

LIVING AND LEARNING: AUTHENTIC LEADERSHIP

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Leadership can be observed and perceived in many ways. It can be exemplified and demonstrated in different capacities. However, leadership can always be found and developed within every individual. I have been lucky enough to work with some exemplary leaders throughout my life. This essay demonstrates the value I see in authentic leadership and how it impacted my life.

As an incoming college freshman, I found myself on a journey I was not entirely prepared for. I had come from a small town and was hoping to find my place in a big city, more specifically in a big university. My first week was full of vulnerability and loneliness. I was finding that college was not everything I hoped and dreamed it would be. I had the perfect imagery set before me of what my college experience would be like, who I was going to be, and the relationships I would have, but, my experience was far from this perfect image.

I wandered around campus the first week and had decided that I should at least try to cultivate a relationship with someone else at the university. I was tired of feeling alone and that I didn't have a place at such a large institution. I sat down by an individual and introduced myself, but they stood up and left the hallway. I walked away with less hope to fit in than I had started with a week prior. This event had the potential to crush my college experience. I could have easily dropped out, given up on

finding myself, or decided that I wasn't going to make any meaningful relationships. Honestly, that's probably what I wanted to do, but luckily, none of that happened.

College is an interesting place. It is full of unique individuals; some striving to develop relationships and sustainability within the university, and others striving to get a degree so they can make a few extra grand after college. These are obviously two extreme examples, and I was in between.

The fact is, college was never in my plan, nor was it in anyone's plan for me. I had expectations, a reputation, and plans set out for me, but none of those included college. But I decided for myself I wanted to become more, to gain a broader knowledge, to develop more relationships, and to be a college graduate. As a first-generation student, it wasn't easy, far from easy actually, but I was determined and had plenty of support on my side.

I had many individuals who helped me prepare for this journey of a lifetime. It's difficult to downplay the impact they had on me. Specifically, I was able to work alongside Dean Forrest Williams of UVU's University College. His ability to practice authentic leadership really helped me. As a junior at UVU, I felt unsure of my future—about my path after college. Dean Williams would go out of his way to help me. He always strived to make personal relationships with anyone he encountered. Because of his example, I find authenticity as the most essential leadership quality.

This characteristic is one I have seen demonstrated and have strived to develop and portray in my own life. Some define authentic leaders as "Conscious, Competent, Confident, and Congruent" (Fusco, 2015). They describe them as having various dimensions of managerial effectiveness, as positive in behavior and attitude, and more likely to achieve personal success at a faster rate. They gain more respect and commitment from others because they are authentic. Overall, authentic leaders are portrayed to be more effective and impactful (Copeland, 2016).

My definition of authentic leadership includes simpler qualities and characteristics. Authentic leaders develop concern for others, inspire others to get involved, and create personal relationships. They set an example and impact others in ways that last a lifetime. Because of my

definition, I find authenticity as the most essential leadership quality. Authenticity in leaders can be developed. It is not just an innate trait for a fortunate few. Seeking and achieving authenticity is possible through knowledge, will, and motivation.

According to one scholar, “Authentic leaders venture into an inward journey to digest their experiences, learning from their ascriptive, biographical, and societal life challenges to explore their values and beliefs” (Datta, 2015). Authentic leaders possess many qualities that influence others and exemplify great leadership; two of these qualities include genuineness and self-awareness. Being genuine is essential in gaining trust, building relationships, and accomplishing tasks with those we lead. It is important not only to develop the quality of genuineness, but always strive to be credible and humble in caring for others. It includes being open and directly reflecting the intention of the leader and the reason for acting in a certain way. As a leader has real intent in the positions they hold, it becomes contagious to others involved. Self-awareness is something everyone should strive to improve. When a leader has a strong knowledge of who they are, their purpose in an organization, and how they can better themselves, it makes for exemplary leadership. “Outstanding leaders go out of their way to boost the self-esteem of their personnel. If people believe in themselves, it’s amazing what they can accomplish” (Walton, as cited in Brandon, 2014). As people recognize the leader who is confident and optimistic, they will follow, look for positive qualities the leader possesses, and emulate the leader’s actions.

These are the types of leaders I have been able to build relationships with during my time at the university. I have become a different and better person because of my experiences and the leadership I have observed in my life. I have found my ability to do more than I could ever imagine alone. I have been strengthened, developed, and tried during this prime time of my life. Because of the exemplary authentic leaders in my life, I was able to become someone better during my time at the university. I found my potential to do more than I have ever planned. I started out lonely and vulnerable, but now I have a desire to help others through college because of my own past struggles. I have been involved with over 10 university organizations. I have found a purpose and felt needed within the big scheme

of college. I am a better person with capability to continually progress. I am forever grateful to those leaders in my life who impacted me. My hope is to be a more genuine, self-aware, and truly authentic leader, always working for the well-being of those whom I serve.

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