My authentic journey in leadership

Nicolette Mackwood
Postgraduate Diploma in Education, New Zealand Tertiary College

In this paper, I explore my personal values and beliefs about authentic leadership, as I relate them to foundational leadership concepts and approaches. I make connections to how these values can be incorporated into my practice to enhance my authenticity as a leader.

Leadership is a reciprocal process. Pedagogical leadership encourages collaboration between teachers, which in turn strengthens the community of learners (Lee, 2010). The ultimate purpose of a leader is to create a healthy working environment where good relationships are developed, as the group works together for better outcomes for the organisation and its individual members (Smith, 2005). An authentic leader can establish a healthy working environment through effective communication. Communication and questioning are suggested by Gardner and Anderson (2015) as strategies to building trust and sharing among members. Lee (2010), George, (2000) and Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee (2002) suggest emotionally intelligent leaders encourage co-operation and trust, to foster quality interpersonal relationships and motivate leaders in their followers.

Katene's (2010) perspective of empowering people, focuses on vision through effective guidance. When you do things yourself, you are not necessarily empowering others. One has to give trust to gain trust and give responsibility and trust to others to motive them to take responsibility. For leaders to promote responsibility, first they must have responsibility so they can be responsible (Tamati, Hond-Flavell, Korewha, & whānau of Te Kōpae Piripono, 2008). Recently I took on the responsibility of mentoring a student teacher on her five-week field practice. The centre manager trusted me with this responsibility which made me feel confident in accepting the challenge. My input was recognised by the lecturer, my manager and the student. All acknowledged appreciation of my input.

Smith (2005) emphasised supporting others to do their best is central to leadership. Greenleaf (1996) outlined four aspects vital to authenticity; service to others; holistic approach to work; promoting a sense of community; and sharing power in decision making. For a leader to be authentic and earn the respect of those following them, the leader needs to be willing to serve others (Smith, 2005). The four responsibilities outlined by Tamati et al. (2008), lend themselves to authentic leadership as they help clarify the leader's 'position' as a mandate to serve others. To serve others is to share one's knowledge and passion, to influence, support and motivate others, which in turn increases morale and has an immense impact on the organisation's success (Smith, 2005). My motivation to serve others, being dedicated to helping, mentoring and supporting other teachers by sharing my passion, has led me on this journey to become an authentic leader.

I became a teacher for reasons of the heart, animated by a passion for teaching young children in quality learning environments. From the outset, I saw my involvement in early childhood education (ECE) as an educator, whereas many colleagues at the time saw their function as child carers, not educators. This sowed the seed for me to become the best teacher I could be. My intent is to be the best teacher I can be and to motivate others to follow my example with passion and a true empathy for the children, whanau and ECE. Many years of experience and regular on-going professional learning opportunities continue to drive my passion for quality teaching and leading in ECE. My passion for teaching ECE has developed into a deeper passion for sharing my knowledge and experience to teach the teachers who teach the children.

Kouzes and Posner (2007) suggest authentic leaders enrich trusting and respectful collaboration among a community of learners working towards shared visions/goals, motivating and inspiring others to excel and become leaders themselves. Smith (2005) supports this and recognises a servant leader views everyone as

having the potential to be a leader. Through demonstrating a passion for the profession, I hope to inspire, motivate and empower constituents to, in turn, become leaders themselves.

George, Sims, McLean and Mayer, (2007) suggests to lead with integrity and authenticity, leaders should be committed to personal growth and professional development of both themselves and others as potential leaders. Dweck's (2006) work recognises everyone has the potential to transform their life, recognising their future is in their own hands. My commitment to teaching, leading and providing quality ECE is evident in my 16 years' experience and my motivation to gain qualifications in the field. To extend my personal, as well as professional growth, I have recently completed a tikanga Māori course to extend my understanding, knowledge and competence of te ao Māori. George, Sims, McLean and Mayer (2007) suggest when we devote ourselves to personal growth and development as leaders, we can then inspire and empower others. Working environments are influenced by the values, beliefs and behaviours of the leader. Therefore, it is vital leaders develop their skills by frequently evaluating themselves to improve their personal development.

Self-awareness is vital for self-improvement and the collective improvement of the community/environment (Wood, 2004). Goleman, et al. (2002) define self-awareness as having a deep understanding of one's values and motives, as well as one's strengths, limitations and emotions. Knowing yourself, accepting and being true to your identity, enables you to become a more authentic leader, as your practice is bound to be consistent with your values and goals. Furthermore, when you are true to yourself, you can teach and lead who you are. This is where authenticity begins at one's core (Evans, 2000).

