CHAPTER 9

Practicing Authentic Leadership

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In today’s world, there is a strong chorus of calls for more authentic leadership. Maybe these calls abound because of the growing level of cynicism that many people have expressed regarding leaders around the globe who seem to pad their own pockets at the expense of their people and the organizations they serve. Many examples exist, including the leader of North Korea who lives in opulence while the majority of his population is starving, contractors working in Iraq who are supposed to be there to support the multi-national war effort but incurring scores of accusations concerning overcharges and special bonuses, and prominent members of the U.S. Congress found guilty of taking bribes and misusing public funds. It is somewhat staggering to read that recent polls done by the Gallup Organization indicated that a third of the American public believed members of Congress were corrupt!

Nowadays, we know more about everything leaders do in the spotlight and beyond. Their failures are big news, and this publicity sparks the call for more authenticity in leadership. For example, less than a decade ago, we had moment-to-moment coverage on President Clinton’s affair while in office, whereas few Americans probably realize that President Franklin D. Roosevelt died ostensibly in the arms of his long-term lover in Warm Springs, Georgia, while his wife Eleanor was in Washington, D.C. (Gerber, 2002).

The enormous availability of information on governments and organizations, the standard of transparency being demanded of organizational leaders, as well as the growing awareness of the general populace that they can access this information online is promoting a call for more authentic leadership. We also suspect that as followers become more challenging of
authority because they simply know more, they also would expect more from leaders in positions of authority. So what we have occurring perhaps is a “perfect storm” for promoting authentic leadership whereby more information, smarter citizens and employees, coupled with the ability to quickly connect with others around the world through the Internet to establish a collective voice are contributing to increasing demands on leaders to get it right!

If the perfect storm is upon us, then where are we in our understanding of what constitutes authentic leadership and, perhaps more important, its development? We start with some examples of authentic leadership in practice and then move more into what are its components. The good news is that it has always been around if we look for it and are willing promote it in our organizations.

Forty years ago, Martin Luther King Jr. was interviewed on the Mike Douglas Show about his stance on the Vietnam War. Although he offered many eloquent responses on this television show, two comments were particularly relevant to examining the practice of authentic leadership:

MLK: A man of conscience can never be a consensus leader ... he doesn’t take a stand in order to search for consensus. He is ultimately a molder of consensus. I’ve always said a measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and moments of convenience, but where he stands in moments of challenge and moments of controversy.

Douglas: Do you care if you lost favor with [President] Johnson?
MLK: Well that isn’t the most important thing to me. The most important thing is that I not lose favor with truth, and with what conscience tell me is right, and what conscience tells me is just. I’m much more concerned about keeping favor with these principles than keeping favor with a person who may misunderstand a position I take. (Pugliese, 2007)

Through these particular words, Martin Luther King Jr. illustrated authentic leadership. First, he spoke of conscience being his guiding factor. Authentic leaders listen to inner conscience to guide them in decision making and taking a stand on controversial issues. Yet, the truth they listen for from within themselves is how to best serve their constituencies. In this way, authentic leadership is inner-guided yet other-focused. Robert E. Quinn (2004) describes this phenomenon and seeming paradox in his book Building the Bridge as You Walk on It. Through deep change, leaders become more authentic in their approach, guided by inner values and desire to serve other people. It follows that Bill George and Peter Sims (2007) place self-awareness at the core of developing authentic leadership. Indeed, leaders must undertake the lifelong journey of self-discovery to lead authentically.

Second, Martin Luther King Jr. (MLK) spoke of being true to certain principles other than concern for what people think or how they might misinterpret his words or intentions. This shows how authentic leaders are guided by principles for the betterment of humankind, not for one group of people at the expense of others. MLK described his core principles as
genuine equality and peace; he did not discuss annihilation or punishment of one group of people (e.g., Whites) so that another group (e.g., Blacks) might feel vindicated for the past or more able to thrive in the future. He described a future in which all people are equally thriving. His expression of these ideals became shared goals among many people from both groups and motivated political action on a national and eventually global basis. Ironically, and in contrast to King’s philosophy, Hitler had used the U.S. “Jim Crow” laws to justify his differential treatment of the Jews during World War II.

Last, MLK shared his thoughts and feelings about the war regardless of political backlash and physical threats. Moreover, his actions reflected the core values of equality and peace of which he spoke often. The way he interacted and communicated with people over a lifetime reflected these values. The effort he put into creating peaceful marches for equality across the nation required daily commitment to these ideals. For these reasons, MLK modeled authentic leadership by (a) being guided by inner conscience, as to how to (b) be true to core principles of improving well-being (equality and peace) for all people, and (c) taking actions aligned with core principles regardless of external pressures or threats.

