

The Power of Authentic Leadership in the Workplace

If you were asked to describe your boss or supervisor in three words, what would they be? Were the words that came to mind positive or negative traits? Well, if one of your answers includes self-awareness, genuine, integrity, visionary, transparent, consistent, or practices solid values, then your leader is what the new generation is asking for. Authentic leadership has been on the rise as employees want more character-based leaders with whom they can build a work relationship and someone who is trustworthy as well as willing to learn. Followers are more likely to respond positively to a leader who is transparent and promotes a growth mindset.

Katherine Kimiko Davis

From Science to Practice Vol III, Issue I (2019): 14-18.

DOI: 10.19099/fstp.031903

The Four Components of Authentic Leadership

Whether you're a leader or a follower, traits of authentic leadership can help your organization. The four components of authentic leadership are known as self-awareness, internalized moral perspective, balanced processing, and relational transparency (Walumbwa et al., 2007).

1. *Self-awareness*

Leaders understand their own inner and outer qualities and how these relate to leadership. Ways to develop self-awareness include: knowing your strengths and weaknesses, understanding that the self is a multi-layered concept, learning about your impact on other people and vice versa, and developing a continuous self-exposure and development process.

Bruce J. Avolio and Tara S. Wernsing highlighted in their chapter *Practicing Authentic Leadership* three ways authentic leaders practice self-awareness:

- I. Actively seeking feedback from the environment
- II. Using self-reflection as a way to understand their behavior

- III. Engaging in self-observation to stay aware of feelings at all times

2. *Internalized moral perspective*

Authentic leaders are able to distinguish between right and wrong. The moral perspective on leadership and the different behaviors it brings about is not based on external factors, nor is it something the authentic leader finds imposed upon him or her by the organization or even society. Instead, self-regulatory behavior is self-imposed and comes from the leader's internalized moral value.

3. *Balanced processing*

The authentic leader does not just strive to make morally correct decisions, but he or she tries to be fair-minded during the process. Leadership is based on openness and fairness and in an environment where opinions are not just welcomed but encouraged. The idea is to ensure opposing viewpoints will be voiced before the leader, sometimes together with subordinates, considers the actions.

4. *Relational transparency*

Authentic leadership rests on the concept of genuineness. When authentic leaders communicate and act, they do so honestly. There is no room for hidden agendas or mind-games in authentic leadership. These leaders seek to create an environment where everyone knows where he or she stands in terms of his or her relations with the leader.

The Pros of Authentic Leadership

A variety of studies have shown the importance of authentic leadership and the traits that authentic leaders possess, but how does this transition into the workplace? The two areas that are of current organizational importance include engagement and workplace environment.

Engagement

The concept of employee engagement emerged in 1985 when Deci and Ryan conducted a study on employee engagement that expanded on early work by differentiating between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Through dedicated and meaningful work, employees are able to recognize how valuable they are within the organization, which then makes them engaged.

Wei et al. (2018) developed a mediated moderation model to test the interactive effect of leadership perspectives on engagement. This model shows how a leader's authenticity and competencies have an interactive effect on followers' performances through the mediation of work engagement. Researcher work stems from the idea that authentic leaders enhance followers' engagement. This includes the leader giving autonomy for opportunities of development, providing incentives, and encouraging followers to invest themselves in their work. Authentic leaders develop their followers by openly discussing their own

vulnerabilities and followers' vulnerability, leading from the front, and continuously emphasizing personal growth. The results support the assumption that work engagement mediates the effect of authentic leadership on followers' performances.

Workplace interactions characterized by respect and dignity, as well as supportive communication, can help promote a sense of engagement from employees. As a result, followers are motivated by an authentic leader to exhibit positive behavior in the workplace, show higher engagement, and have a willingness to reciprocate. In addition, authentic leaders emphasize the importance of openness, honesty, and respect by living out these values through their interactions with followers. By showing courage to express their genuine emotions, authentic leaders help followers build openness and free lines of communication, which results in both leaders and followers engaging in genuine self-expression. Empirically, a positive relationship between authentic leadership and employee engagement also has been found in previous and current research.

Workplace Environment

Since the average individual spends about half of all waking hours at work, it is essential that the workplace be a positive environment. Newer studies are attempting to understand how a leader can create this healthy workplace environment.

Larsson et al. (2016) examined a work health promotion from a managerial perspective using a qualitative empirical approach. For the study, workplace health promotion was defined as "the combined effort of employees, employers, and the community to improve the health and well-

being of people at work” (Larsson et al., 2016, p. 486). Data was collected by using semi-structured interviews focusing on workplace health promotion. This included work environment, leadership strategies, and company organization. Larsson et al. found that the management of a workplace health promotion was influenced by fitness programs focusing on individual health behaviors. However, when trying to implement action plans related to workplace health promotions, the results indicated that the management of workplace health promotions needs to be strengthened.

Although there is no way to define a “healthy workplace,” The American Psychological Association breaks down a psychologically healthy workplace into five categories:

- (1) employee involvement
- (2) work-life balance
- (3) employee growth and development
- (4) health and safety
- (5) employee recognition

It is stated that a psychologically healthy workplace “fosters employee health and well-being while enhancing organizational performance, thereby benefiting both employees and organizations” (American Psychological Association, para. 1). In addition, the World Health Organization defines a healthy workplace as “one in which workers and managers collaborate to use a continual improvement process to protect and promote the health, safety and well-being of workers and the sustainability of the workplace...” (Burton, 2010, p. 2). However, organizations that implement these healthy practices still are often placing unhealthy demands on employees, thus leading researchers to not only study how a healthy work

environment is created, but also how a healthy work environment is sustained.

