

Embracing Authenticity: The Power of Genuine Leadership with Dr. Drew Fockler

Shari Simpson: Joining me today is Dr. Drew Fockler a university professor specializing in HR and leadership studies. Known as a change champion,

Shari Simpson: he empowers students to lead with purpose and innovation. Beyond academics, Drew Fokler is a strong advocate for workplace diversity and is dedicated to preparing future leaders to make a positive impact.

Shari Simpson: Dr. Faulkner, thank you so much for sitting down with me today.

Dr. Drew Fockler: I love quality time. Let's do this.

Shari Simpson: So I am excited about our conversation because it's all around authenticity. And I'd love if you could kind of ground us on how you define authentic leadership.

Dr. Drew Fockler: Sure. So I'm going to actually go to the dark side of authentic leadership, first and foremost, because oftentimes we can, you know, spot a fake right away, right? Like, oh, you're not really being your true self. Oh, you know, I don't pick up what you're carrying here. So when I think of authentic leadership, I think of, well, what is not authentic leadership? So how people are not being their true self, or they're faking it till they're making it. But you could just be honest and be like, I don't know what's going on right now. And then that's where authentic leadership starts to come into play, is that you are owning the fact that you don't know everything. You don't realize that there's more to it than what it is. A lot of us think that we need to know everything. And if we don't know everything, then we are at a deficit. But we're not at a deficit because we have all of this ability to find different information. We have cell phones at our fingertips. We have people around us that have so much experience that if we're not utilizing it, then we're actually looking negatively in ourselves that we can't realize, hey, I don't know the answer, which to me is the first thing that I look at as an authentic leader is, are you comfortable with the unknown if you don't know what you don't know? And that's why I love authentic leadership is that it's really characterizing who are you as a person, and how are you extending that to the frontline? How are you extending that to the people that are surrounding you, not just yourself, not just your immediate circle, but beyond that, like your community? Because as we work in our roles and what have you, we're always attached to a community. And if we're not being authentic and the community catches on, then we also lose out on that opportunity in the future. Whether that be attracting new talent, whether that be working with the community support systems that are there as well. So it kind of has a little bit of a negative snowball effect if you are not being your authentic self when you are dealing with the situations.

Shari Simpson: I like that you started with the negative because as I think back through my own HR career, I remember in some of my first HR roles being asked, you know, questions from leadership and I would

give an answer even though I didn't know the answer because the idea of looking bad, quote unquote, was like more terrifying than saying something like, Hey, you know what? That's a really great question. I don't have the answer right now. Let me get back to you in, you know, 10, 15, whatever minutes. But as I've grown in my career, people respect that so much more.

Dr. Drew Fockler: Shari, I was just going to say 10 to 15 minutes, that's it. Like you're a rock star. If you could find an answer 10 to 15 minutes, because sometimes it takes me a day or two to get the answer. So right there, it's just showing authenticity right there. It's like, you know what, this is important to you. I'll make it important too. And then that's even another way of being authentic as a leader too. So right there, it's like. Hey, I need to find an answer. I don't know the answer. Be humble about it. And then what happens? You're learning, they're learning. And one of my favorite sayings is that when one person teaches, two people are learning.

Shari Simpson: Oh, I love that.

Dr. Drew Fockler: Right? So right there, it's like, hey, we're seeing how we can grow and foster a different group. And especially with how there's multiple generations in the workplace now, we are seeing different levels of what authentic looks like. And just to kind of tap onto something I was teaching my students last week, we were talking about integrity and how integrity 10 years ago might be a little bit different than what it looks like today for the different generations because of, you know, how we're dealing with TikTok, like social media and how we're seeing things. It's, you know, that humble nature that we're looking for. But a lot of the Gen Xs, the baby boomers, they need to feel like sometimes that they have the answer. And it's like, even just the generations, you can see it's like, I don't know the answer. I feel horrible. Meanwhile, the younger generations is like, you know what? Give me five minutes. You know, I'll give me a breather. Like, I feel like, are you one of the younger generations now? Just where you're like, give me five to 10 minutes. I'm like, Shari, I would need like two days.

