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COLUMN EDITOR'S NOTE

Leadership skills are essential to creating libraries that are effective and relevant in their communities. While some individuals seem to possess inherent leadership capabilities, it is possible to develop and strengthen skills to effectively lead a department, unit, or organization. This column explores ways for librarians and library workers to improve their knowledge and abilities as they lead their units, libraries, communities, and the library profession. Interested authors are invited to submit articles for this column to the editor at schlak@rmu.edu.

Communication in a Crisis and the Importance of Authenticity and Transparency

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ABSTRACT

Communication is at the heart of leadership and management. It is how we set expectations, provide feedback, and ensure that the work of the organizations we lead is in alignment with larger institutional or organizational priorities. Communication works at high levels through annual reports and goal setting, but it is also the backbone of day-to-day teamwork and conversation. During a crisis, particularly a prolonged one such as the COVID-19 pandemic, any breakdowns in communication will be magnified. When we are under stress, we tend to be more reactive than we would likely be during calmer times. Clear, calm, and regular communication is needed to assure staff that the boat will stay afloat in the storm. Transparency and authenticity are key to effective communication. Authentic leadership embodies the empathy, transparency, and focus on the long term that are needed to endure the uncertainty of a global health and economic crisis. This article explores aspects of authentic leadership as they relate to employee engagement and trust.

Authentic leadership

George and Sims (2007) identify "five dimensions of authentic leaders:

- Pursuing purpose with passion
- Practicing solid values
- Leading with heart

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- Establishing connected relationships
- Demonstrating self-discipline" (p. 205).

Kruse (2013) similarly characterizes authentic leaders as follows: (1) self-aware and genuine, (2) mission driven and results oriented, (3) empathetic and vulnerable, and (4) focused on the long term. As we consider the implications for leading during a global crisis, leading with authenticity has several positive outcomes. As authentic leaders show empathy, their care and concern for employees becomes a clear priority. Authentic leaders acknowledge employees' fears about the unknowns related to the pandemic, support negotiation of work-life balance, address and ease transitions from onsite to remote work, and all of the other changes that have come with life during a pandemic. In authentic leadership relationships, both leaders and employees show up with their whole beings and recognize when they need to manage emotions around uncertainty, stress, and feelings of isolation that come with remote work and social distancing requirements.

Authentic leaders during a crisis are able to stay focused on the long term results and on values and mission as beacons in the storm. One decision I made last year that was related to a focus on the long term was to continue our annual goal setting process with modifications. Rather than including one stretch goal, I let my staff know that I recognized that just continuing good performance and progress on a small number of goals (2–3, rather than the typical 3–5 I request) was in and of itself a stretch. While a stretch goal typically takes a person beyond their comfort zone and offers a learning opportunity, I recognized that much of our work during the pandemic was outside our comfort zone and that we would be constantly learning new things in order to adapt to

new needs and circumstances. Focusing on a small number of goals keeps us looking and moving forward at a time when it is easy to get bogged down in the day to day management of constant change and uncertainty.

Avolio and Gardner 2005) emphasize that leadership is relational and is as much tied to the behavior of followers as that of leaders. "Authentic leaders foster the development of authenticity in followers. In turn, followers' authenticity contributes to their well-being and the attainment of sustainable and veritable performance" (p. 317). The authors use the phrase "relational transparency" to indicate "the open and transparent manner whereby authentic leaders and followers are posited to share information with each other" (p. 317). They describe authentic leaders as always in development and engaged in "processes whereby leaders and followers gain self-awareness and establish open, transparent, trusting and genuine relationships" (p. 322). The authors emphasize follower development as a key component of authentic leadership development, and one that includes the leader's ability to "heighten the self-awareness and shape the self-regulatory processes of followers" (p. 326). Relational transparency and trust between leaders and followers is a key component of authentic leadership.

