

## Building Authenticity

### Creating an Atmosphere Where You Talk About What Matters

By Tony Stoltzfus

A couple days ago I had another one of those “I’ve never told anyone this before but” conversations while chatting with someone at a church function. I think it was a life-changing moment for the individual I was talking to.

How often do you experience that kind of transparency in your life? If you want more depth and effectiveness in your coaching conversations, here are some tools for becoming the kind of person people naturally open up to.

#### The Two Paradigms of Authenticity

Your understanding of how transparency happens is a crucial starting point. There are two main ways authentic relationships develop: I call them the *Trust Paradigm* and the *Agape Paradigm*. In the trust paradigm, our fundamental belief is that we can be authentic with people that we know we can trust. Our relationships grow slowly over time: we take a little risk, we wait for the other person to respond well and risk a little openness in turn, and gradually over the months or years our relationship can become deeply rich, satisfying and open.

The problem with the trust paradigm is that is basically a self-protective posture: we want authentic relationships, but we are afraid we will get hurt or rejected or have what we share blabbed all over town. So we guard our hearts by being careful what we share and with whom. When we meet someone new or start a new coaching relationship, we are guarded and so are they. Consequently, relationships take a long time to develop, and casual conversations rarely go deep. Because safety comes from being careful whom we share with, really opening our hearts to others is a risky business.

There’s a road less traveled that can take us to the depths of authenticity much more quickly. I call it the agape (or “love”) paradigm. The fundamental belief of this paradigm is that authenticity is a gift we can freely give because our security is taken care of by Christ, and we don’t need to protect ourselves. The idea of agape is that it is a gift that asks for nothing in return. We simply make the decision to live authentic lives, to go deep quickly, to be the one who goes their first to open the door for others to be honest, too. Our focus moves from getting authenticity and protecting our hearts to giving the gift of authenticity and putting our hearts in Christ’s hands.

In practice, it means that we regularly take big relational risks and go deep quickly. We open up to others first, in appropriate ways, because when one person takes the risk to trust, usually the other person is quick to follow. When you live out of the agape paradigm, you become a leader in authenticity, a catalyst who helps everyone around you (this works in groups as well as one-on-one) to develop more meaningful relationships.

#### The Secret of Transparency

The secret of getting others to open up to you is very simple: you open up to them first. When you cultivate the discipline of living a transparent life, two important things happen:

1. No one has to take a risk to be authentic with you, because you are always taking the risk first. Your authenticity and unilateral trust toward them removes the trust barrier and allows them to freely open up to you.
2. Over time, you become comfortable and proficient at functioning in the place of authenticity. It feels natural to you, you are at home there, and when you invite others into it they feel at home as well. If it feels awkward or embarrassing to you to open up to others, that's the message they'll receive when they try to open up to you: "this is awkward and embarrassing. I shouldn't go here." I can't overstate this: the more you live an appropriately authentic life, the more people will be attracted to you and open up spontaneously to you.

### **Coaching Tools**

As a coach, your ability to help people go quickly to a deep level is crucial. If you are talking about surface issues, you'll generate surface solutions and have a surface impact. Transformation only happens when you are talking about what people really care about.

Here are (briefly) some exercises for developing the habit of authenticity in your own life:

1. **Practice Going Deeper**  
Can you find one opportunity each week to open up to someone at a deeper level? Do it in an appropriate way, but push yourself to be more honest and take bigger risks than you are used to. Develop your relational-risk-taking muscle! For instance, when was the last time you were really honest with your kids about your feelings?
2. **Deepen Your Listening**  
Push yourself to really pay attention when people speak. Make it your goal that when anyone talks to you, you treat them like they are the only person in the world (they have your full and undivided attention.)
3. **Cultivate Asking Deeper Questions**  
Many everyday conversations can go deeper if you are ready with a significant question. Books like [Asking to Win](#) or [Leadership Coaching](#) have great lists of conversation starters. Learn to go beyond asking about people's jobs or their kids to what is going on in their hearts.
4. **Meet Jesus as Your Healer**  
It is tough to risk open up to others when you have a bunch of unresolved or partially resolved hurts from your past. Remember: your ability to open up unilaterally to others is dependent on the depth of your first-hand experience with Jesus healing your relational wounds. Take an inventory: where is the relational pain in your life? Take it to prayer and ask for an experience of meeting Jesus where you've been hurt. Theophostic counseling is a great way to do this.