

Leadership for the future: Authenticity

Podcast transcript

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Transcript

The dictionary definition describes authenticity as 'of undisputed origin' not a copy, or genuine. And as such, as people, we are each unique.

Within the Leadership Survey Scoping Study, the term authentic as a leadership quality, emerged from themes arising in relation to trustworthiness, transparency, candour and honesty.

My name is Sarah Hubbard and I'm a Senior Consultant in Leadership, Organisational Development and Research at Advance HE and within this frame of reference, is a personal exploration of authenticity.

Authenticity has always been an important in human interactions and relationships, as it allows us to connect with others on a deeper level and build trust which manifests a deep level of fulfilment with the experience of being seen and heard.

More recently it has perhaps emerged as a counter cultural response to the idealised version of image and lifestyle presented on social media or to the increase in experience of disconnection and isolation as work and life and community has evolved and become more dispersed, and specifically in the context of leadership, it is identified as contributing to higher levels of trust and positive work cultures.

For HE specifically, it is related to the concepts of belonging, inclusion and participation within our staff and student communities, enhancing trust and respect centred around the quality of the relationship.

Authenticity is often framed for our students, as enabling and empowering them to bring their 'whole selves'. In doing so our students are more likely to feel connected and engaged, express and explore opinions and ideas, think creatively and outside the box, leading to improved performance and high retention. And those same characteristics can equally be true and relevant to our colleagues. Perhaps most critically in relation to leadership, those colleagues that are intentional in their authenticity, are most likely to use their power in a responsible and ethical manner for a number of important reasons, not least that the very intention of authenticity requires us to be aware of our own values, beliefs, and biases and our own impact on others. This kind of reflective practice is likely to build empathy and compassion towards others, and as a consequence, we're more likely to be perceived as trustworthy and reliable, relatable, fair and just.

Being authentic does not necessarily mean that we behave in the same way in all situations or that we reveal every aspect of ourselves to everyone we interact with. It is a complex and nuanced, subjective experience that's dependent on various internal and external factors

from mood, social pressure, personal values or in response to different stimuli. It is therefore dynamic and may change over time.

It generally involves a sense of alignment between our own internal experiences like our thoughts or feelings and our external expressions like our actions and behaviours.

It is often characterised by a sense of inner peace and the experience of it will be different for different people.

For me, it feels emergent and different at different times. I can feel aligned, non-judgmental, connected and potent and I'm really aware of what's mine and what's yours. I am curious, open and there is clarity, sometimes only glimpses, but it's there none the less. When it emerges in a bigger group it can feel different again. That there is more diversity of thought and experience to hold and account for, there feels more at stake, a greater opportunity and that's balanced against a higher level of risk – the odds are higher.

It has felt different in different roles. As a leader of a team, I shared my thoughts and feelings in an honest and genuine way within the boundaries of my role and responsibilities, and that looked differently to the nature of honest and genuine expression in carrying out a different part of my role, working in partnership with other leaders, exploring opportunities to improve colleague experience.

It has also felt different in different working contexts. Some working environments I have experienced, my authentic self simply wasn't invited in, others, I did not feel sufficiently protected to share my experience, the risk of rejection was too high and there wasn't a real desire within the culture to do things differently, and what has often impacted is the lack of visibility of those with more power, those assigned leadership roles, not doing it either.

So it doesn't mean that I am consistent in my behaviour at all times. I'm not one-dimensional – I'm multifaceted. It means embracing the full range of who I am, my strengths and weaknesses, my passions and interests, and my unique personality and quirks. It is about being true to myself, in all of my complexity and multidimensionality and expressing myself in a way that feels genuine, honest, and true to my values.

Being authentic is an ongoing process of self-discovery and it's something that we are likely to continue to work on throughout our lives. It requires self-awareness, introspection, and a willingness to embrace our true selves – including our shadows. It needs time and space to think about what we truly value in life, exploring our different social masks, understanding our stories and significantly, cultivating supportive relationships where perhaps we feel more able to be vulnerable and can explore different ways of being, expressing our emotions and standing up for our beliefs if these aren't things that haven't felt possible or easy to do in the past.

It is also about building our self-awareness for example, practising mindfulness and paying attention to thoughts, feelings, and behaviours, being curious around the patterns that emerge and when, and at its heart, cultivating a sense of openness to ourselves and the world around us as it emerges.

There is something paradoxical to even exploring authenticity as a quality to espouse, as it is being true to ourselves rather conforming to external expectations or pressures. So for me, to try and be authentic is missing the point because I'm still focused on meeting some external standard or goal.

It is about my integrity unpinning this conscious effort, and intentionality with a focus on the here and now. And it is not a singular journey but a shared pursuit. It is a collective endeavour as it is in part relational, and about what happens and what is experienced between us.

To raise awareness between us around the different permissions we need to release those self-limiting beliefs, to have permission to not be perfect, to get things wrong, to sometimes be quiet and sometimes have a lot to say, to think and feel differently to colleagues around us and for that to be ok. And for us to take these kind of risks, there need to be the right kind of conditions in place, the protection that there aren't going to be harmful consequences for doing so.

And for these conditions to emerge, there has to be vulnerability so it becomes like a dance.

To enable and grow psychological safety, the space created needs to be one of openness and curiosity, empathy and understanding, where we can ask questions,

express differing opinions, and share our perspectives without fear of being ostracized or criticised, judged or dismissed.

And it is our role as leaders is to take the first step, to be vulnerable and authentic, transparent about our own experiences and feelings, and invite and create opportunities for members to do the same, actively listening, asking open ended questions and encouraging dialogue, proactively seeking out and valuing different perspectives, recognising and celebrating the unique strengths and abilities of every member.

And absolutely critical to these kind, compassionate and supportive spaces are clear boundaries and shared expectations around confidentiality, respect, and non-judgment. And saying these things at the start and then forgetting about them isn't enough. They need to be visibly respected and upheld to enable and build and reinforce trust and trustworthiness.

Enabling these conditions fosters and inspires a culture of authenticity and vulnerability. That leads to deeper connections, trust and a sense of shared purpose and meaning, ultimately freeing us to do the work that is required.

So what does authenticity mean to you?

What opportunity does it present for you and your team?

What step would you like to take?



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