Eleanor Roosevelt is an example of another kind of authentic leader. She was told that her husband had died while on vacation in Warm Springs, Georgia. She was asked to come to Georgia to accompany his remains back to Washington, D.C. Unfortunately, when she arrived she was told that her Franklin had continued his long-time affair, and perhaps more devastating, that her daughter had been arranging for her father and his girlfriend to have clandestine meetings over the years.

During the time the president was in Georgia, he was sitting for a portrait for his girlfriend. Months later, Eleanor who had now left the White House, was in Hyde Park, New York, when she discovered the nearly completed portrait of her husband. Of course, one might not fault the former first lady for throwing the portrait in the trash. Yet, instead, she wrote a note to his girlfriend indicating that she did realize how much the girlfriend must have loved her husband and that Eleanor Roosevelt was sure the portrait had great meaning for her. Eleanor Roosevelt was the same person who, as a member of the United Nations, promoted the international code of human rights, while demonstrating in this instance amazing authentic leadership in this most personal challenge of her own (R. Gerber, personal communication, January 26, 2007).

Warren Buffett at this writing is the second richest man in the world behind his close friend Bill Gates. For a number of years, he discussed taking all the money “he borrowed” from the economy and giving it back to a foundation he would create to address some of the most compelling issues of our time, such as nuclear proliferation or world hunger. When asked by a student in a class held at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln what he would like his foundation to focus on, he replied, if the money had been there at the time, he would have funded the Civil Rights Movement in the United States because it had no significant constituency with enough wealth to do so (University of Nebraska–Lincoln, 2006).
In 2007, Mr. Buffett took a step that perhaps solidifies his authenticity as a leader. Rather than taking his 30 or 40 billion dollars and setting up a foundation in his family’s name, he is investing his wealth in the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, as he believes together they can accomplish much more than each alone. In this one act, he has demonstrated the importance of doing what is good for the collective, even at the expense of his legacy not being tied to a foundation name like his predecessors Ford, Kellogg, Carnegie, and now Gates.

WHAT IS AUTHENTIC LEADERSHIP?

The previous examples offer some interesting insights into what constitutes authentic leadership. The common core is doing what is good for others while being guided by inner conscience, even at great personal sacrifice (such as no legacy foundation, or being kind to your spouse’s mistress, or even assault and assassination). This kind of leadership is not blind attention to serving the larger group or one’s individual desires, but rather a very high form of altruism that shows how the individual and the group can both achieve their aims, if (a) the leader and group can be aligned in core principles and (b) a leader challenges the notion that it is a zero sum game between them, i.e., that one’s gain is the other’s loss.

The level of self-awareness at the core of authentic leadership requires substantial time and effort invested over many years into self-discovery to distinguish inner conscience from external programming. In addition, authentic leaders recognize and accept that people in the group are at different levels of developing their self-awareness and authenticity and may not be able to see paradoxical possibilities suggested by the stories of authentic leaders presented thus far.

Authentic leadership clearly depicts a higher level of moral reasoning and capacity to make judgments that goes beyond one’s self interest, or said another way, includes one’s self-interest to the serve the collective interests of the group. Yet, it doesn’t stop there. These leaders go through life continually revisiting their theory of the self that represents the beliefs, views, and evaluations they hold about themselves (Epstein, 1973). This self-awareness and revision process allows them to determine how they can be better so that the collective can be better. It seems many people are incapable of evaluating their own theory of self, often unconscious to the fact that they even have a concept of themselves that is shaping all they do. So they simply execute on a theory they have never fully discovered. In this way, they operate by default on theories that early experiences programmed into them.

Basically, authentic leadership is leading from the core theory of oneself that is tied to high moral values and beliefs. Developing an understanding of those core values is a central component of authentic leadership, and then over time elevating them as new circumstances and challenges are confronted constitutes the practice and development of authentic leadership. As the starting point for authentic leadership development, leaders must
question what constitutes their current core values and beliefs. What represents the center or base for their important decisions, actions, and behaviors? Moreover, because this is leadership, these core values and beliefs must include more universal principles than simply one’s personal desires and incorporate ideals as to how such individuals come to influence others by raising themselves and others to higher standards of moral conduct. It is also important to consider that authentic leadership is not something that either exists or does not exist; rather, there is more or less authentic leadership in leadership episodes over time.

In this chapter, we explore the development of authentic leadership practices by describing the nature of authenticity, the role of self-awareness, components for practicing authentic leadership, and assessments available.

AUTHENTIC LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT THEORY

Inevitably, people will say, “Sure, Martin Luther King Jr., Eleanor Roosevelt, and Warren Buffett are exceptional people who exhibited high moral principles. But what if a leader’s values and true self at the root or core are evil? Are they authentic expressing that?” The answer to this commonly asked question is that enacting authentic leadership assumes a positive path toward developing oneself toward higher levels of moral perspective and adult development. At these higher levels of human development, we know from years of accumulated theory and research (Erikson, 1959; Kegan, 1982; Kohlberg, 1976; Loevinger, 1976; Piaget, 1954) that people move to more complex and sophisticated ways of understanding the world and relating to other people. They go through transitions, crises, and transformations, and emerge into each new stage with a broader set of perspectives for interpreting their experiences that is more inclusive than the last.