Shari Simpson: I'm definitely not one of the younger generations. I fall squarely in Gen X. But the, you know, I'm, I'm technically, I think in that weird group that they call us Xennials, because we were like, You know, we were right on the cusp there, but no, my young adult sons keep me in the loop on the lingo and the things. What are some other qualities you're seeing as you define authentic leadership? So you talked a little bit about humility in the sense of being able to seek out answers and say you don't know everything. What are some other traits you're seeing?

Dr. Drew Fockler: Empathy is the one that rings my bell every time. I want to double tap every time somebody is working on their empathetic nature and being able to understand that we're still human. And I feel like post-pandemic, that's something that we're starting to really realize. You know, our workplace is not our only place in our life. And that empathy is like, hey, if you have children at home, if you have other problems, well, let's talk about it. Let's make this a

fostering environment where we're not feeling like, oh, I'm sorry, your issues are at the door, because you know what, another employer would be willing to listen. And that's the other catch, right, is that we are now in this environment where there are so many opportunities. And for employers, it's like, hey, you know what, leave your issues at the door. Well, you know what, my issues are going to follow me wherever they go. So can we actually take care of that in a way that it's going to make sure that everybody is taken care of in a true self? because I know like I went through an enormous amount of change this year of who I was and my dean, my colleagues, they were all super supportive because they understood that this is just a, you know, a little, well, I hope it's a little blip in the world. I do hope. But the reality is, is that everybody has those blips. So to realize that that is not true is not fair as well, right? And that's where I think I look at fairness as, are we being authentic and making sure that if we were in that position, are we being able to see how we would want to be treated? Not necessarily the golden rule, because I know some people have a very differing opinion of what the golden rule could look like. But when we're looking at how empathy can come into play, it's like, well, have you been asked, like, have I asked you how you wanted to be supported? Not how I think you should be supported, but how do you want to be supportive? And what can I do to make that happen? And then in doing that, you're actually giving that better environment of trust right there. It's like, I can trust that I'm going to get the support I need. And I think that's just very important as well.

Shari Simpson: How have you coached either leaders themselves and or HR professionals to help get those leaders that look at empathy like the warm and fuzzy? Because I think for so long it was kind of defined that way, like, oh, it's warm and fuzzy or, oh, let's send them to HR because they're the people people.

Dr. Drew Fockler: I don't know sometimes I could be a little bit dark in that area too. So I agree with you that when we are asking those questions and like what that HR is this like flowers and support and we're rainbows and unicorns but it's not that it's that we understand that the people power that comes in an organization the people are the ones that make the difference. So if as leaders when I'm coaching and supporting leaders or I'm even, I work with a lot of MBA students and they're working in higher tiered positions. It's how do you want to be known? How do you want to be recognized? Do you want to be known as somebody that is not supportive? Because that's going to be hard for you to sell yourself in marketing. Because I also teach relationship marketing and it's like, well, if you are known in your community as somebody that is difficult to work with, that is not supportive, nobody's going to want to work with you. Yeah. And that's another big reality is that there are so many opportunities in our society that, you know, we could leave one job, go to another, and it's going to be super easy to do that. So the transitions are there. And the reality is, is that if you're not providing that support and that authentic self, well, then somebody else is going to offer it for me. So it's

like moving on, move on to your next best thing.

Shari Simpson: Yeah. How have you, um, how have you seen the data play out with employers that are teaching and demonstrating authentic leadership from the perspective of things like employee engagement or ROI or, you know, bottom line, that kind of stuff?

Dr. Drew Fockler: So a lot of my research is actually on the LGBT community and how that kind of works and authentic leadership and what that nature looks like. So if I can speak to that lens, because my research is not more general, it's been a little bit more finite. And what we're seeing is that there's been a gradual shift on how we're actually looking at authentic leadership, because with individuals that might be transitioning genders, people who are identifying as queer or people who are identifying as, you know, nothing, like really, right? that the workplace was such a history of being such, I don't want to call it black and white, like I don't want that to be the nuance, but there's been a lot of this is what a workplace is supposed to look like. And now with the evolution of our society and how we're seeing things, we're now, you know, and using the lens of LGBT community, LGBTQIA, is that we're seeing that these individuals are now changing how we're looking at being a workplace. And then also too with the post-pandemic, well, you know, work from home, like remote working is another component too. So how are we creating an authentic leader when, you know, your people are not with you every day? So are you creating an environment where it's, you know, there's fluid conversations? There's, you know, your asynchronous emails. Well, I don't know. I feel like emails are more synchronous now than what they should be. But, you know, there's so many ways to have engagement with individuals. And it's like, how can we continue that? And how can we push the needle to a way where people feel comfortable just being themselves? And now we're creating that environment because we actually have all these people saying, I want to be my true self at work. So how do I extend that into the workplace as well? And it's usually by being themselves.

