


# Chapter 2

## I Thought You Wanted Authenticity

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter explores the paradox women face in higher education leadership, where authenticity is encouraged yet often penalized. Drawing from personal experience and feminist and Black feminist theory, the author examines how emotional expression, care, and relational leadership are devalued in systems rooted in masculine norms. The chapter critiques traditional leadership models and highlights the burdens of emotional labor. Concepts such as radical self-care, placemaking, and opting out are reframed as acts of resistance and agency. The chapter calls for institutional accountability and reimagines leadership as relational, embodied, and inclusive of women's full humanity.*

### **INTRODUCTION: THE PARADOX OF AUTHENTICITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION LEADERSHIP**

In 2023, the college where I was a professor, department chair, and program director—where I had earned tenure and built a vibrant educational program—announced its closure. The entire college community learned about it on the local news. It was shocking, destabilizing, and traumatic.

As we navigated the raw reality, held up our colleagues, and supported our students, we also all had to locate new appointments just as the annual academic hiring cycle was winding down. I found myself at a critical career juncture. I was seeking to advance into a larger leadership role—one where my authentic and relational

DOI: 10.4018/979-8-3373-0260-7.ch002

leadership style, program-building skills, and drive for productivity and impact could be realized and extended.

This chapter explores the contradictions women face in higher education leadership:

- We are encouraged to be authentic, relational, and transparent, yet punished for emotional honesty.
- We are called to create spaces for others to thrive while receiving little institutional support ourselves.
- We are expected to balance ambition and authenticity yet find that being true to ourselves can cost us leadership opportunities.
- We are encouraged to be our authentic selves, but our experiences as leaders are differentiated by our genders and identities.
- We are expected to create inclusive spaces of belonging, while we are excluded from those same spaces.

How do we make sense of these contradictions? How do we take action to preserve our agency and humanness in settings that are unwelcoming? When do we choose to stay, and when do we opt out?

This chapter argues that to resolve these contradictions, higher education must go beyond supporting individual women leaders and must dismantle masculinist leadership norms that define who is authentic, competent, and legitimate. This chapter reflects my personal experiences and observations as a white woman leader in the gendered and contradictory spaces of leadership. I recognize that these dynamics are profoundly shaped by race, class, sexuality, and other systems of power. This chapter does not attempt to speak to or analyze the distinct and intersectional experiences of women of color, as I am not situated or equipped to do so. However, the critiques, insights, and foundational work of Black feminist scholars including Patricia Hill Collins (2000), Audre Lorde (1988), and bell hooks (1994) have been essential in reshaping feminist leadership theory, as a whole. Their work illuminates how authenticity, care, and emotional labor are differentially afforded and constrained based on social identity and structural inequality. While this chapter narrows its empirical focus, it is informed by and indebted to these broader feminist critiques.

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