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**Authenticity**

# **Communicating Authentically in a Virtual World**

by Andrew Brodsky

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**Summary.** Authenticity is important at work, but sometimes it's challenging to identify and maintain. Plus, what if the authentic emotions you're feeling conflict with the message you're trying to convey to colleagues or employees? When is it useful to lean into authenticity, and when is inauthenticity actually a better strategy? Research on how people perceive authenticity during in-person, email, and phone conversations sheds some light on how to navigate this issue, particularly amidst hybrid work. The short answer: if your communication is authentic, try to speak with someone in-person. If you need to suppress emotions, consider using the phone or another audio method. And if you need to use email, make sure it's clear to the recipient that you chose that method because others weren't available. [close](#)

One of the most common leadership buzzwords amongst both executives and academics is “authenticity.” Meta COO Sheryl Sandberg emphasized that “leaders should strive for authenticity over perfection,” while Howard Schultz, former CEO of Starbucks, noted, “the companies that are lasting are those that are authentic.” Indeed, research studies have similarly affirmed the importance of authenticity as a key driver of overall work outcomes for everyone from frontline workers to leaders. Alternatively, being perceived as inauthentic has been shown to destroy trust and relationships, damage customer loyalty, worsen performance evaluations, and decrease organizational profits.

Yet, despite the importance of authenticity, it can be challenging to develop and maintain. Take communication: while being *perceived* as authentic is ideal, actually *always behaving* authentically can lead to disaster. Imagine a manager who, while

laying off an employee, expresses underlying happiness because her soon-to-be spouse just accepted her marriage proposal that morning. Or an executive sending out a message about a new company diversity initiative, but doing so in a dour tone because his child just dropped out of college.

In these cases, being *inauthentic* by hiding underlying authentic emotions may be done with a prosocial motivation to benefit others, with a realization that true authenticity may not be appropriate for the context. This creates a potential bind, whereby leaders are often faced with a choice to either: a) display emotions that they may not be feeling — as required by their job or as a means of benefiting others — at the risk of being punished for being perceived as inauthentic, or b) be authentic and risk being punished for displaying inappropriate emotions. How can leaders navigate this tricky situation, particularly in a hybrid work environment?

## **When Mismatched Emotions Make Authenticity Challenging**

Regardless of their motives, it is first important to acknowledge that despite someone's best efforts, true underlying emotions often do leak through, resulting in emotional mismatches that may make them appear inauthentic. There are three key reasons for this:

### **1) Situational conflicts.**

In many situations, it may be difficult to display the needed emotion due to challenges or conflicting factors directly related to the situation. For instance, even when required by a job, it can be nearly impossible to engage in authentic “service with a smile” if a customer is yelling at you, or be emotionally supportive of a subordinate whose recent poor performance created more work for you.

### **2) Spillover effects.**

Even if there are no emotionally-relevant challenges to the situation itself, emotions often spill over from one moment to the next. A strong emotion from a prior interaction doesn't automatically dissipate as soon as that interaction is done. As a result, emotions may linger to contexts where they are no longer appropriate. For instance, a manager might want to communicate excitement about an upcoming business opportunity, but may feel stressed for an unrelated reason (e.g., they had a stressful commute).

### **3) Communication channel difficulties.**

Even when an individual's emotion is truly authentic, there are now technology-driven communication barriers that may prevent that emotion from being perceived as authentic. Especially given recent Covid-related workspace changes, many work interactions

now occur at a distance. Yet, significant research shows that virtual communication can undermine effectively communicating emotion.

So how can you avoid being inauthentic in these situations? Previous research has been clear: the ideal solution is to attempt to be mindful of your current emotions and those required by the situation, and then try to find a way to alter your underlying emotions so they authentically match the situation. Yet, if controlling emotions were so easy, most therapists would be out of a job.