These perspectives move from primarily individual concerns for personal gain, to relational concerns for support and status, to universal concerns for higher order principles such as genuine freedom, justice, equality, and peace for all members of the human family. The highest levels of development imply a move toward universal consciousness, an awareness of everything being connected (Beck & Cowan, 1996; Debold, 2002; Wilber, 2000). For example, to the extent the leaders of the nations of the world exemplify high moral character and perspective we would expect these individuals to delay judgment in determining the underlying causes for any one country’s actions. By delaying judgment they would be signaling they are willing to listen, and hear one country’s reasoning and cost–benefit considerations for all constituencies in a balanced way.

Balanced processing is thus another essential component of authentic leadership identified by Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May, and Walumbwa (2005). Unfortunately, the trend of global opinion about U.S. attention to self-interest compared with collective interests suggests that the world is trending toward seeing this superpower as being much less authentic these days. The tangible impact of this trend is that the United States needs to
invest billions more in security and much more time in convincing other nations that the direction chosen will benefit them as well.

Authentic leadership is based in core values and beliefs, but ultimately we judge such leaders by the authentic leadership episodes that are expressed through action, that is, forgoing putting one’s name on a foundation to have a more positive and sustainable impact on the world’s problems. Avolio and Luthans (2006) argued that authentic leadership represents the root construct or base underlying all positive forms of leadership. This means there can be authentic directive and participative leaders, just as there can be authentic transformational leaders.

An important distinction was made by Bass and Steidlmeier (1999) that there can be authentic forms of ethical or transformational leadership, as well pseudo-authentic expressions of leadership. Additionally, transformational leaders were defined by Bass and Avolio (1990) and earlier by Burns (1978) as being focused on developing followers into leaders themselves. Thus the basic “transformation” was in the follower becoming leader. They reasoned that a leader that would be so concerned about developing followers into leaders, versus having them remain as “subordinates,” evidenced a higher level of moral perspective. Why? Such leaders would be focused on the good of the individuals, not just their own self-interests, and would want to leave behind individuals and organizations more capable of leading into the future. One only has to look at several despot dictators to realize this was clearly not part of their intentions.

The work on transformational leadership in particular led Avolio (2005) to explore where such authentic leadership originates, which we discuss in more detail in the latter part of this chapter. The important point made by Avolio and his colleagues at the Global Leadership Institute is that authentic leadership is the root, and that like the roots of a plant, if it becomes corrupt so does any form of leadership exhibited above the root or base.

So how does such root-based leadership get developed? Authentic leadership is a developmental process that is largely characterized by learning about the self as it evolves toward broader and more complex perspectives, while in turn applying this learning to leadership episodes and practices. The self here is the core concept, mental model, and theory an individual leader holds that addresses the question—Who am I?

DEVELOPING AUTHENTICITY

To thine own self be true, and it must follow, as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man.

Hamlet, act 1, scene 3, lines 564–566) Shakespeare, 1604

Authenticity is defined as being true to the self (Harter, 2002). As Shakespeare wrote above, being true to one’s self is the highest level of truth there is. As the theory of authentic leadership describes, the self we are talking about is linked to higher levels of moral development. In the cognitive psychology literature, Lord and Brown (2004) present a way to more clearly understand the theories of the self each person holds. The first
theory is the feared self, which represents areas that we do not feel adept at engaging, e.g., “I am not able to sway people by standing up and presenting my deep beliefs and opinions.” The second theory of the self represents the current view of the self or actual self. The actual self represents that which we have come to understand about ourselves and that which guides our action, for example, “I am not an empathetic person, so I don’t try to engage people in counseling because I am not good at it.” The actual self represents our theory of our self in use day to day. The final self is referred to as the hoped for or possible self. This represents the individual I am becoming or could become, e.g., “I know that to be a successful manager in most organizations today, I must develop a global mind-set. With such a mind-set, I will be able to successfully engage my employees and customers across cultural contexts in a way that we each come to understand the other’s perspective and develop trust.”

At any one point in time, we can consider that we all have a feared self, an actual self, and a possible self that are each evolving in some unique way depending on the challenges we have chosen to confront, or that occur through serendipity and life events. Authentic leadership development focuses on the dynamic between these components with the intent of moving the actual self to a higher level perspective towards the possible self. Thus, authentic leadership development begins by developing this sense of clarity about the self and authenticity through action (Gardner et al., 2005).

