Developing towards an authentic leader

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"We all have the capacity to inspire and empower others. But we must first be willing to devote ourselves to our personal growth and development as leaders" (George, Sims, McLean, & Mayer, 2007). This is a statement I have certainly taken to heart and is significant and pivotal to my journey of developing towards an authentic leader. In this paper I will articulate my personal and professional values and beliefs regarding authentic leadership, and then consider how I can put these into practice in an early childhood setting.

In reflecting upon the characteristics of servant leadership, how they are evident in practice, and how they can be developed further, I have drawn upon the thoughts and insights provided by Smith (2005), as inspired by the work of Robert Greenleaf (as cited in Smith, 2005). Smith (2005) listed the following characteristics as identified by other theorists within Greenleaf's writings: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualisation, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people and building community. I will focus on listening, empathy and foresight characteristics of servant leadership.

I personally believe that listening is a crucial skill to possess and continually develop as an authentic leader. It is through active, intent listening that I will be able to gain insight into any situation and the opinions and input of others. I myself highly value being listened to, regardless of the circumstances, therefore I take being a good listener very seriously. I admit that one can sometimes react impulsively before taking the time to listen, but as a servant leader within an early childhood setting I will endeavour to be a skilled listener to the teachers in my team, ensuring they feel acknowledged and respected.

As for empathy, I summarise it as followers feeling truly accepted and valued. Polychroniou (2009) describes empathy as the "ability to understand the feelings transmitted through verbal and nonverbal messages, to provide emotional support to people when needed, and to understand the links between others' emotions and behaviour" (p.345).

For me personally, empathy was a big part of my Christian upbringing, and an aspect I wish to instil in my own children today. I believe that empathy is vital to any relationship, even the leader-follower one, since it brings about mutual care and respect for fellow man. Within the early childhood milieu, I see myself as being a caring, compassionate leader who understands and supports my teachers in both positive and challenging situations. As a Christian I believe that besides professional development on this matter, praying for more empathy towards others will enrich me as servant leader to my teaching team.

Finally, foresight, according to Greenleaf (as cited in Smith, 2005), is the ability to anticipate when a certain situation is going to occur, and knowing how to deal with it based on the outcomes of previous experiences. Bracken (2008) adds that foresight is an essential leadership skill for coping with the instabilities within any organisation and having the ability to see opportunities within uncertainties and channelling them into positive outcomes. He believes that this skill can be acquired and enhanced best through training courses that use case studies as source of instruction.

I believe that foresight is an important leadership skill to have in order to deal with the unpredictability of situations. In practice, I would aspire towards being a leader within the early childhood context who will stay focused in challenging circumstances; by tapping into previous experience gained from earlier related situations, and current trends within the profession.

In terms of authentic spiritual leaders, I think they will know and understand their own holistic make-up. Spiritual leaders will be all-rounded and balanced, making sure that they lead with integrity upon their beliefs and values. They will also recognise these elements in their followers, and value and encourage the other person as a whole, with all their beliefs and values they bring to the team. Towards a definition of spiritual leadership I favour Fry's (2003) interpretation that it encompasses "the values, attitudes, and behaviors" that the leader needs to display in order to inherently inspire themselves as well as their followers to achieve the highest "sense of spiritual survival through calling and membership" (p.711). According to Fry (2003), calling refers to the sense that you are making a difference to the world and people around you through your work, and membership is the need that each person has to belong and contribute to a social group. Spiritual leadership ultimately involves addressing the holistic make-up of a person – body, mind, heart and spirit, as suggested by Fry (2003), in order to ensure the overall happiness of leader and follower and their ensuing commitment to the organisation.

I can translate these ideas around spiritual leadership into actions in an early childhood setting, in a number of ways. Thompson (2012) implores spiritual leaders to continually do self-assessment to gauge the current direction and effectiveness of their leadership practices. I would undertake to do this on a regular basis, in order to determine if I am still true to my personal values and beliefs in the way that I lead and display personal morals and professional honesty and ethics. I would also articulate the cause that I stand for, for example *Leading children to Jesus*, should I become the team leader of the Christian centre I currently work for. Subsequently, my actions will have to match my words – my followers will need to see that I believe in what I say and put it into action or I will lose their trust and loyalty (Kouzes & Posner, 2007). A few more spiritual leadership traits that I will translate into actions, as suggested by Thompson (2012), are: having good communication skills; showing the ability to collaborate effectively with teachers, children and their families, and the wider community; being empathetic; and showing my loyalty to the vision and goals of the centre through my actions.

The authentic emotional leader will have the emotional intelligence of knowing how to recognise and manage their own emotions, and to be able to filter these emotions as being an element to key decision-making. This leader also has the emotional maturity and intelligence to recognise emotional behaviours in their followers, and is able to manage/direct those emotions in a professional manner. Most importantly, dealing with the emotions of others, the emotional leader will always be ready to listen, and after considering all parties' perspectives, make wise decisions. George (2000) describes emotional intelligence as "the ability to understand and manage moods and emotions in the self and others" (p.1027). Goleman (2000) identified four categories of emotional intelligence, and it is not surprising that *self-awareness* and *self-management* are listed first, and *social awareness* and *relationship management* as ensuing. The next step in developing towards emotional intelligence is social awareness and relationship management, both describing the authentic leader's ability to recognise their followers' emotions and to manage them to bring about positive outcomes in any situation (Christie, 2016).

I strongly believe that emotional intelligence is a key component of authentic leadership, since that leader will be able to utilise her own and others' emotions towards effective decision-making for the organisation. In an early childhood setting I would strive towards emotional maturity for the sake of myself, the teaching team and the centre I would represent. I would be an empathetic listener to teachers whenever their emotions seem to impact negatively upon the rest of the team and the children, and talk them through some strategies to redirect their emotions into positive feelings that would benefit others – strategies such as taking a break for a few minutes, or having a change of scenery such as working inside instead of outside for the rest of the day. I also regard accepting my shortcomings and faults as part and parcel of emotional intelligence.

