

Am I an Authentic Nursing Leader for Healthy Workplace Environments?

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This article describes what constitutes an authentic leader drawing from the literature, current nursing research, and recent scientific theories. This author then solicits feedback about her leadership style as an authentic leader from individuals within her sphere of influence and seeks ways to improve upon this style.

Current discussions about leadership and the factors that help make strong leaders successful most definitely include the topic of authenticity. Of particular importance is whether authenticity makes a difference. Over the span of a 40-year career in the service setting, I have been intrigued with and studied leadership in pursuit of a PhD. What has been learned and experienced leads me to conclude that an authentic leader does make a difference with respect to the cocreation of healthy workplace environments. This was especially true in the health care service arena, and if true in service, does it carry over into academia where a healthy workplace is equally important for faculty, staff, and students?

AUTHENTIC LEADERS

Two definitions that help frame the issue come from both the academic literature and the popular literature. Avolio et al¹ describes authentic leaders “as those individuals who are deeply aware of how they think and behave and are perceived by others, as being aware of their own and other’s values/moral perspective, knowledge and strengths, aware of the context in which they operate and who are confident, hopeful, optimistic, resilient, and of high moral character.”^{1(p.804)} Authentic leaders behave in a positive role modeling way that fosters development of self and others, and exhibit 4 key behaviors: relational transparency—presenting themselves to their followers as who they truly are by being open and truthful and thus encouraging others to voice their ideas, challenges and opinions; balanced processing—soliciting input from others both positive and critical before making important decisions; internalized moral perspective—exhibits a strong ethical and moral foundation and acts in congruence with their own values; self-awareness—an ability to be self-reflective and know their own strengths and limitations and how they affect others.¹⁻³ Meeting these standards of behavior every day in every situation can be daunting. And yet, when internalized and embodied as a lived experience, they emerge as a seamless authentic approach to leadership.

In the popular literature, George⁴ describes authentic leaders as individuals who genuinely want to serve others through their leadership, are guided by qualities of the heart, passion, and compassion, recognize their shortcomings and work hard to overcome them, lead with purpose, meaning, and values, build enduring relationships with people, are consistent and self-disciplined, and when their principles are tested, they will refuse to compromise. My experience with other nursing leaders is that these characteristics hold true for nurse leaders because of our commitment to safeguard patients, families, and communities. Moreover, these leaders demonstrate the 5 qualities of understanding their purpose; practicing solid values; leading with heart; establishing connected relationships; and demonstrating self-discipline. Therefore, authentic leaders embody caring and compassion by getting to know the life stories of those with whom they interact with and by engaging others in shared meaning and vision.⁴

HEALTH CARE ENVIRONMENTS

We live in a complex, dynamic, and ever-changing health care environment whereby the prevailing mechanistic, industrial, or machine model paradigm no longer works.⁵ In this paradigm, people and processes were best understood by reducing them to finite parts and could be controlled, managed, and evaluated. To the contrary, we live in a digital or quantum age informed by the recent advances in chaos, complexity, systems, and quantum theories. In this scenario, we need authentic leaders who can cocreate a shared vision, engage others in a dynamic, creative process of growth and change, and effectively connect and relate to people whom they lead.⁵ Thus, it is important as an authentic leader that his or her followers do not just do what the leader wishes as in the industrial paradigm. Instead, an authentic leader collaborates and cocreates with others to bring about the needed changes to flourish in these complex health care environments. Nurses need to be over-led and undermanaged by authentic nursing leaders!

For the past decade, Wong, Laschinger, and their colleagues have investigated the role of authentic leadership on shaping the professional nursing practice environment, empowering nurses to provide safe and effective patient care, linking nurses' perceptions of patient care quality to job satisfaction and patient outcomes. Their findings have illustrated that authentic leaders are thought to build cultures of trust and respect, and contribute to healthier workplace environments,⁶ increased nurses' trust in managers,⁷ increased work engagement and job satisfaction,⁸ perceived quality of interprofessional collaboration in new graduate nurses associated with enhanced teamwork,⁹ and influencing outcomes by these authentic leaders shaping the work environment or influencing staff perceptions and expectations of collaborative relationships.¹⁰

The findings from these new scientific theories and the aforementioned research inform us that leadership is about relationships with one another within that leader's sphere of influence. We now know from these theories and research that we cannot predict at all how others will interact together because every environment and context creates a newness in every relationship. A personal experience demonstrated this principle when a respectful collegial peer relationship changed when the context changed from peer to supervisory. Once we established this new reporting relationship, our rapport changed, even though we were the same people.

Thus, we cannot predict what will happen if a person with a certain personality style, learning style, or leadership style enters a relationship with others, because we know from these "new scientific theories" that we create something new in every relationship with others depending on the context, environment, and what is going on in each individual's life at that time. However, the one consistent attribute is that of authenticity that allows a nursing leader to be that consistent person with core values and beliefs that they refuse to compromise when tested.

