

AUTHENTIC EMERGING LEADERSHIP

By Justin Molocznik

"Leaders aren't born; they're made." While Vince Lombardi's famous quote inspires many, its simplicity can overlook the complex environments where leadership is shaped. Are leaders molded by family, education, life experience or the workplace?

Organizations often appoint an individual into a leadership role after they have proven their technical savvy or loyalty, while sometimes it is as simple as who has been there the longest (Banker, 2023). Yet, nowhere in this mix of experience and conditions are individuals actually trained to successfully lead people, and traits commonly associated with leadership do not always guarantee success. What are the organizational goals in setting the precedent of expecting leadership without giving new leaders the tools to be successful?

Throughout my career, I have observed various leadership styles. This includes some of the most amazing and dynamic leaders as well as others who struggled and could have benefited from self-reflection. Many years ago, through this experience and a great deal of personal reflection and study, I set my goals and expectations for the type of leader I wanted to become. While these were, and continue to be, goals I aspire to and persistently work on exhibiting, they serve as a place I can revisit when I am faced with a challenging situation or individual. The cornerstone of my leadership style is to uphold transparent communication, provide thoughtful mentorship and evoke a psychologically safe work environment (Molocznik, 2022a,b).

In some organizations, leadership can be prescriptive, which eliminates one's ability to explore and create a personalized and authentic leadership style. In industries such as construction and technology, there are great aspirations to diversify leadership, but promoting and encouraging a specific type of leader can often alienate those who do not align with that archetype (Saleem et al., 2022). Of those archetypes, arguably one of the most concerning are individuals who carry bad traits into leadership, either learned in the workplace or elsewhere. A toxic work environment tends to breed toxic leadership, and when workers see others being appointed to leadership positions for bad behaviors, they may be more inclined to follow suit. In high-stress fields, I

have often witnessed uncoached leaders respond poorly to challenges, expressing frustration and blame rather than fostering solutions. Authentic leaders create environments where people feel safe to raise issues, make mistakes and be themselves.

So, this is an advocacy for authentic leadership and the skills that should be developed in emerging leaders to become authentic leaders. But what does it mean to be an authentic leader? Authentic leadership can be defined as:

Individuals who have high standards of integrity, take responsibility for their actions, and make decisions based on principle rather than short-term success. They use their inner compasses to guide their daily actions, which enables them to earn the trust of their employees, peers and shareholders—creating approachable work environments and boosting team performance. (Gavin, 2019)

When reflecting on what an authentic leader means to me, I often think of individuals who demonstrate self-awareness, ethical behavior, transparency, and accountability and show balanced processing in their decision-making. As an emerging leader seeking authenticity, a great place to start is understanding yourself and your driving motivation to lead and interact with people. This is critical, because if you do not know what you bring to the team, you cannot identify how you can and should show up in your interactions with those you have been charged to lead.

I am a huge proponent for developing and building on strengths, as opposed to solely focusing on weaknesses. I would recommend Gallup's CliftonStrengths assessment to get a better understanding of your intrinsic leadership style. Additionally, explore other assessments to pair with your findings.

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Authentic leadership is not a by-product of tenure or technical expertise, but a conscious commitment to self-awareness, ethical behavior and the creation of psychologically safe environments. Organizations must move beyond prescriptive models and invest in the development and support of leaders who are equipped to foster trust, transparency and genuine connection. By prioritizing integrity, responsibility and principled decision-making, emerging leaders are empowered to inspire their teams and drive meaningful, lasting change. Ultimately, the journey to authentic leadership begins with understanding oneself and courageously embracing the continuous growth that comes from self-reflection and learning, to ensure that leadership is not just a title, but a daily practice that benefits individuals and organizations alike. **PSJ**

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