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AUTHENTICITY IN ***SAFETY*** A JOURNEY OF LEADERSHIP

Introduction

In 2011, I stumbled upon a truth that changed my career: authentic leadership can build trust, respect and, believe it or not, improve safety culture on a large commercial jobsite. At the time, I couldn't have told you what authentic leadership was, let alone how to practice it or apply it to my career. Turns out, there's actual science behind this (and no, it does not require a lab coat).

This article takes you through my journey. What I learned, what it taught me, and practical tips you can apply today.

A Quick Hello

Hello reader, my name is Ryan Ogrizovich. I am the Assistant Safety Director for Stevens Construction Corp. in Madison, WI. At the time of writing, I'm in my 17th year in the construction industry.

When I was asked to write an article for the ABC of Wisconsin, my first thought was: 'Wait...

how long does it have to be?' Then came the next: 'What could I possibly teach anyone?'

But then it clicked. Safety is not just about OSHA regulations, insurance claims, or workers' comp. It's about people. Teaching people. Motivating people. Understanding people.

And that's where my story begins.

My goal is to share my experiences and the lessons I've learned, hoping they provide insight into the concepts discussed in this article.

Let's Travel Back in Time

Picture this: iPhones were still single digits (4s), Harry Potter had just wrapped up his magical saga on the big screen, New Girl was making us laugh for the first time, Adele was dominating the charts with her soulful voice, and I fulfilled my dream of becoming a dad. Join me back in 2011.

My son was born with a rare genetic disorder that nearly claimed his life when he was just three days old. The children's hospital became our second home as we fought to keep him alive. For the next year, we were in and out of the hospital until he received a lifesaving liver transplant when he was 13 months old.

During this time, I was a couple of years into my safety career and responsible for six hundred tradespeople on one of Wisconsin's largest construction projects. On the day of my son's liver transplant, the company I worked for lifted a nine-million-pound steel structure seventy feet into the air. It was an operation we had been planning for months. To say that I was overwhelmed would be an understatement.

Accidental Authenticity

I was young, emotional, and trying my best to lead. I gave safety speeches, often sharing our family's fight for our son's survival as motivation to take safety seriously. Watching my son struggle for his life every day made me question why workers would not take the proper precautions to keep themselves safe.

Sometimes, I choked up, occasionally even cried, in front of hundreds of America's most rugged. Trust me, standing in front of a big crowd, choking back tears, and stumbling through a sentence was definitely not on my career bingo card.

Before starting this job after college, I kept hearing the same warning: "Watch out for the Ironworkers." People spoke about them like they were legendary figures from another realm. Rough, tough, and impossible to crack. Hard-nosed and fiercely independent. The phrase I heard most often, "You're going to have a hard time with them." If you have ever worked with Ironworkers, you know exactly what I mean.

But here's the twist: that vulnerability sharing about my son created a connection. The same Ironworkers that I was warned about became some of my favorite people to work with. Our mutual respect built trust that transcended age and hierarchy. Many of them are still my friends today.

I often compare construction workers to horses. They say a horse is a "mirror to your soul" because it responds to your mood, body language, and energy. You can't fake confidence or hide your true self. When you speak to a group of construction workers, you will get the same feeling.

I learned that showing up as myself, imperfect, emotional, human, was more powerful than trying to fit in or mask how I was feeling. Authenticity wasn't a weakness; it was a bridge.

The Science Behind Authentic Leadership

After the pandemic, mental health became a big focus in our industry, and honestly, it opened the door for more authentic leadership opportunities. Whenever I have the opportunity to speak on this topic, I share my personal mental wellness journey. I am an open book. Heck, at this point in my career, most of the field employees at Stevens have seen me get emotional during a speech. Not exactly something I plan. It just sort of... happens.

Authentic leadership is not just a buzzword; it's a well-researched concept. A study published in the Leadership and Organization Development Journal found that employees' perception of authenticity in their leaders is the strongest predictor of job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Gen Z even values authenticity more than financial success (Ernst & Young, 2021). They want leaders who are genuine, transparent, and human.

So, do you need a life-altering event to become an authentic leader? Absolutely not. But authenticity does take time and practice.

Quick Tips for Authentic Leadership

Here are some science-backed strategies to help you lead authentically:

- **Cultivate Self-Awareness and Purpose**
- **Know your core values:** Speak and act in alignment with what you value most.
- **Be yourself:** Build genuine connection with your team and colleagues.
- **Practice vulnerability:** Admit mistakes and share challenges.
- **Communicate openly:** Clear and honest communication will build trust.

Understanding Psychological Safety

One unexpected benefit of embracing authentic leadership is the development of a psychologically safe work environment for employees. Harvard Business School defines psychological safety as a climate where employees feel comfortable sharing opinions, asking questions, and admitting mistakes without fear of negative consequences.

If you have worked in this industry for any length of time, think back: Have you ever been scolded for a mistake? Felt foolish about suggesting a new idea? Hesitated to raise a concern? And how did that make you feel?

At Stevens Construction Corp., we have seen the power of psychological safety firsthand. For the past six years, we've prioritized mental well-being, which has strengthened relationships between our safety team and field employees. Today, team members are more willing to share improvement ideas, voice



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concerns, and discuss challenges. We've listened and used their feedback to improve equipment and enhance how we perform work safely.

This is not just about safety; it's about trust, respect, and creating a culture where people feel valued. That's what drives continuous improvement.

What This is Not

Authentic leadership and psychologically safe work environments are not about superficial gestures or trendy rituals. Accountability still matters, whether it is for scheduling, safety violations, or other responsibilities.

As we discussed at the beginning of this article, we are in the business of people. And because none of us are perfect, mistakes will happen. That is the one guarantee in our world.

What psychological safety does allow is healthy, constructive conversations about those mistakes. It enables us to address issues while still treating employees with respect, which is a fundamental element of growth and improvement.

A Piece of Timeless Advice

One of the best pieces of advice I ever received came from Stan, my college internship mentor: "Always treat people with respect. You never know what they may be going through at home." Seventeen years later, those words still guide me.

Safety is not just about rules; it is about people. The way we lead matters. Sometimes, the difference between good and great is how authentically we show up.

I have often heard the saying: "Anyone can point out safety violations, but a great safety professional finds ways to prevent injuries." I've always taken that as a challenge—to go beyond simply enforcing regulations and instead thinking creatively, anticipating risks, and staying ahead of potential issues.

One way to achieve this is by taking a 'boots-on-the-ground' approach and getting to know your employees. Understanding what makes them tick. Learning the 'why' behind their commitment to staying safe at work.

That is a key focus during every new-hire orientation. We ask each person to share their personal reason for wanting to stay safe every

day. That reason becomes their motivation, their driving force behind making better decisions on the job.

Final Thoughts

Authenticity is not a trend. It's a leadership style that works. It builds trust, strengthens relationships, and could be the thing to improve your safety culture. You do not need a life-altering event to start leading authentically. You just need to show up as yourself, consistently and courageously.

These principles apply to any person or any company, regardless of size, location, or area of expertise.

So, I invite you to look at the way you lead. Find ways to connect, be real, and lead with genuine care. Because in safety and in life, the way we show up for each other matters.

About the Author

Ryan Ogrizovich is the Assistant Safety Director at Stevens Construction Corp. in Madison, WI. With over 17 years in the construction industry, Ryan is passionate about building strong safety cultures through authentic leadership and human connection. 