

# Stories about **LEADERSHIP**

## A STORY ABOUT AUTHENTICITY



The meeting is called "Lessons Learned Q1". A harmless title that in corporations often means: We'll talk about what went wrong, but please do it in a way that makes no one look really responsible.

I click into the call at 10:55 a.m. Eighteen tiles, many faces I know well. Some of the lighting is flat, some voices sound tired. It's March, but it feels like the end of a long winter. The pilot project worked —sort of. But the road to get there was tougher than planned. Much tougher.

The CEO is there, two department heads, the workstream leads, HR. I see Jonas's tile. Priya. Lea from the pilot region. And I feel that slight tug in my stomach, the one I only get when I know: It's about to get uncomfortable.

"Frederik, you're leading the tour?" asks the managing director.

"Yes," I say. I've prepared. Of course. I have a slide with figures, risks, and measures. I could present it smoothly, as I've done a thousand times before. A controlled review. A nice graph.

But there's one sentence that's been stuck in the back of my mind for weeks because I didn't say it back then: I pretended for too long that everything was still under control, even though it had long since tipped over.

And this sentence sits like a stone in my chest. It's not strategic. It's honest.

The first ten minutes go smoothly. I show the key figures: "Region 1 go-live as planned," "Region 2 delayed by two weeks," "Stability figures after four weeks." Everyone nods. Some nod with relief. We've accomplished something. And that's true.

Then we come to the slide "Risks and Countermeasures". It contains, in bullet points, what we all know: "Interface instability", "high workload in the back office", "local resistance to change".

I hear myself speaking, see myself from the outside, and realize: This sounds smooth. Too smooth. It sounds as if this pilot project was a linear undertaking, neatly achieved with just a couple of adjustments. But it was a struggle. A stumbling block. A constant readjustment.

Priya raises her hand. "Frederik, may I add something?" "Please."

She glances down briefly, then back up. "It wasn't just instability at the interfaces. It was also uncertainty. And sometimes the feeling that we weren't being honest with each other because we didn't want to burden anyone."

Quiet.

This is not an attack. It is an offer. A window into the world.

My heart is racing. The old reflex kicks in: moderate, neutralize, move on to the next slide. We want to stay constructive, after all...

Then I think of the coach. A sentence from a sparring session months ago, which I smiled away at the time because it sounded so simple: "Authenticity means that your inner self and your outer self are aligned. Otherwise, you're leading in costume."

In costume. Yes. I've often led in costume over the past few weeks. Professionally. Resiliently. Solution-oriented. And inwardly exhausted, insecure, sometimes even on the verge of losing faith in the plan itself.

I notice my gaze drifting to the managing director. She sits there calmly, her expression devoid of any reassurance. There's no indication of whether I'm allowed to be true or not. And that's precisely where authenticity lies: it happens without permission.

I lean forward slightly. "Priya is right," I say slowly. My voice is calmer than I feel. "And I'd like to add something that I haven't yet spoken about as project manager."

I see a few tiles moving slightly. Pay attention.

"There was a moment in January when I knew the pilot was shaky. Not a little, but really shaky. And yet, for another two weeks, I pretended we had it under control."

The silence deepens. Not unpleasantly. More like reverential. Because people can sense when something is real.

"Why?" the managing director asked quietly.

I exhale once.

"Because I was afraid we would lose trust. Because I didn't want to bother you. Because I wanted to convince myself that it would work if I just put enough pressure on."

Jonas looks to the side. Lea nods slightly. I see no judgment in their faces. I see recognition.

"That was a mistake," I say. "Not because we failed because of it. But because it cost us two weeks of operational capability. We should have held the war room earlier. We should have prioritized sooner. And above all, we should have taken an honest look at ourselves sooner."

I pause because I am surprised myself at how easily the sentence comes from my chest. Priya says quietly, "Thank you for saying that."

"I'm saying this so we can learn from it," I continue. "If we ever find ourselves in a similar situation again, I want us to tell the truth sooner – even if it's uncomfortable. Especially then."

The managing director nods slowly. "That's important."

She doesn't sound angry. More like relieved. Perhaps also a little tired, like someone who has finally had a reality confirmed that they already sensed.

"What do we need for that?" she asks.

I won't immediately translate the question into processes. First, into attitude.

"We mustn't confuse being professional with appearing invulnerable," I say. "We can be resilient and still be honest. We're allowed to say: This is where things get critical. I don't have a solution. But I see it."

Lea chimes in. "That would have helped us in Region 2. There were rumors there because we felt the pressure, but nobody named the situation."

A few heads nod. This is what change looks like: not in grand pronouncements, but in small truths that cease to be alone.

Afterwards, our conversations change. We no longer just talk about risks, but about how we communicate with each other when things get tough. Priya suggests incorporating short "reality check moments" into lead calls. Jonas adds that an early warning log should be not only technical, but also cultural. HR asks about signs of stress. A genuine learning experience emerges, not just a final presentation slide.

When we finish after 70 minutes, the managing director stays on the call for a little while longer. The others log off.

"Frederik," she says. "I appreciate that you were so clear-headed today."

I laugh briefly, but without humor. "I was afraid it would seem unprofessional."

She looks directly at me. "It's unprofessional when we lull each other into a false sense of security. Being authentic isn't being weak. It's being responsible."

I nod, and suddenly my chest feels warm. Not with pride. More like relief. Because today, for once, my inner and outer feelings weren't in conflict.

After the call, I remain seated for a few more seconds. The screen is dark, the apartment silent.

I've noticed that for the first time in weeks, I don't feel like I have to hide anything.

Authenticity is not a style. It is a risk that creates connection.



# Takeaway inspiration

## Authenticity

Authentic leadership means not leading in a protective suit of perfection, but responsibly making your inner truth visible. It builds trust because people experience: Here is someone genuine and, at the same time, clear.

If you realize you're currently leading "in costume," say something in the next round that reveals your true feelings ("This is where things get critical" / "I'm uncertain" / "This is weighing on me"). Authenticity arises from small moments of truth, not from grand confessions.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS ABOUT AUTHENTICITY FOR YOU

1. Where do I appear confident right now, even though I feel something different inside?
2. What truth am I withholding because I'm afraid of the consequences?
3. How can I show my reality this week without shirking responsibility?



Feel free to contact me anytime::

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