PERSONAL JOURNEY

Imagine starting a new role as a nursing leader in a very different environment. While this can be unnerving and disconcerting, it can also be exciting and invigorating. I did this 3 years ago when my role shifted from associate chief nurse of a large academic medical center in Boston to dean of a graduate school of nursing in Worcester, Massachusetts. My sphere of influence had shifted from service to academia, bringing with it the responsibility to reflect and re-examine my leadership and its impact on others.

The first step whenever I enter a new organization is to really get to know the people with whom I will be interacting, using the spirit of appreciative inquiry to learn about them as individuals and as a collective group. Through this process, I can observe all interactions, and that data become vital as I continue to strive to earn

their trust by keeping my commitments and getting back to folks when I make a promise. Foremost, the primary goal is to cocreate with all the individuals within my sphere of influence a healthy workplace environment. I am passionate about working in and cocreating such environments.

The 2005 "AACN Standards for Establishing and Sustaining Healthy Work Environments: A Journey to Excellence" have been the foundation for my understanding the nature of a healthy work environment and guided me as I have worked to make improvements.¹¹ The 6 standards set forth in this publication were: skilled communication, true collaboration, effective decision making, appropriate staffing, meaningful recognition, and authentic leadership. Each of these standards are necessary to establish and sustain healthy workplace environments in health care. Of these 6 standards, there is one that speaks to the role of the nurse leader, namely, authentic leadership. This standard is about personal responsibility and accountability in that I am responsible for my own actions and accountable for my behavior. It is about insight and interpersonal interactions and relationships where I must know myself and how I am perceived by others. These are the cornerstones of authenticity. Authentic leadership has been described in the literature as the "glue that holds together a healthy work environment";¹² to me this means I have an ethical responsibility to be that authentic leader because my role in the organization, whether service or academia, is to ensure that the environment supports open discourse, has room for conflict and resolution, and is a safe environment for speaking up even when it differs from the leaders' position. It is about ensuring dialogue. The other 5 characteristics of a healthy workplace environment must be addressed, and my role as a nurse leader is to provide the space and time for the dialogue so that faculty, staff, and our learners can engage in the effort to cocreate this environment. This was articulated by me in the message below published in a recent article in *Worcester Medicine*.¹³

"We as faculty and staff must ensure to engage in skilled communication that is forthright, open, honest and receptive to diverse perspectives. When critical feedback is necessary, it is done in a professional and respectful manner. As for true collaboration, we must always strive to engage in inter-professional education, practice and research by valuing each other's strengths, prizing each other's contributions and resolving competing interests.

"Effective decision making is vital as faculty and staff. We must always assess a situation, sharing data-based information, and using the spirit of inquiry for clarification. In regards to appropriate staffing, we must ensure that the learner's needs are matched with the faculty's expertise especially in regards to dissertation and scholarly projects. It is also imperative that as Deans and Associate Deans that we evaluate faculty workload and make appropriate adjustments when needed."^{13(p.12)}

Table 1. Responses to Question 1

Question 1: In what ways, if any, have I exhibited to you any of these qualities as an authentic leader in cocreating with you that healthy workplace environment?

- You approach situations with a clear and open mind, with a keen sense of purpose and compassion along with a well-developed insight into both individual and group behavior. You are a sum of all your experiences, and you bring your wisdom and confidence. I truly appreciate your ability to frame situations with a keen sense of understanding the individual as well as the group dynamics. I find you to be thoughtful and respectful, and a leader who leads by use of self.
- With role modeling, you can be tough, but still respectful and aware of people's emotions. You have demonstrated many examples of leading with heart.
- You don't hold grudges, you are calm, never raise your voice, and that is the role modeling expectation you set for the rest of us.
- I believe that you epitomize and embody the definition by George. Without a doubt, both your verbal as well as action behaviors demonstrate the essence of the definition as well as the 5 qualities to a T. You are amazingly generous with your time, efforts, and "gifts," and give of yourself to others, sometimes to your own detriment (we worry about you burning the candle at both ends). You go out of your way to make sure that those who work with you are appreciated and recognized for their hard work and contributions (going way beyond on recommending for awards, upgrades, raises, etc). At the same time, you do not hesitate to confront those who are not doing their jobs—which is refreshing and appreciated. You always respond promptly, and quickly take action when needed, which is sincerely appreciated. You are very transparent, which is also much appreciated—you do not seem to have hidden agendas. You have the utmost of integrity, and clearly love and have immense passion for the nursing profession.
- Every encounter I have had with you since I began as faculty at GSN has been full of warmth, connection, and my sense that I had your full attention...I have felt your keen interest in my words and feelings about a matter. Your commitment to your faculty and staff's overall well-being as members of families, circles of friends, and communities is notable, and your own rich personal and family life is a reflection of the way you live your values and beliefs. Your deep commitment to the work of nursing and your support of the enduring values of our profession are evident in all your encounters with us at the GSN. You value the clinical expertise of your faculty as well as the other dimensions of our professional roles as you elicit the "stories" we love to tell about our work with patients and students, our dedication to professional organizations, and our scholarship. I love how you bring all of these perspectives to your role as an influential leader at UMMS and to your national presence in the nursing profession.
- I find your leadership style to be very spiritual and authentically guided from the heart. You spend time building connected relationships with all members of the department, both as professionals and as people. Your leadership is values-based, and you demonstrate meaning and purpose in your own work, as well as support each of us in realizing meaning and purpose in our own work.
- You consistently show your concern for the well-being of each employee; this support is palpable and feels genuine. You are able to find a "common ground" with others that establishes and helps solidify a connected relationship. You lead with heart—following through with directives that align with your values and purpose, you show intentional kindness, you are full of encouragement, you recognize the positive contributions of others, and you role model positivity in all kinds of circumstances. You encourage "healthy" breaks during the workday, encourage others to relax and interact with each other during the workday, and support flexibility in how people approach their work—being nonjudgmental and accepting of the diverse approaches others may choose.

