Anyone in a big organisation will know the fashion for competency models and the drive for endlessly polished, all-round performance. So in 2000, when Rob Goffee and Gareth Jones published a paper in Harvard Business Review saying that good leaders reveal their weaknesses and show their differences, it caused a bit of a stir. But it also rang true for many people fed up with having to tick boxes on a list of prescribed strengths. Using these ideas, Goffee developed large-scale leadership programmes for companies such as Nestlé, starting with board members and working through some several thousand executives over the following years. His experiences with Nestlé, Roche and others and Jones’s work with the BBC and other companies fed into a 2006 book Why Should Anyone be Led by You? which has sold more than 100,000 copies. The ideas caught on and Goffee says people have told him – both in person and by letter – that the book changed their lives.

Reveal the inner you

The message to “be yourself – more – with skill” appealed to people wanting to make a difference in their companies. And the book is filled with examples of real leaders who’ve inspired people. Both by being themselves: Bill Gates with his unabashed geekiness; Richard Branson with his longhaired, bearded signals of informality. And by revealing their weaknesses: John F Kennedy was admired despite his apparent weakness for women; football manager Brian Clough was arrogant but somehow used humour to make this work for him.

“Gareth and I are both sociologists and the original article was born out of frustration that so much leadership research had been inconclusive,” says Goffee. “Much of it had been conducted by psychologists who tend to focus on individuals, yet leadership is all about a relationship with your followers, so that’s more in the field of sociology.

“Our second insight was that a lot of research makes the fundamental error of thinking that people who get to the top are leaders. There are plenty who get to the top who aren’t leaders, and plenty who aren’t at the top who are leaders.

“Third, we found a paradox in companies that said they wanted more ‘distinctive’ leaders, yet imposed structures, cultures and systems on their employees that forced them to look similar to each other, not different.”

What’s different about you?

These three findings informed their work. Leadership is relational, non-hierarchical and situational. And their answer for leaders is to draw on what’s different about themselves and adapt to suit the context.

This doesn’t mean “just be yourself” says Goffee, now Emeritus Professor of Organisational Behaviour at London Business School. “You can’t just go in somewhere and say: ‘This is me, take it or leave it.’ With leadership you’re playing a role and it’s about managing your authenticity – this is a deliberately provocative statement, but it’s all about relationships and context.”

Goffee’s always relished executive education as a chance to work with companies and practitioners to develop his research. When he joined the School in 1983 he started by teaching MBA students who sometimes had to be convinced to get interested in the people side of business. But it all began to make sense for him when he took his first session of executive education with a small group of reflective and thoughtful mid-career Shell executives. “Doing top-level research and top-level practitioner engagement is really hard,” he says, “but when you see it working, it’s great. And that’s what London Business School is all about.”

And for someone wondering if they can be a leader, Goffee’s an optimist. He thinks authentic leadership can be developed, but you need to be sure it’s right for you: “Leadership can produce exceptional performance – but it’s also tiring, it’s stressful, it’s difficult,” he says, “the real question is: Do you really want it?”

Rob Goffee is Emeritus Professor of Organisational Behaviour at London Business School.

Gareth Jones is a visiting professor at the IE Business School in Madrid.