On the moral and ethical aspects of authentic leadership, and the difference between the two, Brown and Treviño (2006) define ethical leadership as "the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships; and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making" (pp.595-596). They further attest that for a leader to

be considered as ethical by their followers, the leadership traits they exemplify has to be worthy of their followers' respect and loyalty. The ethical leader will take strong ethical stances on issues such as human rights, child safety, respect for diversity and so forth, in such a way that would be expected by society (Gardiner & Tenuto, 2015). I am convinced that there is an undeniable link between ethical leadership and authenticity, and for me the two are inseparable. Being true to yourself as a leader, is an ethical responsibility, in my opinion. Brown and Treviño (2006) likens ethical leadership to authentic leadership, since they share traits such as concern for others, ethical decision-making, integrity and positive role modelling.

Moral leadership can be seen as the overarching leadership model of authentic, spiritual and transformational leadership styles (Brown & Treviño, 2006). Brown and Treviño (2006) propose that all these leadership styles correlate with moral leadership in that the leader leads from the heart, based on their personal values and beliefs, and how genuinely these principals are translated into actions. Starratt (2004) proposes that "the more authentic one is, the more moral will the whole tenor of one's life be in all its many daily activities" (p.75). Thus, leading with integrity is equal to moral leadership.

As for the difference between ethics and morality, as shown in *Ethics vs Morality: Philosophical Distinctions* (2015), ethics refers to the principles pertaining to right/wrong and good/bad, as established by an outside group such as society, a culture or a profession. Whereas morality refers to a person's own personal sense and perceptions of right/wrong and good/bad *not* imposed by anyone else. Essentially, it is all about acting true to one's own convictions, in accordance with what society would expect of one's behaviour.

When it comes to translating the concepts of moral and ethical leadership into practice in an early childhood setting, I would make myself very aware of current ethical issues in early childhood education, such as child safety and human rights, in order to be able to make informed ethical decisions if anything relating to these issues emerge from within the context I'm leader of. As for being moral, I will continually ensure that I am convinced of my personal beliefs and values around leadership within the early childhood context and how my leadership displays integrity towards these beliefs and values and my identity. By staying morally true to myself and acting accordingly, I would hope to inspire the same aspirations in the teachers in my team.

Finally, I reflect upon the attributes and principles of Māori leadership, comparing and contrasting these to authentic leadership within the bicultural context of Aotearoa/New Zealand. Graham (2011) uses the Māori metaphor of a person being "a sheltering rata tree" or a "tall tōtara tree standing tall in the forest" (p.252) to describe the essence of Māori leadership – a leader who cares about others, who stands tall, who weathers storms and whose followers can depend upon. Matthews (2011) adds that Māori leadership is substantially informed and constructed by cultural concepts such as "mana (status), tapu (protected, sacred), manaakitanga (hospitality, kindness), tikanga (custom, rule) and aroha (love, concern)" (p.2). Matthews (2011) further comments that these cultural concepts greatly influence how we act and interact with people and our environment as a leader, which strongly correlates with Starratt's (2004) notion that authentic leadership is highly dependent upon external influences such as upbringing and culture, and that our actions as authentic leaders will undoubtedly impact on others.

Another significant principle of Māori leadership, is that it aims to "work across cultures and nationalities without compromising their own values" (Katene, 2010, p.9). Katene describes Māori leadership as being the crucial link between the traditional Māori context and contemporary European-style expectations of leadership. Graham (2011) adds how Māori leadership has advanced hugely from the traditional to the contemporary, whilst staying true to the essence of the Māori culture and values. This idea is reiterated by Hohepa's (2013) statement that these indigenous leaders do not give up their heritage and identity once they have taken up leadership roles. This again compares to authenticity in that the authentic leader stays true to their identity; knowing, valuing and portraying their authentic self without compromise (George et al., 2007).

The next attribute of Māori leadership that parallels authentic leadership, is that it is both transformational and inspirational – being focused on achieving a predetermined goal for the organisation, having high expectations of their followers' potential, and being morally and ethically sound (Katene, 2010). Kouzes and Posner (2007)

claims that this kind of inspirational leadership earns the leader credibility, which in turn plays an important role in their authenticity construction. Another quality of a leader that leads to credibility and ultimately authenticity, according to Kouzes and Posner, is the ability to look ahead to the future of the organisation and its followers. This is an attribute that Wikitera (2011) claims to be central to Māori leadership, claiming that it earnestly considers "the future generations that follow them" (p.3).

All these principles and attributes of Māori leadership greatly appealed to me personally. I strongly believe in the concepts of cultural influences and how they inform our leadership practices; transformational and inspirational leadership; shared leadership; and being a servant to others. In practice, as a leader within the early childhood context of Aotearoa/New Zealand, I will always value and stay true to my Christian, South African upbringing and cultural make-up whilst respecting and honouring the bicultural significance of this country I now call *home*. My ideal would be being the kind of leader that can transform the way my followers behave and collaborate within the organisation and inspire them to reach their fullest potential as leaders in their own right.

Conclusion

I have articulated my beliefs and values concerning servant leadership, spiritual leadership, emotional leadership, moral and ethical leadership, and Māori leadership concepts, and have considered how I can put these concepts into practice in future leadership opportunities within an early childhood context.

In closing, when considering the characteristics of the authentic leader that George et al. (2007) suggest, I believe that in conjunction with the above-mentioned leadership concepts, I can indeed grow towards being a leader that knows myself, leads with intelligence and integrity, and uses my "leadership gifts to serve others" (p.130).

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