Taking actions that go against inner values or inner base represents self-abandonment and a slide into negativity. We suggest that individuals who truly know themselves and are progressing throughout their lives towards higher perspectives are people who are more positive, and we have some evidence to support this assumption. Indeed, in one police study, officers who were rated by their followers as more authentic, and who were higher in psychological capital, over a 6-month period of time had followers who showed higher levels of flourishing, on-the-job performance, and well-being (Peterson, Walumbwa, Avolio, & Fredrickson, 2007; Luthans, Youssef, & Avolio, 2007).

Now contrast the above focus on positivity and think of the officers in the German army in World War II, who were required to dehumanize and eventually put to death approximately six million people in death camps. For many of these officers, there must have been an initial moment when they went against their own inner principles—knowing that killing these human beings was against their moral values. Yet for their own survival (and safety of their families) they bought into, or at least went along with, Nazi policies. It seems that once you abandon your inner values, it becomes easier each time as you become a little more deadened to its voice. These officers may have thought they were surviving, but instead, they experienced the slow death of their moral perspective and well-being.

We see this same pattern occurring for people in organizations, who are selling out their inner values, often for security or status. At first, it may be one difficult choice, and it may not even be noticed. But over time, these people no longer hear their inner conscience, and they make decisions...
purely based on economic reasoning. This too results in slow death. Inauthentic behavior shows up in leaders and followers who behave as social chameleons, changing who they are according to whatever group or authority figure with whom they are currently interacting.

We suggest one indicator of inauthenticity is that people experience polarities of energy: (a) frenetic, hyper, wired energy or (b) low, dull, exhausted energy or (c) a constant swing between both extremes over a short period of time. This is because inauthenticity reflects an imbalance. When someone is not grounded in who they are, they are likely to look outside themselves for answers, validation, or direction. Repeatedly ignoring one’s own inner moral base drains a person’s energy, and not being aware of inner conscience and instead tuned toward other’s people attitudes and opinions leads to more frenetic energy states. We also know that maintaining this sort of psychological and physical imbalance will eventually take a toll on the person’s well-being.

In sum, authentic leaders have a better understanding of who they are, as well as more experience and facility in acting in alignment with their true selves under various conditions (Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May, & Walumbwa, 2005; Luthans & Avolio, 2003). Accordingly, being true to the self, being authentic, involves both a “knowing” and “doing” component. That is, leaders must first know who they are, and only then can they choose to do things that match their true values and principles. Thus, the first component to developing authenticity in individual leaders and authentic leadership is leader self-awareness.

SELF-AWARENESS IS THE FIRST STEP

Most people tend to overestimate or are more favorable toward themselves compared with ratings they receive from coworkers (Nilsen & Campbell, 1993). So we know from this research that most people really aren’t clear about how they are perceived by others. But self-awareness is more than knowing how others see you; also it is being aware of aspects that others don’t see, as well as understanding some basic principles common to all people, such as how we all make sense of and derive meaning from our life experiences. It also allows for the possibility that everyone else may be wrong about you!

Although the term self-awareness is often used to refer to a certain state of “enlightenment” that some people attain, in practice self-awareness is a long-term, really a lifetime, learning process without an ultimate destination level of 100%. This is because the actual self is dynamic and changes over time. As noted above, there are multiple components to the self (i.e., actual, feared, and possible) and not everything about the self can be known anyway. In fact, cognitive psychologists suggest there is a “working self-concept” that represents what we are able to access about ourselves at any one point in time, since we cannot access all of it all of the time (Lord, Brown, & Freiberg, 1999; Markus & Wurf, 1987).

In the book titled Blink: The Power of Thinking without Thinking by Malcolm Gladwell (2005), a study was described where unsuspecting
people were primed to think either young or old, and as a result their subsequent behaviors changed. Priming them involved flashing a word on a screen below the threshold of awareness, so that people were unaware this was happening yet unconsciously processing the words. People who were primed with old words walked more slowly afterwards than those that were not primed with such words.

In another clever experiment, people primed with aggressive words interrupted a meeting after about 5 minutes of waiting, while those who were primed with polite words did not interrupt the meeting at all (Bargh, Chen, & Burrows, 1996). This series of studies provides evidence of how people’s thoughts and perspectives of themselves affect their actions, and yet they can be unaware of what is driving their behavior. Developing greater self-awareness is one way to become more conscious of what shapes behavior. Although it probably cannot overcome intentional priming conducted in laboratories by scientific researchers as described here, self-awareness development can bring to consciousness many other aspects of the self that do shape behaviors and that can be adjusted. For instance, leaders who become aware of these common biases in the ways they perceive and process information can intentionally seek more ways to balance their perspectives. Therefore, authentic leaders are likely to engage in a more balanced processing as a result of greater self-awareness.

**SELF-AWARENESS BEGINS WITH A TRIGGER MOMENT**

So what is a trigger moment? An example of a trigger moment might be: “Consider that when you are leading every single conversation matters.” A young leader asked her mentor, “What is the one thing that would help me be a better leader?” His reply to her question was the statement above, and she indicated to us that it has guided her very successfully through the past 10 years of work in the public school systems.

