

SPOTLIGHT ON SOFT SKILLS YOU CAN'T NEGLECT

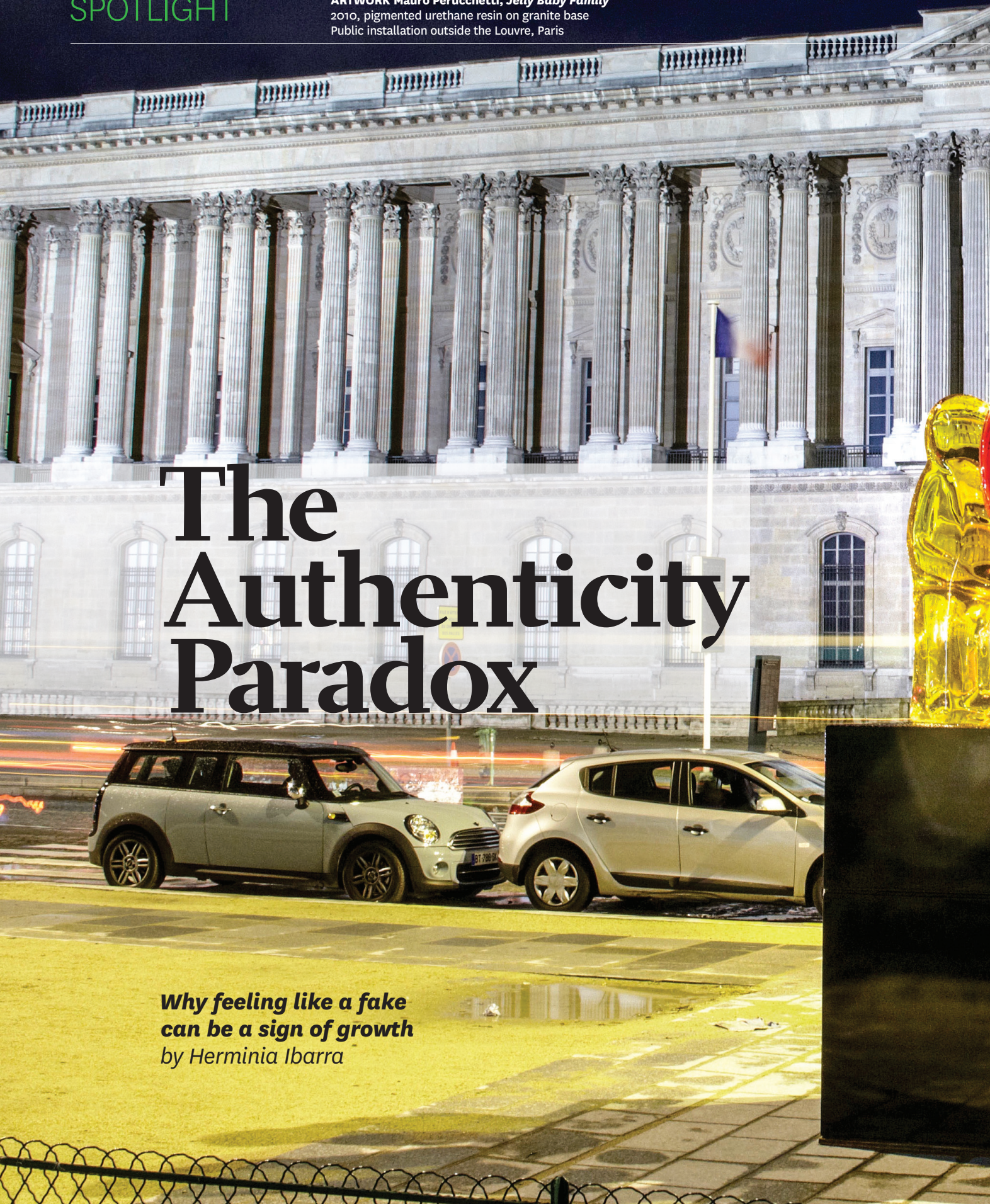
SPOTLIGHT

ARTWORK Mauro Perucchetti, *Jelly Baby Family*

2010, pigmented urethane resin on granite base
Public installation outside the Louvre, Paris

The Authenticity Paradox

***Why feeling like a fake
can be a sign of growth***
by Herminia Ibarra



ARTWORK Mauro Perucchetti

Jelly Baby Yellow, 2010

Pigmented urethane resin



and action fence us in. To begin thinking like leaders, we must first act: plunge ourselves into new projects and activities, interact with very different kinds of people, and experiment with new ways of getting things done. Especially in times of transition and uncertainty, thinking and introspection should follow experience—not vice versa. Action changes who we are and what we believe is worth doing.

Fortunately, there are ways of increasing insight and evolving toward an “adaptively authentic” way of leading, but they require a playful frame of mind. Think of leadership development as trying on possible selves rather than working on yourself—which, let’s face it, sounds like drudgery. When we adopt a playful attitude, we’re more open to possibilities. It’s OK to be inconsistent from one day to the next. That’s not being a fake; it’s how we experiment to figure out what’s right for the new challenges and circumstances we face.

My research suggests three important ways to get started:

Learn from diverse role models. Most learning necessarily involves some form of imitation—and the understanding that nothing is “original.” An important part of growing as a leader is viewing authenticity not as an intrinsic state but as the ability to

take elements you have learned from others’ styles and behaviors and make them your own.

But don’t copy just one person’s leadership style; tap many diverse role models. There is a big difference between imitating someone wholesale and borrowing selectively from various people to create your own collage, which you then modify and improve. As the playwright Wilson Mizner said, copying one author is plagiarism, but copying many is research.

I observed the importance of this approach in a study of investment bankers and consultants who were advancing from analytical and project work to roles advising clients and selling new business. Though most of them felt incompetent and insecure in their new positions, the chameleons among them consciously borrowed styles and tactics from successful senior leaders—learning through emulation how to use humor to break tension in meetings, for instance, and how to shape opinion without being overbearing. Essentially, the chameleons faked it until they found what worked for them. Noticing their efforts, their managers provided coaching and mentoring and shared tacit knowledge.

As a result, the chameleons arrived much faster at an authentic but more skillful style than the true-to-selfers in the study, who continued to focus solely

The Cultural Factor

Whatever the situation—taking charge in unfamiliar territory, selling your ideas and yourself, or processing negative feedback—finding authentic ways of being effective is even more difficult in a multicultural environment.

As my INSEAD colleague Erin Meyer finds in her research, styles of persuading others and the kinds of arguments that people find persuasive are far from universal; they are deeply rooted in a culture’s philosophical, religious, and educational assumptions. That said, prescriptions for how leaders are supposed to look and sound are rarely as diverse as the leaders themselves. And despite corporate initiatives to build understanding of cultural differences and promote diversity, the fact is that leaders are still expected to express ideas assertively, to claim credit for them, and to use charisma to motivate and inspire people.

Authenticity is supposed to be an antidote to a single model of leadership. (After all, the message is to be yourself,

not what someone else expects you to be.) But as the notion has gained currency, it has, ironically, come to mean something much more limiting and culturally specific. A closer look at how leaders are taught to discover and demonstrate authenticity—by telling a personal story about a hardship they have overcome, for example—reveals a model that is, in fact, very American, based on ideals such as self-disclosure, humility, and individualistic triumph over adversity.

This amounts to a catch-22 for managers from cultures with different norms for authority, communication, and collective endeavor because they must behave inauthentically in order to conform to the strictures of “authentic” leadership.