

The Masks We Wear: How Authenticity Restores Presence and Possibility

For years I led as the person who always had it together. The mask worked, and that's exactly what made it hard to set down.

By Bryce Thomason · September 13, 2023 · 3 min read



Most of us do not grow up as our whole selves. Instead, we grow into versions of ourselves shaped to avoid humiliation, fit expectations, or remain safe in environments that weren't always ready for our true nature. Some of these masks were handed to us; others we built deliberately. In one way or another, every mask helped us survive.

But masks have weight. And over time, that weight begins to limit who we can become.

In my own life, I learned early what it meant to hide. I became skilled at presenting a version of myself that others would praise: the achiever, the responsible one, the person who always had it together. From the outside, that persona looked polished. Inside, it was a strategy, one that protected me from shame and from truths I didn't yet have the strength to hold publicly.

For years, that mask "worked." It brought success, admiration, and a sense of safety.

But it didn't bring freedom.

Many leaders I work with now can relate. Their masks look different: the high performer, the fixer, the caretaker, the stoic, the one who never needs help. The impact is the same. We all have a part of us that remains hidden, and that hiddenness slowly constricts our presence. They often find themselves exhausted by lives that

appear successful from the outside.

The truth about masking is deeply human:

We create these versions of ourselves to survive: psychologically, socially, emotionally.

But eventually, the strategies that once protected us begin to keep us small.

Authenticity isn't a branding exercise or a curated vulnerability designed to seem relatable.

It's a physiological return to ourselves, the softening that happens when we no longer need to manage every impression or outrun every fear.

When we allow ourselves to be seen a bit more fully, something shifts. Breathing becomes easier. Discernment sharpens. Relationships grow more honest. And the nervous system, which may have spent years in vigilance, finally begins to rest.

This doesn't mean we discard who we've been. Masks aren't failures; they were creative solutions in a given moment. Honoring them is part of the healing. But there comes a time when the strategies that once kept us safe become too constricting for the person we are becoming.

So the key question isn't "Why did I wear the mask?"

It's "What becomes possible when I set it down?"

For many leaders, this marks a turning point: the shift from performance to presence, from self-protection to self-trust, from a rehearsed identity to one that is more whole and more sustainable.

If you sense a part of you that has been tucked away, a truth or a need or a longing, consider this a gentle invitation. You don't have to tear off the mask or uncover everything at once. You can begin slowly, with curiosity rather than force.

Ask yourself:

- What part of me wants more room to breathe?
- What truth is tired of hiding?
- What small act of honesty would help me return to myself?

Authenticity is not a destination. It's a practice, built breath by breath, choice by choice, as we learn to inhabit our lives rather than perform our way through them.

The world needs leaders who are willing to live from their whole selves, not their rehearsed selves. Leaders with presence, depth, and the courage to be seen. Leaders who understand that strength comes not from perfection, but from authenticity.

When you bring the fullness of who you are into the world, unmasked and unedited, something remarkable happens:

You don't just become more yourself.

You become freer.