Self-awareness means asking central questions about yourself that relate to your theory of yourself. When am I at my best? How can I improve? Where am I being true to myself, and where am I selling out? It can be triggered by receiving feedback. For example, how many of your friends would hide you if your life and theirs depended on it? This kind of question really gets one to think about true and deep friendships and what they mean in life. Thus, self-awareness is a process of learning about the self that includes moments of insight (i.e., an “ahah!” moment), self-reflection, and an accumulation of knowledge about the self over time.

Trigger moments cause leaders to pause and reflect on the meaning of the event and implications for their current and future leadership. These moments may be negative, neutral, or positive. One clear indication we have found for authentic leadership development is when leaders stop searching for answers from outside sources and listen to their own wisdom and conscience on key issues. One hospital director remarked that he had read so many books on leadership that were useful to his development, but his real development started to emerge when he set out to understand and
address his own model or theory of leadership. When he began to dig deeper into his own model, he was able to see how he wanted to be guided from the inside out. Here is another example we picked up in a class where a student addressed the following question to Warren Buffett.

STUDENT: But when you need advice and feedback about an idea or a decision, I’d like to know who do you go to?

WARREN BUFFETT: Well, usually I look in the mirror, to be totally honest. The nature of what I do means I have to think pretty much independently because if I take a poll, in effect, I’m gonna do whatever everybody else is doing, and I don’t think much of that usually in investments; and so I have to have an environment and I have to have the temperament personally that lets me think for myself (University of Nebraska–Lincoln, 2007).

Mr. Buffett has no doubt sought advice throughout his life from his acquaintances and readings, but there comes a point where such leaders believe they must fully own the decision and its consequences. Given his response, he has apparently reached a level of experience where he knows that he has his own answers. This behavior represents trust in one’s self that comes with years of experience and experimentation. Contrast this example with a new leader who doesn’t have much experience in his field and decides not to ask for feedback or advice on a key business decision. What we describe here is a leader not willing to be vulnerable, which can be the kiss of death in most careers, particularly those where we observe leaders who are extremely high in exhibiting hubris! Of course, this behavior could be considered arrogance and ignorance. This is why we refer to authentic leadership development… because it is a long-term process of moving toward more complex ways of understanding yourself, others, and the effective leadership that comes through experience and deep reflection. For leaders, this happens while they are on the job in leadership episodes, as well as through separate reflective practices, like journaling or meditation. Self-reflection is critical thinking usually performed after some event has occurred deemed relevant to oneself. Feedback from other people (such as performance reviews at work or after-action reviews and debriefing) is a common trigger for self-reflection.

This kind of leader self-awareness is more than just surface level thinking and learning; it includes, yet moves beyond, knowing your own strengths and weaknesses. It is knowing one’s self on many levels and also knowing certain aspects of the self in much greater depth and detail. First, consider how people always are interpreting their circumstances, situations, and interactions with other people. They are assessing, judging, evaluating, trying to understand and make meaning of each event, while determining if action is needed. This process is referred to as meaning making or sense making. So at one level of self-awareness a leader comes to the realization that all people are meaning makers. In fact, leadership itself is considered a meaning-making function. It involves creating meaning
through describing a vision and engaging people in sharing the vision and taking action towards specific goals that fulfill the vision. Leader self-awareness contributes to ensuring that leaders responsibly shape the meaning and sense-making that goes on in their teams, organizations, and communities.

Gaining greater self-awareness is a choice, and for some it is uncomfortable to discover new things about themselves. Thus, one of the ways to facilitate leader self-awareness is through self-observation and mindfulness. Mindfulness allows a leader to observe him or her self with a minimum amount of judgment, as a witness or as a third-party observer. Practicing mindfulness is one way to turn off or slow the meaning-making process for a time. This nonjudgmental self-observation contributes to self-acceptance, which is also important to authentic leadership development (Gardner, Avolio, et al., 2005). Gaining more awareness of the self without accompanying self-acceptance can be painful. Thus, combining a variety of self-awareness practices (i.e., self-reflection, journaling, mindfulness) to develop authentic leadership works best.

ALIGNING ACTIONS WITH INNER VALUES IS THE SECOND STEP TO AUTHENTICITY

Clif Bar is a private company with estimated annual revenues of about $150 million and employs about 170 employees. Yet, there was a moment when they almost became another product line of a large conglomerate corporation. It was a “moment” of authentic leadership that changed the course of this company’s future.