Shari Simpson: What do you say to, and I'm going to call it the younger generation for just a second.

Dr. Drew Fockler: What are we defining as younger generation?

Shari Simpson: Let's do Gen Z. Let's get that young. What do we say? And I am obsessed with Gen Z. I am like so thrilled that they're in the workforce. I think they're going to do phenomenal things.

Dr. Drew Fockler: They are going to change the workforce for sure.

Shari Simpson: That being said, I have noticed they bring an authenticity when they ask questions of leadership that I just hear and I'm like, feel cringe in my body for because it seems like, yes, it's authentic for them, but it maybe doesn't meet the business environment. How do we talk about authenticity and kindness and civility and bring it all together? Because they should be together. It shouldn't be separate things.

Dr. Drew Fockler: Well, and this is where each term that you're using, like humility, civility, civility, what was the third one you said? Humility, being civil, and what was the third one? Sorry, I missed it.

Kindness. Kindness is that it means different for everybody. And this is where, when we're working in a workplace environment, this is where, you know, the mission, vision, and values come into play as well. And oftentimes when I'm coaching and supporting individuals who are looking for work, my first question is, have you looked at the values of the company? Because those values are going to help determine, are you going to lead a healthy lifestyle in that workplace environment? I always tell individuals that vacation is my priority. Like I thrive on vacation. So it's like, hey, when's my next vacation? I already know when my next vacation is, and that's how I live. But I need to work with places that have that. where I can tap out and not have that need to be constantly connected. So it's now a matter of understanding what does kindness mean to you, but now how is the company orchestrating what kindness means to them? So most companies, and I would hope if you're listening to this and your company does not have values or a mission and vision, Maybe it's time to do that, right? I'm just going to throw that out there. But this is now where the values of the company can help target those individuals. And then this is where if there's a clash, well, where's the clash coming from? Is it because the leadership in the organization is not following their values? When I talk about employee reviews, one of my big things I talk about is, are you including values in your reviews? So if you are doing performance reviews, are you looking at your corporate values and saying, how are you integrating creativity? Creativity is something important in your organization. Well, how is creativity being utilized in your performance evaluation? And then in doing that, you're actually creating that authentic nature because those individuals are saying, hey, I did this to be creative. I am coloring outside the lines. Like this is my thing I say is that I like coloring outside the lines because let's try something different. If we're constantly doing the same thing over and over again, we're not gonna get a new result. So let's see what we can do to be a little bit different.

Shari Simpson: What are some of the misconceptions you've seen around authentic leadership?

Dr. Drew Fockler: I feel like people think it's cookie cutter. I really do. It's like, you're an authentic leader because you do A, B, C, and D. And I'm like, but what about E, F, and what about X, Y, and Z? And this is now where what's important to you might not be important to me. And that's not a bad thing. It's now saying that this is who your true self is and that you're utilizing that to show who you are. And that's what's important to me. I would rather you be your authentic self than trying to be a chameleon to what other people are looking at. And if you are being a chameleon, then when are you going to show yourself? You know, I always think of Frozen 2. I'm a Disney person. And, you know, she talks about show yourself, you know, you step into the light. And it's like, why are you wanting other people to determine who you are? when you are unique. There's only one of you in this world. So why are we not, you know, looking at that and saying, hey, let's see how you can, you know, shine. And then what

does that mean for the company? Well, that's that there's bonuses to that. If you're allowing somebody to shine, that means that they're doing what they love, their passion, they're energized. So now there's that excitement that comes to work, like I love going to work. And people are like, some of my friends are like, you're you're crazy. And I'm like, I am crazy. And that is why I'm authentic is because I am genuine that I love what I do. And it shows when I do that, at least I think it does. And my feedback is that too. So if you're being authentic, and you're being genuine, chances are people are going to, you know, feel connected to that. And if they don't, they're not your people. They're not the people that might be the ones to work with there. And that's why going back to like values and corporate values, understanding what would be important to you versus what's not important to other people.