Johansson et al. (2011) evaluated the characteristics of an excellent work environment to understand the involvement of leadership in that environment. Researchers found emerging categories of congruence in leadership, mature group functioning, adequate organizational structures and resources, and comprehensive and shared meaningfulness to be essential to the work environment. It is stated that resources and organizational structures may be the core elements in creating a positive, productive, and successful work environment. However, it is the role of the leader to create these organizational structures and obtain the necessary resources. Overall, the study showed the complexity and mutual dependence of numerous elements that exist in a good work environment and how leadership can positively influence outcomes.

It is stated that the psychological engagement of employees by authentic leaders may be a key mechanism by which a healthy work environment is created. This factor of engagement may be viewed as an important consequence of authentic leadership that mediates its effect on followers’ outcomes. In the current literature, engagement is being studied in connection with stress and burnout in the workplace. It is assumed that engaged employees contribute positive emotions, attitudes, and behaviors to the workplace, resulting in a sustainable healthy work environment that is characterized by positive people, high finances, and quality outcomes. Furthermore, authentic leadership plays a significant role in the engagement and general contentment of employees as well as creating a healthy work environment. For employee engagement to occur, the leader must create a

psychologically safe workplace, showing all three variables simultaneously coinciding.

Practical Suggestions for Authentic Leadership

To enhance the above characteristics and start leading in an authentic manner, a leader needs to implement core principles to guide their way.

Kevin Cashman, CEO of LeaderSource and executive of Leader Institute, recommends in his 1998 book *Leadership from the Inside Out* five principles that authentic leaders should follow.

Principle #1: Know yourself authentically

Principle# 2: Listen authentically

Principle #3: Express authentically

Principle #4: Appreciate authentically

Principle #5: Serve authentically

With the combination of these principles, an authentic leader can create a healthy workplace environment that inspires employees to be more engaged. In addition, an authentic leader can promote engagement, which then creates a healthy workplace environment. This can be done by:

1. Having supervisors and managers conduct an authentic leadership program/training by using resources like

- eNaropa: Authentic Leadership Program
- Trillium Teams: Authentic Leadership Course

2. Making sure followers are satisfied with the level of recognition they receive at work

- Example: creating benefits and bonuses that are applicable and wanted by employees

3. Allotting intentional time between followers and leaders

- Example: bi-weekly meetings to check-in and for personal development practices

4. Promoting wellness

- Example: consider an employee assistance program for those who have financial troubles, excess stress, or depression symptoms

5. Creating a comfortable space

- Example: redesigning the office to allow both individual space and open communication

Overall, research indicates and supports the notion that authentic leaders have positive effects on creating a healthy workplace environment as well as encouraging employee engagement. It is the role of the leaders in an organization to reflect authenticity in order to improve engagement and workplace health culture. The first step is to recognize the current leadership techniques, assess employee engagement, and understand the workplace health culture. The second step is to commit to making change in leadership practices based on these findings. Gathering information and hearing employee voices is crucial to the foundation of change in an organization.

Now think about the leader you want to be or the leader you want to have. With these practical suggestions and research knowledge, individuals and organizations can make that dream a reality.

References

- Avolio, B. J., and Wernsing, T. S. (2008) Practicing Authentic Leadership. In Lopez, S. J, *Positive Psychology: Pursuing human flourishing* (pp. 147-165). Praeger.
- Benefits of a Psychologically Healthy

- Workplace. (n.d.). American Psychological Association website: <https://www.apaexcellence.org/resources/creatingahealthyworkplace/benefits/>
- Burton, J. (2010). *WHO Healthy Workplace Framework and Model: Background and Supporting Literature and Practice*. World Health Organization. <https://doi.org/9789241500241>
- Cashman, K. (2017). *Leadership from the inside out: becoming a leader for life*. BK Berrett Koehler Publishers, Inc.
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (1985). Intrinsic motivation and self-determination in human behavior. Plenum.
- Johansson, G., Sandahl, C., & Andershed, B. (2011). Authentic and congruent Leadership providing excellent work environment in palliative care. *Leadership in Health Services*, 24(2), 135–149. <https://doi.org/10.1108/17511871111115701>
- Larsson, R., Akerlind, I., & Sandmark, H. (2016). Managing workplace health promotion in municipal organizations: The perspective of senior managers. *Work: Journal of Prevention, Assessment & Rehabilitation*, 53(3), 485-498.
- Walumbwa, F. O., Avolio, B. J., Gardner, W. L., Wernsing, T. S., & Peterson, S. J. (2007). Authentic Leadership: Development and Validation of a Theory-Based Measure. *Journal of Management*, 34(1), 89–126. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206307308913>
- Wei, F., Li, Y., Zhang, Y., & Liu, S. (2018). The interactive effect of authentic leadership and leader competency on followers' job performance: The mediating role of work engagement. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 153(3), 763-773.
-

About the Author

Katherine Kimiko Davis is a student at Vanguard University of Southern California Master of Science Program in Industrial-Organizational Psychology.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Katherine Kimiko Davis at katherine.davis@vanguard.edu.