Authenticity

 Acting with integrity, speaking honestly, and representing oneself or one's organization in genuine ways

Authenticity Defined

The principle of *authenticity* in organizing, engagement, and equity work refers to individuals, groups, or organizations that act with integrity and represent themselves in genuine and faithful ways. In general, authentic actions or statements can be characterized as candid, forthright, or unpretentious, while inauthentic actions or statements are typically insincere, false, or misleading.

The practice of authenticity also extends to representing oneself or one's organization in sincere, honest, and unaffected ways, while avoiding deceitful, manipulative, or unscrupulous behavior. For example, school leaders and educators are more likely to be seen as "authentic" by their students, families, and communities if they:

- Speak in plain and understandable language, rather than in educational jargon.
- Talk about the personal experiences and values that motivate them, rather than their professional credentials and expertise.
- Speak and interact in ways that are sincere, compassionate, and heartfelt, rather than aloof, reserved, and bureaucratic.
- Act in ways that are consistent with their expressed values, rather than claiming to hold values that are inconsistent with their actions.
- Take personal responsibility for addressing problems that arise, rather than placing blame on official policies, administrative procedures, or other people.
- Acknowledge what they don't know or understand something, rather than pretend to possess knowledge they don't have.
- Listen to others attentively and respectfully, rather than interrupting them or speaking over them.
- Make attempts to understand and appreciate different cultures and perspectives, rather than act on assumptions, biases, and stereotypes.
- Are candid and forthcoming about uncomfortable or embarrassing facts, instead of dodging questions, speaking evasively, or downplaying negative implications.

Importantly, authenticity also includes social evaluations of someone's intentions or motivations—not just their explicit actions or statements. For example, a school principal may make a false statement, but the community may still feel she acted "authentically" if the principal was communicating

information she believed was accurate at the time. In this case, the statement may have been technically false, but because her intentions were honest the community may feel the principal can still be trusted.

On the other hand, if a principal makes a statement that is factually accurate, but she intentionally omits important information in an effort to avoid public criticism or embarrassment, the community may feel they were misled or deceived. In this case, the statement was accurate, but her deceptive intentions raise concerns about whether the principal can be trusted.

Discussion: Authenticity and Trust
The authenticity principle of organizing, engagement, and equity is based on the recognition that the denial or avoidance of uncomfortable facts, and any form of dishonesty, deception, or misrepresentation—even, in some cases, when it's unintentional or unconscious—is likely to undermine trust and damage relationships.

In organizing, engagement, and equity work, the authenticity or inauthenticity of leaders, organizers, and facilitators will often determine the success or failure of a given strategy, program, process, or campaign. When people feel betrayed, deceived, or cheated, for example—such as when leaders misrepresent themselves, hide potentially damaging information, act in hypocritical ways, or fail to follow through on commitments—the community is likely to respond with frustration, anger, suspicion, or mistrust. Over time, patterns of inauthentic behavior may also lead to apathy, disillusionment, resentment, and other negative emotions that contribute to community disengagement.

Similarly, inauthentic behavior or statements from official representatives—whether its a superintendent, elected official, executive director, or spokesperson—can undermine community support for a public institution, organization, or cause. As distrust grows over time, for example, the community may start to believe that the school system is irredeemably mismanaged or wasteful (even if most of the staff are highly competent and principled), which can then erode the community's motivation to support the school system or become involved in school activities.

Authenticity Strategies

The following examples illustrate a few common authenticity strategies that can be used in educational organizing, engagement, and equity work:

1. **Improving self-awareness and reflecting on intentions**
2. **Being consistent in word and deed**
3. **Building trusting relationships**
4. **Creating opportunities for dialogue**
5. **Communicating truthfully, transparently, and proactively**
6. **Creating accurate and unbiased documentation**

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1. Improving self-awareness and reflecting on intentions

Authentic intentions are characterized by self-awareness and a genuine concern for the wellbeing of others. If leaders, organizers, and facilitators are not honest with themselves about their motivations or objectives, they cannot be fully honest with community members.

- For example, leaders who are unaware of their own privilege—whether that privilege is based on race, class, professional status, or some other cultural attribute—will be more likely to dismiss or minimize the legitimate concerns of underprivileged groups—behaviors that may then be perceived as insensitive or disrespectful.
- When leaders, organizers, and facilitators don't understand their own biases or motivations, they are more likely to make assumptions that undermine opportunities for authentic engagement. For example, school leaders may believe they understand their students and families and that they are acting in their best interests. But if school leaders don't take the time to listen to their families, and truly understand their concerns or priorities, the policies or programs those leaders develop are more likely to be based on misinterpretations or inaccurate assumptions (such as assuming that certain parents don't value their child's education, when in fact those parents are working multiple jobs that don't allow them to attend school activities as regularly as other parents). In these cases, the problems that school leaders are attempting to address may only worsen, the community may feel that administrators are don't care about their concerns, and the school leaders may struggle to understand why their good intentions have not resulted in effective solutions or community appreciation.

2. Being consistent in word and deed

Authentic actions are characterized by consistency in intentions, words, and deeds. If administrative decisions contradict the professed principles or public promises made by the school or organization, for example, the community is likely to feel the administration is being hypocritical or deceptive.