GSN, Graduate School of Nursing; UMMS, UMASS Medical School.

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SOLICITING FEEDBACK AS AN AUTHENTIC LEADER

Goffee and Jones in their 2005 seminal article in *Harvard Business Review* contend that a leader cannot define him or herself as an authentic leader. That authenticity is a quality that others must attribute to the leader.¹⁴ They state, "No leader can look in a mirror and say, 'I

am authentic.' A person cannot be authentic on his or her own. Authenticity is largely defined by what other people see in you..."^{14(p.85)}

Given this premise, it was important to elicit feedback to 2 questions that I posed about my authentic leadership style to the employed faculty and staff that are within my sphere of influence

Table 1. Responses to Question 1 (Continued)

Question 1: In what ways, if any, have I exhibited to you any of these qualities as an authentic leader in cocreating with you that healthy workplace environment?

- Joan's first order of business as a new dean was to meet with each one of us—to listen to us individually, ask about our feelings and concerns, our goals and aspirations. Then, in the months following, she continued to acclimate to her new home, learning and listening, and gently making changes. Slowly, but firmly, the leader asserted herself into the role without drama or strife. The transition was seamless. Our environment has become more unified in purpose, and all voices are heard and respected. Sensitive, empathic, but firm when needed—Joan is an authentic leader who came into an environment where there had been a longstanding and well-loved leader, and with deference, gentleness, thoughtfulness, transitioned into the role, and in so doing transformed the environment to one of cohesion and respect. Another aspect of an authentic leader is recognizing talent and strengths in those you lead and empowering them to develop those gifts and to challenge themselves. Joan does this every day with the faculty and staff in the GSN. To do this, a leader must not feel threatened by others but instead inspired by the possible opportunities that others will have and recognize that, in itself, is a benefit to the leader and to the group. Joan embodies this in every way.
- I am referring to your optimism, resilience, confidence, and strong moral values. Your behavior and these qualities/characteristics set the expectations for a positive and productive work environment and most importantly a culture of excellence and inclusivity. As a new faculty, I have appreciated this. I consistently observe “leading with heart” in your day-to-day leadership practices. This is evidenced by your great passion for our profession, your great desire to “give back” by serving and mentoring the students and faculty with compassion and empathy. One of my favorite editorials that was written by Karlene Kerfoot many years ago in *Nursing Economics* states that the leader must be in love with those that they lead. I feel you exemplify this respect and deep care for those that you lead.
In turn, all of these leadership qualities contribute to your ability to make connecting relationships. Relationship building is a direct outgrowth of the time and energy that you put forth in those leadership characteristics that I have described above.
- You truly exhibit behaviors of an authentic leader. To begin, authentic leadership is all about relationships. You not only echo those words, but continually demonstrate through your actions what it is to be an authentic leader. You listen openly and encourage feedback while creating and maintaining a healthy work environment, allowing faculty the freedom to make decisions. Your behavior/demeanor towards others is in line with your personal values, standards, and principles, and you have made it easy for faculty to connect with you and others on a personal level, always valuing the input of others (both positive and negative). Finally, you routinely celebrate the success of others while creating an environment that focuses on a common vision.
- You have called on a number of occasions for our time together (as faculty) to be spent examining and discussing *our* purpose and defining our vision and mission. Time is precious, and not all may see these discussions as time well spent, but your commitment to raising consensus on these basic areas demonstrates to me strong leadership. You also spend time connecting to both students and faculty. So many times you've asked about my life outside of the GSN (ie, my family, the holidays, etc), and I know that you ask from a place of genuine care and concern. This helps to create the wonderful, familial feel that we share as faculty of the GSN, where we are more than just colleagues.
- You have demonstrated these qualities when dealing with adversity, you demonstrated authentic leadership by practicing self-discipline (avoid the emotional part of thinking—why is this happening on my watch) and instead gathered data to support your position and operating from a position of calm, confidence, and strength.
- In your time as dean in the GSN, you have been consistent in your approach of being a perfect blend of not only relating to the “humanness” of each faculty, but rationally identifying goals to move our school forward. I have been thoroughly impressed by your ability to maintain focus of the school while also meeting the needs of all of the various programs. Finally, in your time in the GSN, you have proven without a doubt that you are there to support us each individually and as a whole.