Shari Simpson: You know, as I was preparing for our time today, I've been thinking about what areas of our organization, maybe not my organization specifically, but organizations in general, aren't being authentic. I had this fascinating conversation with somebody about women's leadership development programs. And she really challenged me to think about, well, why is that where we focus? Why is it that we focus on women needing X, Y, Z to be leaders? Shouldn't our narrative be different? Should our narrative possibly be men's leadership development programs to teach some of the things that are opposite of what women are learning? Sure. And it really pushed me to think about your definition of authenticity even inside an organization. What does that look like? I mean, how do you balance all that requirement and how authenticity shows up differently for different groups?

Dr. Drew Fockler: Great question. So I do an exercise actually with my students and we talk about funding. So I pretend and I give them the example of you're in talent development, so L&D, whatever you know what that is, and you're given a million dollars. What group are you going to sponsor? Like what group are you going to work with? Are you going to work with the people that are low performers, high performers? Are you going to target an audience? Tell me what that looks like. And my favorite answer I usually get from students is, I want those people who are wanting to invest in themselves to attend those sessions. So I don't want the manager to tap the person and be like, you should go for this training because maybe they're not ready for the training. Whatever that training is, again, we haven't talked about what the training is, but this is where we're saying, hey, if that person is showing excitement, energy, and they want to level themselves up, they want to try something different, then why are you restricting them to the confines of these groupings? And the other thing that's happened recently, so I do one-on-one work, and I actually had a heteronormative male come to me and say, you know, I'm actually struggling to find work. And he was a leader in his organization and he also identifies as a white male. And he's like, I struggle finding work because people are looking for visible minorities in their workplace. So now I'm looking at this with him and I'm like, we need to find an organization that wants you to be you. So

rather than, you know, oh, you're checking off these boxes, it's are they looking at the individual and not making the checkbox? Yeah, the checkbox might be, you know, a good component. But the reality is, is are we actually finding the right person for the job? Or are we like, I'm sorry, you do not have this criteria. So therefore, we're going to find somebody that does. Yes, you probably could. Well, you're now eliminating some top tier talent as a result. And that's why when you're saying to me, you know, how do we target these groups? Well, let them target themselves. So let them come forward and say, I'd like to go for training because then they're actually showing the initiative. And usually when we're showing initiative, then there's a little bit more of a higher success rate as well. So if they are saying, hey, I want to go for this, chances are, you know, if I was tapped by my manager being like, hey, you should go for this training. I'll be like, computer says no. Whereas if you are authentically wanting to do that training, you're probably going to be more receptive to doing it as an option for yourself.

Shari Simpson: Well, that's like when managers sit down and they look at their, you know, their high potential list and they're like, all right, these three people we're going to invest in this year. And inevitably one of those persons is like, yeah, I don't want to be a manager. I don't, I don't want to be, I just want to do my job really, really well. So if you want to help me do my job really, really well, that's great. But it's absolutely right. Like you have to know where they're at. All right. I want to stay on topic, but switch a little bit.

Dr. Drew Fockler: Follow the bouncy ball. Okay, I've got it.

Shari Simpson: Yes, yes. Okay, so still authenticity. Yeah. How does that play into things like crisis management or high stress situations?