Transparency

Crumpton (2011) articulates the need for transparency in leadership during difficult financial times and argues that "to maintain … trust, leaders must be transparent in

how information gathering and decisions are made" (p. 126). His advice for leading in times of financial difficulty is applicable to our current crisis that includes economic uncertainty as well as health and safety concerns. Crumpton says, "the first important issue that drives transparent behavior is communication and helping people get the facts straight in the beginning and without emotional uncertainty" (p. 126). What is particularly challenging during the pandemic is that the facts keep changing. Still, I would argue that transparency in the known facts at a given time is important, otherwise speculation takes over and assessments rather than facts will begin to spread in the organization. Crumpton advocates for trust-building transparency in saying that "library leaders might not agree with some of the tough decisions that need to be made, and having their own informed opinion is okay, as long as it is not hidden from view" (p. 127).

How decisions are made in an organization is always of great importance. Walumbwa and et al. (2011) link authentic leadership to transparency in information sharing and input into decision making. They emphasize that in the modern working world of today, "organizations in the knowledge economy require leaders who promote pos tive relationships through disclosures, including openness in terms of information sha ng, accountability, and honesty, and leaders who objectively analyze relevant information and solicit views from others−including those they lead−before making decisions" (p. 111). At the departmental level, one way to enhance employee engagement is to use participatory decision-making where it makes sense to do so. Especially during times of uncertainty, shared decision making can give employees a sense of control. It helps the team feel invested in the decisions, especially for services that they will carry out themselves. Each individual has a different and valuable perspective to bring and often one individual will spot a potential pitfall or opportunity that the rest of the team would have missed. As Walumbwa et al. (2011) explain, "when leaders share information openly, they provide their followers with opportunities to develop collective intuition, expand their knowledge, learn from each other, and acquire new skills" (p. 113). For e, including others in the day to day decision making was vital to our ability to shift quick y as needs and situations changed. Regular communication ensured that we could keep each other informed about what we knew and what we needed to react to or be prepared for. This shared decision making has been vital to team cohesion and engagement.

Transparency has been linked in the business and communication literature with trust and employee engagement. Jiang and Luo (2018) examined the link between employee trust and authentic leadership and transparent communication within the organization. Walumbwa et al. (2011) further articulate the connection between employee engagement and transparency and authentic leadership through a connection of the employee's personal values and the vision and mission of the organization (p. 113). "Knowledge workers are independent thinkers who perform with almost no supervision, value their job for the fulfillment they receive, and enjoy being rewarded for ideas they generate" (p. 113). By being able to see an alignment between their personal values with the organization's mission and vision, knowledge workers can truly feel they are part of the organization. Employees in this kind of work environment are not cogs in the wheels, but fully invested individuals with a sense of agency and purpose.

Men and Stacks (2014) and Jiang and Luo (2018) emphasize the importance and influence of the supervisor in the relationships among authentic leadership, transparency, communication, trust, and employee engagement. Men & Stacks showed that "when employees are supervised by authentic leaders, they are more likely to perceive the organization's communication as symmetrical and transparent" (p. 317). The authors draw on prior research that has drawn a connection between authentic leadership and symmetrical communication because both emphasize ethical behavior. Similarly, Jiang and Luo (2018) argue that an authentic leader's core values and actions are primarily conveyed through transparent communication (p. 152). It is through effective communication that a leader demonstrates their authenticity.

Communicating during times of uncertainty

In terms of the content of communication, it is important to relay what is known during times of uncertainty. This may be information passed down from the larger organization, or it may be information gathered through listservs, trade publications (Chronicle of Higher Education, etc.) or news sources. It is also important to recognize and name what is not known.

As an example, because I regularly receive the Chronicle of Higher Education news feed, I am able to share information with my staff about what is happening with COVID-19 at campuses on a national level. This serves to place our university in a broader context. Likewise, my engagement with our statewide academic library consortium (VIVA) provides me with information about what is happening on campuses and in libraries around Virginia. Selectively sharing information that I learn at these meetings as well as through listservs and professional trade publications has helped to ground what we are doing within our library and on our campus in a larger context. Reductions in staffing and budget have happened at many universities and in many academic libraries and by sharing that information, it provides a context for what is happening on the local level.