An authentic leader is one who recognises, empowers and supports others to grow personally and professionally. Cloud (2013) suggests collaborative professional learning is key to building strong, rich communities of teachers where everyone's contribution is valued. Motivating and inspiring others to attend regular professional development opportunities to gain another perspective is valuable. Recently, I facilitated a large self-review on gun and weapon play. Throughout this review, I encouraged individual team members to share their stories, experiences and identities. We shared stories from when we were children, our upbringing, things we had witnessed, or been a part of, to build a foundation/basis for improvement. Everyone's voice was valued, as we collated our views and worked together to form effective strategies for this play that sat well with individual beliefs and also the values of the team. Smith (2005) says with a desire to serve others, leaders can build on relationships which promote a holistic approach to work together in decision making, thus building a strong sense of community.

Knowledge of one's self is necessary in becoming a successful leader (Notman, 2010). Evans (2000) suggests authenticity is about knowing and growing your identity, as authenticity is not a fixed destination, it is an ongoing journey. Identity is what people know of themselves, including their personal values and beliefs. Integrity is how people behave, according to their values and beliefs (Palmer, 1997).

Through reflection, we learn to know and better ourselves. Starratt (2004) agrees leaders should constantly reflect and refine their authentic self through interrelationships with others. Reflection has enabled me to develop an understanding of who I am, my identity and my integrity, to truly understand my practice, my heart and my intuition. Every individual has their own story where their values, beliefs and expectations transpire. In order to truly know ourselves, we must first recognise and accept our individual childhood experiences.

Buckingham (2007) emphasises the value of a leader aware of their strengths, talents, skills and knowledge. My strengths are reflected in my consistent practice and performance as a positive role model, a quality teacher who teaches from the heart with passion, and a desire to serve others to inspire them to become the best they can be.

Authenticity is not only about knowing your strengths, it is about recognising your difficulties in order to develop them into strengths (Buckingham, 2007). I have realised there are some significant barriers I must overcome to enable me to achieve my goals of being the best leader I can be. I feel I need to focus on improving my communication and relationships with adults. At times I can feel nervous and doubtful when collaborating with

adults – standing in front of them, teaching and articulating my practice, sharing my values experiences and opinions. This communication and confidence challenge can be a barrier when dealing with courageous conversations and testing situations among adults. At times, I hold back from expressing what I feel, or truly believe, out of fear of rejection, debate, insult, or conflict. While aware I have the ability, it is simply a case of being comfortable and confident in taking the lead.

A lateral perspective has enabled me to develop alternative approaches to tackle such issues; for example, a shared reflection, a reading review to support my beliefs/opinions, or as we undertook recently, a collaborative review of the centre's philosophy.

The philosophy review proved to be an effective opportunity to educate the group and emphasise on the centre's values and beliefs. An incident occurred recently where teachers' actions did not reflect the centre's values. I wanted to challenge the teachers, question them about their actions and encourage them to reflect on their practice. However, I felt uneasy about this, allowing my emotions to get in the way, while worrying about not knowing how they would respond. Upon reflection, it was my emotions and mindset which created the barrier (Dweck, 2006, as cited in Lee, 2010). A mindset of wanting to discuss the teachers' actions, to motivate them to reflect on the situation and explore alternative approaches would have been more effective.

Notman (2010) suggests difficult conversations are key in the collaboration process as, in a team with a culture of trust and respect, debate should be healthy, positive and informative. I am on a journey to be confident in approaching challenging discussions, debates and conducting courageous conversations.

Honesty, trust and respect are vital ingredients of becoming an authentic leader, however they are also effective strategies for gaining membership in a community (Kouzes & Posner, 2007). In a recent staff meeting, I opened up and shared my challenges and goals with the team. I told them how I want to work on my confidence and articulation when communicating professionally with adults. Being open and honest with the team, has enabled me to gain the confidence to 'give it a go', to try to approach situations as they arise, with a planned approach. The team now has a better understanding of me and my challenges.

Leaders who are true to their identity and integrity resonate honesty and openness through their leadership practices, thus gaining trust, respect and loyalty from constituents (Wood, 2004). A poignant example of this is when a colleague went out of her way to express her thanks for my honesty and openness when I admitted having shortfalls and being human. In doing so, I gained added credibility as I was prepared to drop my guard and share my short-comings. While we can all better ourselves, we should not lose sight of humility.

Notman (2010) concurs, recognising personal development includes knowledge of one's self, of one's values and belief systems, engaging in critical self-reflection and building a personal resiliency. Palmer (1997) identifies the importance of not only knowing, but also embracing and being at peace with, and accepting, your identity and integrity. I have made a conscious effort to actively approach testing situations and deal with them effectively.

