughts and activities to get you started.

1. Identify three leaders or personal mentors whom you sincerely respect and genuinely like. What is it about them that appeals to you?
2. If you were to record yourself in a presentation as Weiss did, do you think you would like what you saw?
3. Why not try it? The next time you give a talk, or hold a meeting, record your presentation. Then, dare to watch and objectively evaluate your persona.
4. How do you respond when asked questions to which you don’t know the answers? How do you respond when you know the answer but feel the other person may not like it?
5. Schedule an hour a day for self-reflection. Use that time to consider your roles as a leader.
6. Do you allow yourself to be vulnerable and let people see who you really are?
7. In what way are you less than perfectly honest—at home, with your clients, your supervisor and your teammates? Commit to honesty as a core value.

Recommended Reading

If you enjoyed the summary of Dare, you may also want to check out these titles:

Conversational Intelligence by Judith Glaser
The Speed of Trust by Stephen M. R. Covey
Principle-Centered Leadership by Stephen R. Covey