Selective sharing of information is in part designed to help manage information overload for staff. I do not share every article I read, but I do share those that provide a perspective that I think is especially useful or perhaps one that has been absent from our conversations thus far. When we pivoted to teleworking, I shared a few articles about working from home, but was careful not to bombard the staff with this type of advice, which was in abundance at the time. As information professionals, we are well aware of the dangers of information overload. I also paid attention to what kinds of information seemed to be resonating with my team.

Some staff experience more discomfort with ambiguity than others. Some cannot manage too much information at once and some cannot seem to get enough. It's a fine balance and it is important to understand the individuals on your team so that you know who will have a desperate need to know and who would be overwhelmed by too much information. There are inexpensive assessment tools that can help with this (e.g. Rath, 2007, Budner, 1962).

Naming what is not known is also important and helps convey authenticity. There have been many times during the pandemic when I did not have information about

things I would normally have at a given time of the year (for example, we typically receive a full academic year calendar by August) and there were new factors that contributed to delayed information, such as waiting for the university's COVID-19 plan to be approved by the state before it was shared broadly in the organization. This put us in the position of having to make decisions and plans without having all the information available that we would like to have. It also meant that, in some cases, we made decisions and then later had to change them, or were informed later that a particular decision was not in fact within our purview after all. Decisions were often made quickly and we had to be ready to react to those that had a direct impact on our services.

When I did not have information, I was open with my staff about that. This authenticity also fostered trust within the team. While they certainly wished I had the information, they trusted that I would share information when I had it and was permitted to do so. In an effort to provide support for the academic program and also to gain as much relevant information as soon as possible, I volunteered to serve on an ad hoc faculty committee that made recommendations to the administration regarding the academic calendar, the use of academic space, and the scheduling of classes. This group became an invaluable resource during the pandemic planning and my involvement gave the library a preview of what was being discussed. Because I was involved in the conversations about what the fall and spring semesters might look like and what support was needed, the library was able to make more informed decisions and offer targeted support. While the decisions were ultimately made by the administration and board, having the possible scenarios for spring semester on hand helped us be as prepared as we could be.

Communication structures that support transparency

Regular meetings are an important part of communication infrastructure. I hold a weekly team meeting with an open agenda, meaning anyone can contribute agenda items for discussion through the use of an agenda document accessible through our shared Google Drive. When we swiftly moved to remote work as a result of the emerging pandemic March 2020, I added a weekly check-in that was not agenda-driven, but instead was whatever we needed to discuss in the moment. I also hold a monthly meeting with each of my direct reports. I emphasize that this is their meeting. While I may have something we need to discuss (for example, a mid-way check-in on annual goals), the agenda is really for them to set. It's about what the individual needs, and an opportunity for them to ask for direction or support from me.

Shared documentation supports transparency, as in the above mentioned example of agenda documents, but also in policy and procedure documentation. My library maintains internal process procedures and documentation on our shared Google Drive. By ensuring that all staff have access to the procedures, we are in a better position to stay resilient through staffing changes. An added benefit of using Google Drive was that all documentation was accessible when we made the pivot to remote work.

One change I observed during our move to remote work was that staff began using Google Hangouts more regularly as a way to keep up casual conversations and we have kept this up as we have returned to the building. Sometimes these involve the whole

team, but there are also some one-on-one or smaller group conversations. These may be to share a bit of silliness and cheer or to vent about a technology issue with which someone has been wrestling. Although these conversations were happening in Hangouts some when we were together in the same building, in the pivot to remote work, they have helped to replace the casual conversation that occurs in the face-to-face work environment. Hangouts has also been a way to keep team comradery going now that the team is split with some remote and some working onsite.