Dr. Drew Fockler: It is what it is, right? Like they do happen, high crisis, you know, the holiday season is upon us, you know, like the December and making things work, Black Friday's coming up too. These are all high stressful situations. Well, this is now where your values need to align with that. So, you know, being your authentic self, even in crisis situations and being able to work with that. I've worked with many paramedics in my day, and they are constantly running to the issue when people are running away from the issue. So it's that mindset. It's that culture that they have instilled in themselves. So when we're looking at like that reality, it's making sure when you interview people or when you're working with people that they understand that, you know, it's a blip, as I called it earlier. Like I was very honest and forward that, you know, this year has been a big, crazy roller coaster ride for me this year. But the reality is too, is that I knew going in what it was gonna be like, and I knew coming that there is a finish line, there is light at the end of the tunnel. So it's now a matter of how are you as a leader supporting your people by asking them, what do you need from me? I don't want you to assume what I need. I want you to ask me plain and simple, what is it that I need? Maybe it's I need a day off. Maybe it is that you can win me over by a

chocolate bar or a candy bar or something. And this is now where you're starting to get to know your people and then knowing how to work with that people power to get over that hurdle that's happening in the society, in the organization in that context too. So I feel like oftentimes we presume what the other people need or what I would need in order to get through it, but that's not always going to be same and true for what the people who are in it needed as well.

Shari Simpson: Well, and we do this in our real lives, and I don't know why we don't necessarily always connect that to the workplace, you know, because I think about the difference between just my sister and I. Like, when we go through crisis, I am the, don't talk to me. I need 24 hours. I need to get my emotions together. Like, give me some space. She's the opposite. She'll be on the phone and she'll cry. and that works for her, it would not work for me. And we know that about each other. You typically know that about your friends, too. What are the things they need and don't need? So it's just pulling that into the workplace. I think we have the skills there. We just need to flex them more. As we kind of end our conversation, I think about the HR professional who's listening to this and they're like, yeah, I agree. I totally agree. Authentic leadership's important. What are the first steps they need to take in their organization to either, you know, get the C-suite on board and or introduce, you know, authentic leadership programs?

Dr. Drew Fockler: Well, I think first and foremost, you have a mission, vision and values. If you don't, that's where you're starting. And I promise you, when you start to do that, you're going to start to realize the next steps and stages, because through that evolution, you're going to see where there might be blind spots in your organization. The other thing is, is that everybody has a playbook. You know, we all know what's important to us and how we're working through it. And when we're dealing with authentic leadership, it's kind of like you have to showcase your playbook. So what's important to you? How are you showcasing that? And what does that look like so that other people can see it on the receiving end? And then by doing so and trying to do that selling feature to the leaders, the C-suite, it's now turning around and saying, hey, C-suite, you have values, don't you? And I'd hope they would nod furiously like, yes, I do. Well, how are you integrating them in your workplace? What are we going to do to make it different, make it better? How are we going to make this organization thrive? And then utilizing it as an accountability approach too, because like I mentioned earlier, doing your performance reviews and having them focused on your values and having it as a collective, like if you have the value of creativity, as I mentioned earlier, well, what does that look like at the different levels? And how are you integrating that in the routine of the day? And then in doing that, you're now creating an environment that's fostering, in this case, creativity. And then by doing that authentic nature, it's being sure that, being true to yourself, saying, hey, I need to be authentic. If I'm not creative or I'm not hitting that creative level, well, what can I do about that? What does

that, and this is now where introspection comes into play. How can I be more creative? And then what does that look like for people to see me doing that? And one other thing I'll just throw out there is I love using the Johari window. Do you know the Johari window?

Shari Simpson: I have heard of it before, yes.

Dr. Drew Fockler: Yes, yes. And it's like how I see myself, but others don't see me, but others see me, but I don't see it in myself. And I love that part about the Johari window, because sometimes we're hard on ourselves. Yeah. 100%. And especially people who are creative. And I have a family member and she is so hard on herself all the time. And I'm like, this is amazing. But to her, it's not. It's not at her quality. It's not at her caliber. So now it's a question of, well, what caliber are we working on? And how does that work for other people to see that? And when I think of like the Johari window, it's like, well, you might have creativity as your values, but do other people see that as, you know, your regular routine? And that's why I love the Johari window. I've been using it for over 20 years. And that is one of my favorite things to start by saying is let's see what you see in yourself and what people don't see in you. And then that's where we can start to see all the gaps and then the opportunities for growth and development too.

Shari Simpson: Drew, what a great discussion and a reminder of just what an amazing role leadership has in shaping an organization when they can show up authentically. So thanks for sitting down with me.

Dr. Drew Fockler: Anytime.