

Authentic Leadership for SAS® Programming Leaders

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ABSTRACT

Leading a team of SAS programmers isn't just about knowing your PROC SQL from your DATA steps. It's about showing up as a real human. In this paper, I'll share my take on authentic leadership in technical environments, where precision, autonomy, and complexity often dominate the landscape. Authentic leadership, to me, means leading as yourself, communicating transparently, and listening like it actually matters. We'll explore how these three attributes- "being yourself, transparent communication, and active listening- "can transform the way you lead analytical minds.

I'll share stories from the trenches, including how showing vulnerability helped me navigate a tough interpersonal moment, and how listening (without jumping in to "fix") sparked a fresh idea from a quiet team member. We'll also talk about the challenges of leading introverted, detail-oriented personnel who thrive on clarity but don't always speak up. I'll offer practical strategies for mentoring emerging programmers, building psychological safety, and encouraging authenticity without oversharing. This paper is about real habits that help leaders foster trust, creativity, and collaboration in data-driven teams.

You'll leave with reflection questions to challenge your current leadership style and maybe even a nudge to ditch the "manager mask" and lead with more heart. Because at the end of the day, SAS programmers don't just need a boss who knows how to code, or just a manager that can approve a timesheet, they need a leader who gets them.

INTRODUCTION

Leading a team of SAS programmers isn't just about technical expertise. If it were, the strongest programmer would always be the strongest leader. In practice, that's rarely the case. In analytical environments, leadership often leans heavily on task management, timelines, and technical oversight. But even in highly analytical teams, the programmers still do the work. And how those people think, communicate, and engage directly impacts the quality of the output.

In my experience, authentic leadership in this space comes down to three things: being yourself, communicating transparently, and listening with intention. These are not abstract leadership concepts. They are practical everyday behaviors that shape how teams collaborate, solve problems, and ultimately deliver results.

WHY AUTHENTIC LEADERSHIP MATTERS

SAS programmers typically operate in a world defined by precision, autonomy, and complexity. Whether working with clinical trial data, regulatory deliverables, or large-scale reporting, the expectation is accuracy and efficiency. Many programmers are also naturally independent and detail oriented. They are comfortable working through problems on their own and may not always speak up, even when they have questions or new ideas.

That's where things start to break down a bit. The work still gets done, but collaboration takes a hit. Ideas stay unspoken. And sometimes, inefficiencies persist simply because no one created the space to challenge those inefficiencies. Being an authentic leader helps close that gap.

When leaders foster trust and openness, team members are more likely to ask questions early, share alternative approaches, and collaborate more effectively. And you see it pretty quickly in the work, in timelines, in how the team functions. In environments where accuracy is critical, better communication is not just a "soft skill", it's a performance driver.

As you may already know, many programmers are also naturally more introverted, which can create a different kind of leadership challenge. Silence in a meeting does not necessarily mean agreement or disengagement. It often means someone is still processing, or they are not fully comfortable interrupting a fast-moving discussion. In environments where speed and expertise are valued, those quieter voices can

be overlooked. Without intentional space for input, teams risk missing strong ideas simply because they were not voiced at the right moment. Giving people time to process, allows them to reflect and think about the information provided and thoughtfully craft a more structured response.

BEING YOURSELF

Being yourself as a leader does not mean being unfiltered or informal in all situations. It means leading in a way that is consistent with your values and communication style, rather than trying to fit a predefined leadership mold. Teams are quick to recognize when leaders perform for their employees. And when that happens, people tend to hold back. On the other hand, when a leader shows authenticity, it creates space for others to do the same. This is especially important in technical environments, where individuals may already feel pressure to appear certain and error-free.

There are moments in leadership where the most effective choice is not to provide answers, but to admit you do not yet have one. I experienced this firsthand during a disagreement between two programmers on my team. Each had a different approach to solving a complex problem, and the discussion had become increasingly tense. My initial instinct was to step in, make a decision, and move forward. Instead, I acknowledged that I did not have an immediate answer and asked each of them to walk through their approach. I also addressed the tension directly rather than ignoring it. That shift changed the conversation. Instead of defending positions, both individuals focused on explaining their reasoning. The result was a stronger, combined solution. More importantly, it reinforced a team dynamic where it was acceptable to challenge ideas without creating conflict. This was a moment where showing vulnerability as a leader made a difference. By acknowledging that I did not have the answer and creating space for others to contribute, the conversation shifted from tension to collaboration.

Authenticity also shows up in something more concrete: how you spend your time. Your values are not what you say in a meeting. They are what show up on your calendar. If you say people matter but consistently cancel one-on-one meetings when you are busy, that is not authenticity. That is branding. Authentic leaders align their time, attention, and decisions with what they claim to believe. And teams notice that alignment quickly. Relational transparency and alignment between values and actions is emphasized in authentic leadership actions (Avolio & Gardner, 2005).

At the same time, authenticity requires some balance. Being real does not mean sharing everything or processing challenges in real time with your team. There is a difference between being open and being unfiltered. Sharing uncertainty or acknowledging when something is difficult can build trust. Sharing in a way that shifts emotional burden onto the team can have the opposite effect. Effective leaders understand that being authentic includes judgment, knowing what to share, when to share it, and how it supports the employee or team.

TRANSPARENT COMMUNICATION

Clarity is critical in programming environments. Ambiguity in specifications, timelines, or expectations can quickly lead to rework, delays, or errors not to mention frustration, stress and discouragement that impact a person's mental health. Transparent communication reduces that risk. This includes clearly defining deliverables, explaining the context behind decisions, and aligning priorities. When programmers understand not only what they are doing but why it matters, they are better equipped to make informed decisions in their work. Transparency also builds trust. When leaders communicate openly and consistently, teams spend less time interpreting signals and more time focusing on execution.