After key competitors were bought up by large corporations, an offer was made by another large corporation to purchase the company in the year 2000. It was a great offer, sure to make both owners of Clif Bar very wealthy so they would never have to work another day in their lives. On the day of signing the contract, one owner felt a sense of panic, so he took a walk outside and in that moment realized he did not want to sell the company. He decided he was not going to give in to the rational reasons people gave him for selling the business, primarily that the key competitive products recently were bought by corporations with large marketing budgets and Clif Bar would never be able to compete at that level and would wither away under the attack. But on that day, he listened to his conscience and he made a decision that went against all the experts including the other owner of Clif Bar, who he would now have to buy out.

Gary Erickson decided to buy out the other owner for over $60 million, even though he only had $10,000 in his bank account that day. The company has since grown from about $40 million in sales to $150 million in just 6 years, even while competing with those other large companies. Most recently Clif Bar became a leader in business sustainability by offering the nation’s first incentive program to pay cash to employees who purchase clean-burning biodiesel cars, also helping employees buy high-mileage
hybrids, and offering a variety of rewards to those who leave their cars at home altogether (Burlingham, 2005; Erickson, 2007).

Gary Erickson demonstrated authentic leadership by aligning his actions with his conscience, when he chose to back out of the sale at the last minute and follow through on his inner voice and values. He honored and trusted his own wisdom over the advice of the other highly experienced business people involved, and he not only succeeded in sustaining the revenue growth of the company over time, but he continues to create innovative ways to be a company that values and takes actions towards sustaining the planet. In retrospect, he could have been wrong about the future potential, but he would have still been right about himself.

AUTHENTIC LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PRACTICES

As noted above, we witness authentic leadership in the episodes of leading that occur in everyday decisions and in moments of great challenge and change. Martin Luther King Jr. practiced a high level of authentic leadership through the clarity and transparency with which he shared his dreams for equality and peace, and through his daily choices to adopt a nonviolent approach to leading political and social change. Gary Erickson practiced authentic leadership through making an important and expensive decision based on his inner conscience, values and concern for his employees.

Authentic leadership development (ALD) theory suggests there are several specific core practices involved in practicing authentic leadership: namely self-awareness, transparency, balanced processing, and moral perspective and actions. We discussed leader self-awareness and its development through trigger moments and self-reflection above. Now we explore specific practices associated with self-awareness and the other components of authentic leadership below.

Self-Awareness Practices

Authentic leaders choose a path of self-discovery. They invite feedback and insights about the self, choosing to engage in practices that enhance leader self-awareness. These practices include three main types: (a) seeking feedback regularly, thereby creating trigger moments, (b) engaging in self-reflection to understand the meaning of triggers to the actual self and emotional responses, and (c) spending time in self-observation, or mindfulness mode, which makes one aware of immediate thoughts and feelings. These three practices contribute to heightened self-awareness. When the focus of feedback, reflection, and self-observation are on leadership episodes, and leaders intend to learn about implicit theories they hold regarding themselves, effective leadership, and worldviews, we call this process leader self-awareness.

Receiving feedback from a variety of sources is a way to gain perspective on how a leader is perceived across a range of people. Hence, 360-degree performance feedback instruments are very popular in organizations as a
tool for leader development (see Atwater, Brett, & Waldman, 2003). Although these instruments are useful for triggering self-reflection via feedback, it is also important to point out that they are only one mechanism for enhancing self-awareness. Moreover, a leader may know herself very well and still differ in her ratings of leadership from followers, and in our view, this does not necessarily mean the leader is not self-aware.

In terms of learning one’s strengths and receiving feedback on them, Roberts, Dutton, Spreitzer, Heaphy, and Quinn (2005) have developed an exercise called the “Reflected Best Self.” In this exercise, people seek feedback on when they have been at their best, what characteristics they display, and under what circumstances. Authentic leaders invest time in understanding their own strengths and best possible self, as well as helping those around them learn the same. Leveraging strengths and being at your best affects well-being positively (i.e., feels better), and it also is likely to lead to better individual and ultimately group performance, since everyone is encouraged to rely on knowing their strengths and blending them into a more effective course for execution.

A second practice for heightening self-awareness is self-reflection. Making time to consider trigger moments and learn from leadership experiences is practicing reflection. Adaptive self-reflection is a form of critical thinking, involving examination and evaluation that results in insights (aha! moments) and learning about the self. Maladaptive self-reflection is spending time renumerating what and why things went wrong and never deriving positive lessons learned. Authentic leaders seek out trigger moments for learning from their own actions as well as those of others. They actively engage in self-reflection on a regular basis, whether asking for feedback on which they can reflect, or by performing a “debrief” or after-action review on a weekly leadership episode or experience.

Thirdly, practicing mindfulness and self-observation is another component practice of self-awareness. This practice involves observing your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors as they are happening. Mindfulness involves being attentive to what is happening in the present moment without judgment (Baer, 2003; Brown & Ryan, 2003). Although this sounds simple, practicing mindfulness can be quite a challenge. Most people use meditation or reflective exercise techniques to learn how to observe their inner thoughts, emotions, and visceral reactions from a nonjudgmental, witness-like perspective. This kind of self-observation is distinct from thinking about whether your thoughts and behaviors are aligned with your goals. This latter practice represents an example of self-reflection, and both practices are central to self-awareness development.