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Table 2. Responses to Question 2

Question 2: Is there more than I can do to be that authentic leader to cocreate a healthy workplace environment as your dean?

- You excel as an authentic leader, I just have 2 cautions: many nursing deans are perceived as “pushy broads” predominantly by their colleagues from other disciplines. I only caution you to be aware of that. Experience from the service sector is extremely valuable and real in terms of the outcomes of jobs in academia. The 2 positions and cultures, however, are very different, and we all continue to learn every day in whichever role we occupy.
- I only wish that you could be everywhere all the time as I am always enriched and nourished by your presence at the GSN. I am always encouraged to look differently at a situation and to rethink approaches based on your ideas and insights while honoring my own judgment. I do try to emulate the way you are so fully present when you interact with us, and in that way, I try to carry your example of leadership every day. I look forward to our ongoing work together for many years to come.
- Continue efforts to create a nonjudgmental atmosphere of inquiry among the faculty. Continue efforts to help everyone recognize that everyone has different strengths and that this diversity is what makes us a strong group. Continue efforts to advocate for nursing on this heavily dominated medical campus. Improve the lighting in the large GSN conference room.
- I think you are a master leader, as Benner would describe. You are an advocate for the GSN throughout the UMMS, the hospital system, and the state. These are areas that you are currently addressing and that need your leadership:
- Continue to invite feedback from others...while articulating your ideas without hidden agendas.
- Cocreating a healthy work environment is so important for recruitment and retention of faculty. I would specifically recommend that you keep doing what you are doing. Specifically, your role modeling and mentoring faculty so that we all continue to build positive connections and relationships with each other and our students.
- As you guide us as dean, just continue to refocus the faculty on the important issues and our joint vision...especially when we get sidetracked with minor, irritating issues that pale in comparison to the big picture.

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and with whom I have frequent contact. Twenty-four individuals consisting of faculty and staff were asked to participate in this survey. Participants were provided with 2 definitions, one from the academic literature (Avolio et al¹) and the other from the popular literature (George⁴).

Questions included:

1. In what way/s if any, have I exhibited to you any of these qualities as an authentic nursing leader in cocreating with you that healthy workplace environment?
2. Is there more that I can do to be that authentic leader to co-create a healthy workplace environment as your dean?

I received responses from the all of the associate deans and some of the faculty; unfortunately no staff members responded, but that is not unusual because many believe that the faculty should respond, especially because this was solicited over a weekend. All were informed that confidentiality could not be maintained via e-mail and that verbatim responses would be shared. Of the 24, 12 of the 16 faculty members sent me e-mails directly for a response rate of 75% from the faculty. The verbatim responses for both questions are contained in [Table 1](#) and [Table 2](#).

REFLECTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The responses from both questions provided me with validation of my authentic leadership style and, equally important, provided me with a road map for improvement. Some of the faculty responses reflected the characteristics espoused from both the academic and popular literature. Because Goffee and Jones¹⁴ contend that authenticity is determined by how others see you, it was certainly reassuring as a dean that I am being perceived as such by the majority of the employed faculty.

Exposure of self is always difficult and yet necessary for authentic leadership. I learned a lot from the responses and was heartened. For those who did not respond, I may have to find another forum in which their willingness to disclose will be better suited. Responses that I did receive to the second question were very helpful and will help guide my actions in the future.

Setting up a peer review system is a high priority, and this initial step has led me to begin work on instituting an anonymous 360° feedback in time for my performance review. In addition, I have introduced the authentic leader standards to my leadership team as a platform for change.

In my new role as dean, contact with patients and

families is less than when I was in the acute care setting environment. My responsibility to influence students and faculty who do provide direct patient care is still a priority, and my indirect influence has value. Therefore, it is imperative that their environment is one that promotes psychological, emotional, and physical health so they are largely satisfied with their learning environment and feel motivated and encouraged to provide holistic and humanistic patient care. Authentic leadership can be a true catalyst for an enriching, rewarding, and most importantly, healthy workplace environment.

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