There are, of course, situations where full transparency is not possible. In those cases, how a leader communicates is just as important as what they communicate. Acknowledging limitations directly, for example, "I'm not able to share details yet, but I will as soon as I can," maintains credibility and demonstrates respect. It avoids the uncertainty that often comes from vague or incomplete responses. Simply following through with what you say you are going to do is important.

In structured environments like programming and data science environments, clear and honest communication removes a lot of friction. It just makes everything run smoother.



ACTIVE LISTENING

In technical roles, there is a natural tendency to move quickly from problem to solution. While this can be efficient, it can also lead to missed insights. Active listening requires a different approach. It involves giving full attention, asking follow-up questions at the appropriate time, and allowing space and time for ideas to develop before responding. Giving full attention means avoiding multitasking, not checking your phone or laptop, and not mentally preparing a response while someone else is speaking. Allowing space means not putting someone on the spot and giving them time to respond when they are ready. This is particularly important for team members who may be less vocal but still bring valuable perspectives.

In one team discussion, a quieter programmer offered an alternative approach to a recurring issue. Rather than moving on, I asked a few follow-up questions and encouraged them to expand on the idea. That conversation led to a process improvement that benefited the entire team. Just as important, it increased that individual's confidence and willingness to contribute in future discussions.

This is also where psychological safety starts to take shape. Research has shown that psychological safety improves team learning and performance (Edmondson, 1999). When team members see that their input is genuinely considered, even when it challenges an existing approach, they are more likely to speak up in the future. Over time, that creates an environment where raising concerns, asking questions, and offering new ideas becomes part of how a team operates, rather than something individuals have to work up the nerve to do.

Listening, when done well, does more than surface better ideas. It strengthens engagement, builds trust, and reinforces that every team member's input has value. Teams where members feel heard are more likely to contribute ideas and identify issues early (Edmondson, 1999).

PRACTICAL APPLICATION

Being an authentic leader shows up in small, consistent actions:

- Using one-on-one meetings for real discussions—focused on the person, their thinking, and their challenges—not just status updates
- Creating space in team meetings for input before offering your solutions
- Being clear about expectations, even when the answer is "not yet defined"
- Mentoring emerging programmers beyond technical skills to include communication and confidence
- Maintaining professionalism while still being approachable and real

One area that needs more discussion is mentoring junior programmers. This requires going beyond code reviews and technical correction. It includes helping them articulate their thought process, explain tradeoffs, and gain confidence in their decisions. Many times, the technical solution is only part of the job. The soft skill of being able to communicate that solution clearly is what allows them to contribute more fully to the team. Taking a few extra minutes to ask “Walk me through how you approached this” can be just as valuable as pointing out what needs to be fixed. It shifts the conversation from correction to collaboration, and it opens a window into how they think. That’s not just helpful for them — it’s helpful for you. Sometimes a newer or early-career developer will approach a problem with a perspective you hadn’t considered, or use a technique that’s surprisingly elegant. When you acknowledge that, praise it, and thank them for teaching you something new, you’re not only building their confidence — you’re reinforcing that good ideas can come from anywhere.

I’ve learned plenty from mentees over the years because they often bring a fresh, unfiltered way of looking at things. That exchange of ideas is part of what makes mentoring so energizing. Even this “old dog” can pick up a few new tricks when I stay curious and open to what they bring to the table.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

As you consider your own authentic self, it may be helpful to reflect on a few questions:

- Do I create space for input before offering my own perspective and opinions?
- When was the last time I acknowledged that I did not have the answer?
- Do my actions and time commitments align with what I say I value?
- Who on my team speaks the least, and what am I doing to hear them?
- Am I mentoring for technical accuracy, or also for communication and confidence?

These questions are not meant to be answered once but revisited over time as your situations evolve.

5 QUESTIONS FOR AUTHENTIC LEADERSHIP REFLECTION

Pause. Reflect. Lead with Intention.

 <p>1</p> <p>Do I create space for input before offering my own perspective and opinions?</p> <hr/>  <p>Create space. Invite voices.</p>	 <p>2</p> <p>When was the last time I acknowledged that I did not have the answer?</p> <hr/>  <p>Vulnerability builds trust.</p>	 <p>3</p> <p>Do my actions and time commitments align with what I say I value?</p> <hr/>  <p>Values show up on your calendar.</p>	 <p>4</p> <p>Who on my team speaks the least, and what am I doing to hear them?</p> <hr/>  <p>Seek quiet voices. They matter.</p>	 <p>5</p> <p>Am I mentoring for technical accuracy, or also for communication and confidence?</p> <hr/>  <p>Develop the whole person.</p>
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Great leaders keep asking. Better leaders keep listening.
Reflection today. Stronger teams tomorrow.

CONCLUSION

In programming environments where accuracy and efficiency are critical, it is easy to focus primarily on technical execution. However, the effectiveness of a team depends just as much on how people communicate and collaborate as it does on their technical skills.

Being an authentic leader, grounded in being yourself, communicating transparently, and listening with intention helps create an environment where teams can perform at a higher level. When leaders show up this way, programmers are more likely to contribute ideas, raise concerns early, and work together more effectively. This is especially important for those quieter team members who may not always speak up but often have valuable insights to offer when given the space.

Over time, your behavior will help build psychological safety and create opportunities not just for successful outcomes, but for stronger individual growth (both yours and your employees). Whether it is mentoring junior programmers to communicate their thinking more clearly or creating space for different perspectives, small, consistent actions shape how a team functions.

The reflection questions offered in this paper are intended to encourage your ongoing awareness of how you show up every day. Because ultimately, authenticity is not what we say we value, it is what consistently shows up in our time, our attention, and our decisions. That is what employees trust, and what turns leadership from something people comply with into something they believe in.

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