Mindfulness helps leaders become more self-aware of the current flow of thoughts and feelings they are having in the present moment. This metacognitive (thinking about the way one thinks) capacity for this kind of awareness allows for greater immediate adjustments and adaptive flexibility. Mindfulness allows leaders to interrupt automatic or habitual reactions and to select alternative pathways of thinking and responses based on insights gleaned from self-reflection. For example, Martin Luther King Jr. may have felt at many times an automatic reaction of anger or a desire to aggressively
push back or defend against attacks as his contemporary Malcolm X did. Yet, it is likely his ability to practice peaceful responses in a variety of challenging and even violent situations was due at least in part to his capacity to observe his automatic reactions in the moment and choose to respond differently.

Thus, authentic leaders are those who have built the capacity to choose to act true to their core values, even when they have more automatic human emotional reactions to perceived threatening situations. There may be leaders who reach a state of transcending emotional triggers and remain disciplined in linking their positive core values to positive growth strategies for resolving dilemmas. How easy it would have been for Nelson Mandela to come out of 27 years in prison and seek revenge from his captors. What made this authentic leader so different in that “moment”?

Practicing Balanced Processing

Based in the process of leader self-awareness just described, authentic leaders come to understand that all people are biased processors of information. Just like the people in the Bargh’s experiments who responded to non-conscious priming from words related to being young or old or to aggression (Bargh et al., 1996), authentic self-aware leaders realize that all humans filter what they perceive, interpret their environment according to past experiences, and are nonconsciously influenced by a variety of phenomena around them, including other’s people emotions. Thus, authentic leaders seek out alternative, often competing perspectives on important issues. They know that any one person is a biased processor of information. Therefore, this core component of practicing authentic leadership encourages leaders to create the conditions for adaptive conflict (Avolio, 2005). Adaptive conflict occurs when a diversity of views from people of different backgrounds are considered in decision making. Healthy debate and fair consideration of competing ideas result in more creative, emergent, and adaptive solutions.

It stands to reason that if leaders aren’t aware of the inherent biases in their own meaning-making processes, and that of their teams, they will not set up their organizations to benefit from the diversity and innovative solutions that come from adaptive conflict. At the other extreme, stereotyping, prejudice, and righteousness set up the conditions for maladaptive conflict. Thus, people need education and training about these inherent cognitive biases and automatic sense-making processes, so they can begin to decipher their own implicit theories and to learn how to constructively interact with others who are operating from their own personal filters and biases at all times. Realizing these processes are in place is a huge step toward more balanced processing.

Practicing Transparency

Authentic leadership development recognizes the relational nature of leadership: that leadership is built on social interactions and influence. As such, a key component of authentic leadership is relational or interactional
transparency, defined here as sharing relevant information, being open to giving and receiving feedback, being forthright regarding motives and the reasoning behind decisions, and displaying alignment between words and actions (Vogelgesang, 2007).

Transparency is central to building trust between people. Withholding information, saying one thing but doing another, and not being willing to receive or give feedback all erode transparency in relationships and reduce trust. Although we do know in practice, people wonder how much information is necessary to share. Avolio and Luthans (2006) reason that the more certain you are about your values and beliefs, the more clear you will become about how transparent to act with others. Being transparent may cause feelings of vulnerability at times but should not make you so vulnerable as to invoke anxiety or invite exploitation from others. If you know your core values, and your core is based on high moral principles, why would you not want to be transparent in your interactions with others?

Practicing Moral Actions

ALD ultimately is about leaders being true to themselves in their leadership practices. The “self” to which we refer has been described in many ways (i.e., the possible self, the best self, or one’s conscience and core values). All these terms imply a higher level of awareness than might be average for most people. To practice ALD means regularly identifying with your best self, checking in with your core values concerning your leadership agendas and operating practices, and verifying that indeed your actions are aligned with the highest ethical and moral principles you hold. In this way, practicing authentic leadership becomes taking actions that serve high moral principles concerning relationships, social responsibilities, and performance standards. Practicing ALD means continual engagement in self-discovery and awareness opportunities and learning which values and principles are the highest form of conscience and possible self for each leader at the current stage in their life stream.

In sum, authentic leadership development involves several practices, including self-awareness, balanced processing, transparency, and moral actions. Together these practices put a leader on a path to becoming more authentic and to serving as a role model in their leadership relationships, and it follows that the leadership experience for all exemplifies higher levels of trust, engagement, and performance.