Leading a virtual team comes with challenges, but as Walumbwa et al. (2011) argue, the qualities of authentic leaders carry through regardless of the work environment. "Virtually leading independent workers who are highly educated and skilled and who require little supervision, but who are still humans with the same emotions and needs as other workers, is a tremendous accomplishment" (p. 115). They stress the importance of trust and employee empowerment. "If leaders believe that every follower has the ability to make a positive contribution at work, by demonstrating this belief, either consciously or unconsciously, they will positively influence their followers' work engagement, motivation, and commitment to their organization, regardless of the physical location of employees" (p. 116).

Navigating the long pandemic

Avolio and Gardner (2005) describe the benefits of authentic leadership in a way that resonates with what is needed during   ongoing global crisis. "Authentic leadership can make a fundamental difference in organizations by helping people find meaning and connection at work through greater self-awareness; by restoring and building optimism, confidence and hope; by promoting transparent relationships and decision making that builds trust and commitment among followers; and by fostering inclusive structures and positive climates" (p. 331).

As we continue to navigate the pandemic after many months behind us and unknown months ahead, my focus has turned to helping my team build resilience. We now know that the spring semester will be a marathon, unlike the typical schedule that would include a few holidays and a spring break when we typically have fewer meetings and appointments with students. Inspired by the "planned pause" (https://www.wm.edu/offices/hr/currentemployees/wellness/) approach taken by William & Mary that allows each department to slow down for a certain period of time, we intentionally used the time between semesters to recharge, renew, reflect, and build resilience to help us stay strong through the spring. As a team, we decided what would work best for us and what was most important and doable during this period of time. We adjusted the hours the building is open so that we can find time to focus and to provide time when the team can come together without interruption. We began practicing mindfulness together through a 5–10 minute daily meditation, and have been trying to carry that practice forward into the semester. We are learning together through shared experiences and discussions, and we even scheduled some fun together in an intentional way. My hope is that with an intentional restorative period we will be more resilient and less susceptible to burnout.

Throughout the pandemic, I have focused on asking about how team members are feeling and have emphasized the importance of self-care and wellbeing practices. I cannot begin to count the number of times I asked How is it going? How are you feeling or What do you need? I have focused on listening, sometimes without having any responsibility or ability to fix the problem. I cannot fix my team member's lousy internet connection when they are working from home or silence their distracting spouse or kids, but I can listen to them share what they are dealing with and I can show empathy.

I have spent considerable time thinking about the role of goal setting during a time of crisis, so much so that I developed a webinar on the topic. While some of my peers decided to take goal setting off the table this year, I decided to modify our process instead. I feel strongly that goal setting is needed during a time of crisis because without a focus on the future and the bigger picture, it is too easy to get mired in the details of every day problem solving and worries about the pandemic. By focusing on just 2–3 annual goals, my team is able to connect to our mission and vision, while leaving room for dealing with the challenges of providing library services during a global health crisis. My hope is that each team member will emerge from the pandemic with a sense of accomplishment, not just survival.

Practicing gratitude

Part of my own focus as a leader during the pandemic has been an emphasis on expressing gratitude to my team members individually and to the team as a whole. Expressing a sincere appreciation for the work of the team goes a long way to helping team members feel valued, especially during a time when extraordinary things may be asked of them. Gostick and Elton (2020) emphasize the importance of "leading with gratitude" and provide a variety of ways this gratitude can be expressed and incorporated into a leader's practice in a way that supports authenticity. These practices include looking for small wins, tailoring gratitude to the individual and reinforcing core values. In addition, the authors suggest that leaders spend time in the day-to-day work of their employees. During the pandemic, this last suggestion has been necessary as I have had to fill in for team members to manage a gap in staffing either on a temporary or long term basis.

Gratitude flows both ways. As difficult as it has been to lead through this global crisis, I have been lifted up by the gratitude and loyalty my team members have shown toward me. At the end of our mindfulness sessions, team members regularly thank me for providing them the opportunity to take a few minutes out of their busy day to pause, breathe and focus on the present moment. By focusing on the present, we can manage our anxious thoughts about the future and the unknowns as we hope to safely navigate the rest of this unprecedented time.

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