

## **The Connection Between Leadership Philosophy and Leadership Presence**

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Throughout my first year in the Ed.D. in leadership program at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU), I have been exposed to many different leadership philosophies from academic scholars, professors, and fellow students. As a result, I continually reflect upon not only my leadership abilities but also my personal leadership philosophy. In one of the earliest papers that I completed during the program, I discussed how my leadership philosophy focused on working hard and treating people nicely and that “the full potential of an organization cannot be reached unless leaders are not only active members of their teams but also prioritize treating their employees with kindness and respect” (Caffrey, 2019). While this concept still remains to be the basic tenet of my leadership philosophy, with each passing semester I find myself looking at this philosophy through different lenses. *Leadership presence* is the current lens I am using to determine the most effective way to put my leadership philosophy into practice. In this brief paper I will state how my approach to leadership enables me to successfully connect my leadership philosophy to my *leadership presence* and how it guides my decision-making as a leader.

The development of my leadership philosophy dates back to my upbringing and early employment experiences. My parents both worked full-time when I was growing up in order to afford the private high school that my brother and I attended. They believed equally in the value of hard work and education. I was also raised Roman Catholic and the lesson of this religion that made the greatest impact on me was “do unto others as you would have them do to you” (Luke 6:31, New International Version). This religious influence combined with the influence of my parents’ emphasis on hard work helped shape my leadership philosophy of working hard and always treating people kindly.

The biggest impression that strong leaders at prior places of employment made on me was their willingness to show accountability, empathy, and humility. Consequently, I gravitated towards utilizing an *authentic leadership* approach towards leadership which involves expressing self-awareness, an internalized moral perspective, balanced processing of information, and relational transparency in order to foster positive self-development and create strong relationships with followers (Walumba et. al., 2008). In order to effectively put a leadership philosophy into practice, however, leaders must develop a strong and sustainable *leadership presence*.

I believe *leadership presence* is the manner and style in which a leader is able to convey their values, beliefs, and vision and put their leadership philosophy into action. Hedges (2017) explained how our beliefs shape the aspects of our *leadership presence* from our body language to our actions. Therefore, she stressed the importance of being intentional with words and actions. I try to be intentional with my own *leadership presence* by showing respect towards other individuals even when there are disagreements. I accomplish this through positive body language such as smiling and nodding, and through verbal actions such as acknowledgment of differing opinions (“I understand your position...”) before sharing my own. By maintaining this friendly and respectful *leadership presence*, I hope to maintain a healthy level of respect amongst individuals working towards a common goal.

Dr. Shirley Davis (2018) explained that people do not leave bad bosses, they leave bad jobs. I have had several jobs that were very challenging and often frustrating, but supportive supervisors kept me engaged in the work and empowered me to believe that I was up to the challenge. These supervisors were also humble enough to admit that they did not know everything and that they were capable of making mistakes. This humility was part of their

*leadership presence* and illustrated to other employees that making mistakes was okay and part of the learning process. Therefore, part of the intentionality of my leadership is expressing the aspects of *authentic leadership* such as the humility to admit when I do not know something, have made a mistake, or need assistance from others. I have found that admitting mistakes to others enables leaders to be vulnerable and serve as a positive example to others to not be afraid to admit mistakes and learn from them.

One of the most important aspects of my *leadership presence* that I wish to convey to others is that I sincerely care about the individuals that I work with. Last year when a new employee began in my unit, I took him and another colleague out to lunch during his first week. I also invited along the former person who held his position who had retired several months earlier. It was an enjoyable lunch that focused mostly on our personal lives as opposed to our professional lives. In reflection, I think this was a prime example of my *leadership presence*: I care about someone when they are an employee, but I also care about that person after they have left the organization.

With any leadership position comes inherent risks and challenges because a multitude of stakeholders rely on leaders to guide others towards a common goal. During the recent ESPN documentary, *The Last Dance*, basketball legend Michael Jordan discussed the challenges and risks that come with leadership. His leadership approach often came off as tyrannical, but in one of the series' most powerful moments, he echoed a statement that every leader must convey with their *leadership presence*: "You ask all my teammates, the one thing about Michael Jordan was he never asked me to do something that he didn't [expletive] do" (Tolin & Weinbach, 2020). I believe the connection between one's leadership philosophy and *leadership presence* is the ability to connect with others through not only our words, but more importantly our actions. If

we make the effort to connect with others, are intentional with our words, and display team-oriented actions and behaviors, we can improve our chances of inspiring others to believe in what we are trying to accomplish through our leadership philosophies.

*Leadership presence* is the key to connecting with others in order to put leadership philosophies into practice. Sharing one's leadership philosophy can be challenging because there will often be individuals that do not share similar ideals. Thus, the importance of a positive *leadership presence* cannot be understated because it is needed to reach compromises while working towards the same goal. In my experience, I have found that taking the time to make personal connections with other people will enable a productive relationship to flourish even if there may be disagreements along the way. While a leader can successfully utilize a positive *leadership presence* to prioritize personal connections and treating others with respect, a leader must also follow through and consider these values when making decisions that affect the unit and the organizations. As such, followers will sense a leader's authenticity by not only their words and actions, but also the professional decisions that they make. When followers trust their leaders to be sincere and authentic, I believe they are more likely to buy-in to a leader's philosophy and invest themselves in working towards the same shared purpose.

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