## **How to Choose a Communication Method to Maximize Authenticity**

In a paper I recently published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, I aimed to explore whether it might be possible turn one of the potential impediments to emotional authenticity — virtual communication — into a tool that could be positively leveraged to address this problem. Given that many workplace interactions now occur at a distance, there is often a choice of which mode of communication to utilize, from email to face-to-face and video conferencing. If it's possible that some modes of communication can result in misinterpretations or masking of emotions, could they be used strategically to make inauthentic emotions seem more authentic? In other words, which

communication medium is best for being perceived as communicating emotionally authentically, *even when the communication itself may be inauthentic?*



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To answer these questions, I first sought to understand people's intuitions about which

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communication medium is best. I conducted a pilot survey of 234 financial professionals at the Australian branch of a Big Four accounting firm, where I gave them varying scenarios involving needing to communicate inauthentic or authentic emotion, to see which communication media they would choose. Additionally, I asked them their perceptions of the differing media. I found that in situations in which they were communicating authentic emotion, they tended to choose richer communication media (e.g., telephone or face-to-face). However, when the situation involved needing to communicate inauthentic emotions, there

was a substantial shift in which participants chose email because they believed it was the best method for hiding underlying emotion.

Then, for my main project, I conducted three studies of 1,029 individuals to move beyond intuitions to test which media are actually best with regard to emotional authenticity. The studies involved a set of cross-occupational U.S. workers reacting to fake anger from a counterparty in a negotiation, managers reacting to a potentially feigned excitement from a subordinate, and parents from a set of private international schools in Vietnam evaluating the emotional authenticity of their children's teachers. The studies examined how communicating emotion via in-person/video, telephone, or email as the mode of communication altered a recipient's perceptions of the communicator's authenticity.

My first finding was that that the financial professionals from my pilot study were right, in part: when emotion is authentic, it is best to use the richest communication medium available, such as face-to-face or video communication. However, when needing to relay inauthentic communication, there was a surprising difference. Email communication was not the best choice — but neither was face-to-face communication. It turned out that over the course of many interactions, “medium richness”

communication, such as telephone or audio, is most likely to make inauthentically communicated emotion seem the most authentic.

Although email did in fact mask emotional leakage and cues of underlying inauthenticity better than any other medium, there was a cost to using it. In situations where the sender had the ability to choose the communication medium — regardless of whether the underlying emotion being communicated was authentic or not — emotions communicated via email were perceived by recipients as highly inauthentic. Because it is so easy to “fake” emotion in email (e.g., typing an emoticon is far easier than smiling authentically), and because email was perceived as a low effort of a choice, communication recipients were skeptical of the authenticity of senders who chose email to relay emotion. Recipients simply assumed that if a sender chose email, then their communicated emotion was less authentic.

As a result of this negative cost to email, telephone and audio communication ended up being the sweet spot for making inauthentic emotion seem the most authentic. That is because telephone communication filters out far more cues of underlying inauthenticity than face-to-face interactions (as all physical nonverbal behaviors are removed), yet telephone is not perceived to be nearly as inauthentic as email.



So, to recap, here are three key takeaways you can use in your own work life:

- **If you are communicating authentically**, try to use the richest communication medium available (e.g., face-to-face or video conferencing).
- **If you are communicating inauthentically** (e.g., you need to suppress emotions not appropriate for an interaction), on average, it appears best to utilize telephone or audio communication in order to appear most authentic.
- **If you have to use email to relay emotions that you want to be perceived as authentic**, find a way to make it clear that you didn't make the choice on purpose, or that the choice was for a positive reason, to help reduce the attribution that it was low effort. The findings from my studies indicate that it isn't using email that makes emotions seem inauthentic by itself, but rather, that this cost is driven by the recipient believing that you *chose* to use email. For instance, if you're congratulating someone on a big promotion, you could tell them that you can't wait to celebrate in person, but wanted to congratulate them the moment you heard.

For managers, another extension of this research is that, if you want to reduce your employees' Zoom fatigue, consider making it the norm to allow people to keep their webcams off. Being on camera can be incredibly taxing and exhausting for employees to try to mask the stress that they may be feeling due to the pandemic, to being isolated, and a whole host of other reasons. Turning off webcams allows for individuals to worry less about which emotions they may be displaying, and instead allows them to focus simply on the task at hand.

One overarching finding is clear from this research, however: communication media often relays more than we realize, whether it's due to emotion cues leaking through or recipients making evaluations based on our choice of communication mode. As more and more of workplace interactions shift virtual, it is becoming ever more important to be mindful of the communication choices we make — and their possible unintended consequences.

**Andrew Brodsky** is an assistant professor of management at McCombs School of Business at the University of Texas at Austin. He is on Twitter @AndrewSBrodsky.

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