CONCLUSION

Returning to our example of Martin Luther King Jr., he challenged all of us in the United States to find a way to create a nation that viewed all people as equal and demonstrated true equal opportunities for all. He challenged our nation and indeed the world to practice authentic leadership and to hold ourselves true to the principles upon which the nation, and now the United Nations, was founded—equal liberties for all. Forty years later, we are challenging ourselves in a similar way to practice authentic
leadership on a global scale. This does not imply a right way, but rather implicates a process of transforming perspectives to become broader, more inclusive and integrated than before.

For example, many Americans would be surprised to find out from a Gallup Muslim poll, that a majority of Muslims have a tremendous respect for our innovativeness and liberties (Esposito, 2006). However, the majority of Muslims believe that Americans have little respect for their culture and what Muslims stand for. One Muslim professor in Singapore illustrated this latter point by showing clips of the myriad of American movies that had ‘‘Arab’’ characters in them. In every movie over the last 3 decades the Arabs were depicted as being gang members, terrorists, or extravagantly wealthy, corrupt business men.

Reflecting back on the findings above, we can think about every world leader today, and ask: how self-aware are those leaders and how does that affect their ability to be authentic leaders? How does the current global context affect the development of authentic leadership in our world today? If we could take those leaders and simply enhance their self-awareness, their level of transparency, balanced processing, and moral perspective-taking concerning their actions, could we change the path of human history? Absolutely! Indeed, we believe that inauthentic leadership is at the root of what is causing many of the dilemmas facing current and future generations. Leadership has been a significant force in the course of human history with both good and bad results. Shifting our focus to what developing more authentic leadership could actually help drive humanity to a much higher and more positive level of development.

The question is: how can each of us commit to a new level of authentic leadership in our lives, relationships, and leadership opportunities? How can we become more aware of our biases, blind spots, and filters? How can we up the level of transparency in our interactions with those we want to instill trust? How can we learn to act more in alignment with our highest moral principles and inner conscience everyday? Provided below are some initial suggestions for engaging this developmental path.

**PERSONAL MINI-EXPERIMENTS**

**Everyday Practices**

Life is a series of quasi-experiments where you choose one thing over another in pursuing learning or a course of action. Here are some actions you can choose or not choose to pursue, and the experimental outcomes, so to speak, are up to you.

**Discovering Your Authentic Leadership:** Assess your Authentic Leadership Development online using a short well-validated survey that assesses the components of authentic leadership described above. Go to [www.gli.unl.edu](http://www.gli.unl.edu) and take the survey.

**Personal Reflections to Develop Self-Awareness:** Learn what your implicit theories are about yourself and your beliefs about good leaders and effective leadership. Start by listing what you feel are the top positive attributes of
leaders and compare your list with a colleague’s list. What was the first one you put on the list “top of mind” versus your colleague’s list?

**Personal Reflections on Your Worldview:** Discover your “worldview.” Learn how it differs from other people close to you, and how this “filter” impacts your behavior. What is your worldview regarding the responsibilities of leaders to develop followers into leaders? What is your worldview regarding how other cultures perceive exemplary leadership in your own culture? What is your worldview on leadership legacies?

**Asking Others About Your Strengths:** Try a “reflected best self” exercise (Roberts, Spreitzer, Dutton, Quinn, Heaphy, & Barker, 2005). Ask the key people you work with and live with: what are your strengths, when are you at your best at work or at home, and what circumstances bring out your best?

**Getting to Know How You Make Fair Decisions:** Seek out conflicting perspectives when making important decisions. Uncover and understand the assumptions underlying your decisions.

Create diverse teams by ensuring diversity of backgrounds and beliefs. Be sure to obtain training for these team members in understanding cognitive biases and learning to thrive from adaptive conflict. Pick a topic that might be controversial and have each member describe their core belief and discover differences.

**Getting to Know Your Level of Transparency:** Develop transparency in your interactions and trust in your relationships: What information are you most and least comfortable in sharing? Why? Try to share relevant information freely. Regularly seek out feedback and be willing to give feedback, especially positive feedback often. Ask people what they don’t know and how you can better inform them. Share your motives and reasoning behind decisions. Make sure that you align your words and actions by debriefing important events to see if you were in alignment. Ask others to give you feedback on how aligned you were from their point of view.

**Getting to Know Your Level of Moral Perspective:** Align your actions with your highest principles and inner conscience. Of course, you must first engage in some self-reflection and self-awareness activities to understand who you are at your best, and what are your core values and principles. Take a difficult moral dilemma and explore the principles you use to guide the decision that should be taken. Ask your colleagues to do the same and compare your moral principles. Read about world class leaders who you consider the highest in exhibiting moral values and principles. Describe how those values align with your own.

**Compile What You Have Learned About Authentic Leadership:** Now that you have looked at the components of authentic leadership, consider how they may be applied in terms of your development each and every day. What would you now choose to work on to become a more effective authentic leader? What would you stop doing? What would be your leadership goal and how would you measure success?

**REFERENCES**


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