- Inauthentic actions are often self-serving. For example, mayors and other elected officials routinely convene "task forces" in response to controversial or highly publicized problems in schools. Yet the primary purpose of these committees, in many cases, is not to fix the underlying cause of the problem, but to generate the appearance of action, reduce public criticism, and limit damage to a public official's reputation and future political prospects.
- Similarly, school administrators may undertake ambitious school-reform projects that are motivated more by ego than community needs and interests. For example, the administrators may feel they understand the problem better than their staff or community, or they may want to raise their professional profile and prestige to improve their prospects of getting a higher-paying, higher-status job. In both of these cases, local leaders are hiding self-serving motivations behind the pretense of trying to solve problems that are in the interest of students, families, or the general public.

3. Building trusting relationships

Authentic relationships are characterized by trust, openness, and reciprocity. To establish trust, leaders, organizers, and facilitators not only need to listen to their community and stakeholders, but they also need to demonstrate—through their decisions and actions—that they have heard and understood their community or that they are able to follow through on commitments.

- Establishing trust—particularly when there is a long history of distrust between a school and its community—can be one of the most difficult challenges that leaders, organizers, and facilitators will face, in part because the trust-building process may take a lot of time and may require uncomfortable or emotionally difficult conversations.
- Authentic relationships also require openness—or the absence of secrecy, avoidance, defensiveness, and other behaviors that can become barriers to trust and reciprocity—and actions that are mutually beneficial to all parties in the relationship. For example, schools often want to "partner" with families and community organizations, but school leaders may initiate these partnerships by proposing an arrangement that only considers the schedules and priorities of educators, rather than starting with an open conversation in which all the partners discuss their respective needs, concerns, and goals, and then co-develop a plan that takes different priorities into account.

4. Creating opportunities for dialogue

Authentic dialogue is characterized by honesty, listening, and sincere attempts to understand others. Dialogue may take place between two individuals or in groups, including settings in which the dialogue is guided by a facilitator and follows a predetermined structure or agenda.

- Honesty in dialogue requires speakers to present themselves, their beliefs, or their position truthfully and accurately, which includes being forthcoming about any relevant details or essential background information, given that withholding important information—such as negative information about one's organization or past—can be construed as dishonesty or misrepresentation by the community.
- Authentic dialogue not only requires listening, but it also requires that participants listen in specific ways. For example, listeners should avoid interrupting those who are talking, they should ask questions when a statement is unclear or confusing, and they should refrain from thinking about their response while a speaker is talking or formulating counter-arguments to something that was said.

→ For a related discussion, see the [Dialogue Principle](#) of organizing, engagement, and equity

5. Communicating truthfully, transparently, and proactively

Authentic communication is characterized by accuracy and transparency. While authentic communication generally requires that information be correct and factual, it may also require leaders, organizers, and facilitators to be forthcoming with information that may be difficult for some audiences to hear or that may not present them or their organization in the most favorable light.

- In some cases, school leaders may instinctively want to communicate only positive information about their school, and yet withholding negative information from journalists, families, and other stakeholders often ignite controversies that only makes the school's problems worse. For example, if school leaders avoid proactively disclosing poor school-performance data, abusive staff behaviors, or incidents of prejudice among students, it may lead to harsher public criticism, or even accusations of an attempted cover-up, when the negative information ultimately comes to light. Avoiding the full disclosure of important information may also raise suspicions about the administration's motivations for withholding the information.
- Authentic communication also requires that information and statements be presented in ways that are not disingenuous or manipulative. For example, public officials or district leaders may only provide the community with the best-case-scenario estimate of the cost of a new project to secure voter or school-board approval, while knowing that the project is likely to run significantly over budget. In this case, maintaining authenticity in communication would require local leaders to present accurate information even though it may potentially jeopardize support for a project they believe is important.

→ For a related discussion, see the [Transparency Principle](#) of organizing, engagement, and equity

6. Creating accurate and unbiased documentation

Authentic documentation and reporting are characterized by factual accuracy and non-deceptive presentations of information.

- In organizing, engagement, and equity work, leaders, organizers, and facilitators often routinely use different forms of reporting to share relevant data or background information with participants, to record what was said during dialogues and events, or to document agreements that were made in a partnership. Authentic reporting can also be used to model transparency by ensuring that everyone involved in a partnership or process has access to the same information or documentation of events.
- In general, authenticity in reporting requires leaders, organizers, and facilitators to present the most accurate interpretation of events possible, which extends to sharing background information that helps participants or readers understand the larger context of an issue. When reporting on a conversation or summarizing an event, for example, local leaders may—either intentionally or unintentionally—misinterpret what was said or misrepresent the conclusions of a group by either documenting only those outcomes that they agree with and support or by using terms that do not have the same connotations as those that were used by participants. For this reason, local leaders should attempt to use language that matches the language used by participants as closely as possible. In certain cases, such as in contentious conversations or negotiations, verbatim quotations or transcripts may be recommended to ensure that participant viewpoints are accurately presented in a way that won't call into question the motivations, neutrality, or credibility of facilitators.

→ For a related discussion, see the [Facilitation Principle](#) of organizing, engagement, and equity

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