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On Authenticity and Leadership in Academe

Being true to ourselves is a barometer of well-being, but what if aspects of our true selves are counterproductive for us or our institution? Jacob A. Brown, C. K. Gunsalus, Nicholas C. Burbules and Thomas Byrne offer some answers.

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A common exhortation from today's leadership gurus in academia and popular media is to "be authentic" or your "true self" at work. But what does that mean? In the simplest terms, authenticity is seen as behaving in ways that are consistent with internal states, traits and beliefs—aligning our inner with our outer selves. Being

authentic is associated with positive outcomes for leaders, such as increased follower commitment and well-being. So we should just be ourselves, right?

As it turns out, being authentic is more complex than it may initially seem. Yes, being true to ourselves is an important barometer for well-being, and suppressing our true selves can result in other issues, such as feeling separated from our work or organization. But what if your true self is comfortable with oversharing, or with focusing on personal needs over those of others, or with telling it like it is in ways that are perceived as abrasive by others? What if aspects of your authentic self are counterproductive for your goals or go against the grain of your organization's culture?

In our academic leadership programs at the National Center for Principled Leadership and Research Ethics, we work with new and experienced leaders to recognize that leadership roles come with accompanying expectations for being and doing, regardless of one's personality. In many situations, it is not good enough to say, "This is just who I am," because serving and maintaining a leadership role comes with its own imperatives, including effective interpersonal communication, prioritizing organizational purpose and more.

As a result, it is important to recognize that authenticity is less about enacting a true self and more about the balance between recognizing who we are and acknowledging that accepting a leadership role carries with it obligations to the responsibilities and mission of the role. We need an account of authenticity that explores this complexity more explicitly in higher education leadership.

Authenticity and Values at Work

Scholars have explored the notion of the "true self" in connection with various concepts, such as feeling specific emotions (e.g., "I feel angry and so I behave

angrily") or enacting specific identities (e.g., "I am a Muslim, so I try to behave in ways consistent with this identity").

Another fruitful way to think about how people try to enact their true self is by linking it to values. Values represent ideals and beliefs that guide thinking and behavior. Researchers have articulated various kinds of values, some of which are considered universal across cultures and range from treating others in our in-group well, to gaining personal influence (power), to the desire to guide one's behavior and decisions (self-direction).

However, the challenge here is that values manifest themselves when they are enacted in terms of distinct behaviors, which may or may not be deemed appropriate for a given context. Looking out for your friends and family members, for example, may appear to others to be giving preferential treatment to those in your inner circle—personal values aside, an effective leader can't exhibit bias or favoritism. Similarly, enacting the value of self-direction might look like crafting your work schedule in ways that work best for your own needs, but it may appear to others to be prioritizing those needs over those of the organization.

Some of the most difficult leadership problems center on conflicting values. For example, suppose that the values of justice and order come into conflict: What if you argued unsuccessfully with the administration against a new policy affecting your unit in ways you found unjust (say, a new budget model or curriculum change), and you are now expected to implement the new policy? Must you now follow the policy or quit? Or suppose you value both loyalty and honesty: What if a longtime colleague asks you to go along with an action you feel isn't justified, such as including them as an author on a project?

Learning to reconcile your work behavior with your values is key to your well-being as a leader at your college or university. It also requires considering how your behavior interacts with the needs of colleagues, those to whom you report and the organization

as a whole. And if you come to feel that your values really don't belong in your workplace, or if they come into conflict too often, it may help you see that it's time to move to a position that offers a better fit.

Authenticity in Roles and Rules

While we argue that it is crucial to learn to behave in ways consistent with our values and beliefs, the workplace is also driven by other features, such as roles (e.g., in leadership) and rules (e.g., in regulations).

Effective leaders are often expected to fulfill specific roles. As we have argued, fulfilling those roles while also being true to personal values can get tricky, because assuming a leadership role—department head or chair, dean, director of graduate studies—may carry specific expectations for behavior that may be challenging to navigate.

For instance, you may want to begin your first faculty meeting with self-deprecating remarks, such as, "I'm not sure I'm the right person for this job." For those in underrepresented groups, that may undermine your perceived legitimacy in the role. Or perhaps you have an acerbic or sarcastic sense of humor—"I know we're *thrilled* to be here for this 8 a.m. meeting"—which might be seen by some people as inappropriate. Or maybe you hold specific opinions or beliefs that go against the norms of the organization in, say, religious membership or political party affiliation, which you may feel you shouldn't talk about.

Furthermore, organizations are governed by rules and regulations that shape how members and leaders must perform their roles. Regulations are intended to provide order in organizations and to shape how work is done. When embedded within organizations governed by such rules, individuals and leaders may feel limited in their ability to be true to the personal values and beliefs most important to them—they may

even feel forced to go against those values and beliefs, which can produce a strong sense of cognitive dissonance and discomfort.

So, what are college and university leaders to do? Is it possible to shape the way leaders approach their work to align with all three of these sources—personal values, positional roles and institutional rules? To help you determine how to balance those three in your specific situation, we provide some guidelines below.

Be clear about what your values, role and rules are (and aren't).

- What are your core values? Can you see any drawbacks or challenges with enacting these values in your leadership role?

- Which values mean the most to you, and which are less central to who you are? Which ones are you willing to push into the background and which ones not?

- What are the tasks, responsibilities and ways of acting that your leadership position requires? Which are most vital to the job, and which are less vital? Who are the stakeholders you are accountable to, and what are their expectations for your job performance?

- What regulations set the conditions for your work? Are they formally written down, in bylaws or statutes, or are they implicit norms people tend to follow? In short, which are discretionary and which are not?

Consider the consequences of your actions.

- What will happen if I suppress a certain value that's important to me over time? Can I find ways to be true to this aspect of myself without violating others' expectations of me?

- Will I be able to perform my role effectively without being the truest version of who I am? What might my followers, colleagues and superiors miss without this?

- Which rules can I or others transgress or bend, and which do I have to follow exactly? Do I have networks of people who can help me understand and navigate these rules as they apply in practice?

Envision whom you want to become.

- Which values in your current behavior do you find most inspiring, admirable or attractive? Which are relevant to your personal and private life but not necessarily to your professional role? Which values do you admire that you don't currently enact, that you can work on to make you a better leader and a better person?

- When have you felt your best as a leader? What might the future version of you excel at? What specific situations or problems might you be distinctly able to address?

- Which rules do you consider most helpful in getting work done? Which are the biggest hindrances?

As individuals and leaders, we confront a variety of competing values and demands, and our workplaces can sometimes constrain our ability to do and be our best. There is a way forward: an awareness of what is most important to us, as well as the demands of our roles and the rules that govern our work, can provide an opportunity to help us become the leaders and people we aspire to be. No one is fixed or static; we change and are changed by the process of serving in a leadership role—and hopefully this change is, on the whole, for the better. Building on a foundation of values will help institutions and their leaders develop not only an awareness of what is important to them but also an ability to exercise integrity in an increasingly complex, and often conflicted, environment.

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