Kurth (2003 as cited in Fry, 2003) suggests spiritual practices are key in the continual quest for personal and professional development and effectiveness to know oneself, respect and honour the beliefs of others while being as trusting as you can. Authentic leaders who know themselves, their identity and integrity, can better come to know their constituents and teach them at the deepest level (Palmer, 1997). Marotz and Lawson (2007) also emphasise the importance of leaders investing time to know their constituents and their individual strengths, capabilities, limitations, work ethics, needs, identities and backgrounds, to authentically lead, communicate, motivate, inspire and support them.

How can we incorporate opportunities to discuss our inner selves, for such deep, honest discussion to occur, among a team of teachers in a centre environment, without fear of judgement and ridicule? Palmer (1997) suggests creating safe spaces and trusting relationships where we can open up and tell truths about our joys and struggles as teachers in ways which "befriend the soul and give it room to grow" (p.16). Fry (2003)

suggests leaders should have self-awareness and be in touch with their core values to communicate them to their followers, through vision and personal actions. Reviewing our philosophy collaboratively, sharing individual beliefs, values and opinions to make decisions collaboratively is an example of how to promote a safe space and trusting relationships within the team.

Lee (2010) recognises values reflected by authentic leaders as being true to one's self, sharing the magic of the moment, having a sense of moral purpose, articulating practice, having vision, sharing/distributing leadership and merriment. Lee (2010) suggests the four M's as attributes needed to build communities where people are encouraged by shared spirit, passion and effort, to be the best they can be. Magic is connecting with constituents and building relationships to form a strong community. Being Moral is being ethical, honest and having integrity. Merriment is being happy, enthusiastic and therefore motivating. Mobilising is motivating others for a shared purpose, demonstrating a passion for the purpose and inspiring constituents to follow (Lee, 2010).

Shared vision, decision making and promoting responsibility enables mutual respect, loyalty and confidence to occur (Kouzes & Posner, 2007). I experienced a situation which has caused me, and in turn the team, to reflect on our practice. To this end, we revised our philosophy, to better support our tamariki and better teach our parents. Lee (2010) expresses pedagogical leaders have the ability to articulate their practice and discuss underlying theoretical ideas surrounding their teaching.

A prominent ability of a leader is to lead the group toward a shared vision/purpose (Mead, 2006). An interesting benefit of this collaborative experience was the strengthening of our relationships as team members. We experienced a uniting effect. As a role model, mentor and leader, I was challenged as I worked to encourage the teachers to reflect on their individual practices and explore alternative perspectives to improve our overall practices. The team worked closely, collaborating, discussing and debating their values and beliefs, to develop a philosophy to enable teachers to teach who they are. All values and beliefs were respected, and contributed to developing a shared vision for the community. This example demonstrates leading the group toward a shared vision/purpose, improves its economic base and mana.

Evans (2000) defines integrity as consistency between your values, goals and actions. Admired leader characteristics, as recognised by Kouzes and Posner (2007) are honesty to reflect their values and ethics, being forward-looking with vision, being inspiring by communicating that vision and being competent with relevant experience, sound judgement, a good track record and a true ability. These characteristics, with intellect, foster credibility which is the foundation of leadership (Kouzes & Posner, 2007).

Through my studies, my horizons are broadening. The manager at my current centre wants to share my knowledge collaboratively with a vision of establishing a professional development facility in conjunction with the centre, with me at the helm. I can envisage a greater picture, whereby, rather than operating from a single centre, I could adopt a regional role where I visit all centres, to reach more constituents, with a view to raise the standard of ECE regionally. This has potential to broaden the scope to tailor the development required by individual centres. This concept could be expanded on a national basis with a number of suitably motivated, passionate, experienced leaders, working regionally, reporting to central authority.

A conclusion I have reached is authentic leadership is about knowing and being true to yourself so you can teach from the heart. Gardner and Anderson (2015) suggest to be an authentic leader who creates sustainability in the learning organisation, one must first know them self and have a clear vision of what they want to achieve. Leaders can work to share their vision with participants.

My goal is to teach teachers, to share my experience and knowledge, and in turn provide better learning opportunities and outcomes for children in Aotearoa/New Zealand, thus serving others. By teaching the teachers, I plan to spread my passion, knowledge, experiences, beliefs, visions and values expedientially. As my father used to say "from the smallest seed, the mighty kauri grows".

Manifest in my philosophy, I have come to the conclusion it is not so much teaching children, it is teaching the teachers. As George (2000) concurs model the way, inspire the vision, challenge the process, enable others to act and encourage the heart.

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