Perspectives on Leadership in Organizations Providing Services to People With Disabilities: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract
As leaders from the Baby Boomer generation prepare for retirement over the next decade, emerging leaders must be identified and supported in anticipation of a major organizational transition. Authentic leadership is a construct that informs the development of values-driven leaders who will bring organizations into the future, just as the previous generation of leaders oversaw the movement of services away from state institutions and into networks of community-based service delivery organizations. The purpose of this exploratory study was to examine executive and emerging leaders’ opinions about the unique leadership values, skills, and challenges in organizations that serve individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Themes of defining, developing, and sustaining leaders emerged from the data and are explored through an authentic leadership framework.

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Over the past 4 decades, there has been a fundamental shift in the delivery of services and supports to individuals with disabilities. This shift from institutional care to the provision of flexible and individualized services and supports for people with disabilities within their own homes and communities (Braddock, 1999; Bradley & Knoll, 1995; Parish, Pomeranz-Essley, & Braddock, 2003) has faced challenges in both the management and leadership of nonprofit organizations. In answering calls for social change and action in the late 1960s and early 1970s, a new generation of leaders in nonprofit organizations and state and local government emerged to support and advocate for the rights of individuals with disabilities and their families (Kunreuther, 2005). With encouragement and collaboration from people with disabilities and their families, these leaders have spearheaded federal and state policies that recognize inclusion, promote family decision-making abilities, and endorse integrated and coordinated community-based services for individuals with disabilities (Bradley & Knoll, 1995; Rainforth, Giangreco, Smith, & York, 1995).

Since 1974, the average number of people living in institutions has decreased by 75.2% (Prouty, Coucvanis, & Lakin, 2005). Although there has been a decrease of over 100,000 individuals living in institutions during the past 25 years and an increase of over 370,000 individuals living in settings of six or fewer persons (Braddock, Hemp, & Rizzolo, 2008), strong leadership continues to be needed for the future to address concerns of the slowing rates of deinstitutionalization (Prouty et al., 2005). Ultimately, new emerging leaders are needed to carry on the transformative work of those who were part of the civil rights movement for individuals with disabilities in the 1970s and to lead the way in the transition from group homes and sheltered workshops to individually controlled, inclusive, community-based, and, when appropriate, family-focused services and supports.

According to the 2004 Nonprofit Executive Leadership and Transition Survey (Teegarden, 2004), a survey of over 2,200 nonprofit organizations from each U.S. state, nonprofit organizations have had relatively stable leadership during the past decade. However, over half of the Baby Boomers will retire or leave their position by 2010, with another wave of Boomers leaving the nonprofit sector by 2020 (Teegarden, 2004).
mass retirement of leaders raises questions regarding who will take over leadership positions in nonprofit organizations in the future (Kunreuther, 2005; Teegarden, 2004). Subsequently, new interest has spiked in identifying emerging leaders of the 21st century (Kunreuther, 2005). The current exploratory study examined the challenges and needs involved in leadership transitions, with a focus on the unique context of organizations providing supports and services for people with disabilities.

Addressing the transitions of new leaders into organizations serving people with disabilities merits investigation of the values and skills required for effective leadership that are specific to the field. This assessment of values and skills is particularly salient for leadership within organizations serving people with disabilities, because the field is driven by values of equality and human rights. In addition, a history of political innovation and civil rights advocacy has been important for deinstitutionalization and policy changes that improve opportunities for people with disabilities (Braddock, 2002; Parish, 2005). Future leaders must lead in the direction of disability policy goals, such as economic self-sufficiency, equal opportunity, full participation, and independent living, all of which were developed as components of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA, 1991; Silverstein, 2000).

Leadership is a complex and diverse phenomenon that can be viewed from multiple perspectives (Yammarino, Dansereau, & Kennedy, 2001). Leadership is promoted by an array of values in which a common goal exists for both leaders and followers (Bennis, 2007). Kouzes and Posner (2002) viewed leadership as a way of modeling, inspiring a shared vision, challenging the process, enabling others to act, and encouraging the heart. Bennis (1997, 2007) defined leaders as those who demonstrate integrity, dedication, magnanimity, humility, openness, and creativity, as well as competence in guiding and inspiring new leaders into the future so that organizations can accomplish their goals. Exemplary leaders “create a sense of mission, they create an adaptive social architecture for their followers, they generate trust and optimism, they develop other leaders, and they get results” (Bennis, 2007, p. 5).

One leadership approach, authentic leadership, instructs on how leaders can successfully guide organizations in effectively supporting people with disabilities. Considering the strong relationship between leading and inspiring a shared set of values (Bennis, 2007), organizations serving people with disabilities might benefit from authentic leaders, defined as those who (a) are critically aware of how they think and behave; (b) are perceived by staff as being conscious of their and others’ morals, values, expertise, and strengths; (c) understand the organizational culture or context in which they are working; and (d) are optimistic, resilient, confident, hopeful, and have moral integrity (Avolio, Luthans, & Walumbwa, 2004, as cited in Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Interest in fostering new authentic leaders in the field necessarily involves a discussion on defining authentic leadership in organizations supporting people with disabilities and identifying the importance of values unique to authentic leadership in these organizations. Understanding the fundamental values of leaders who serve individuals with disabilities, as well as how they define leadership, will inform how the authentic leadership framework can support and guide future leaders in the field.

Authentic Leadership: Definitions and Applications in the Field

The authentic leadership construct provides significant implications for leaders, staff, and communities affected by disabilities. Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May, and Walumbwa (2005) suggested that authentic leadership encompasses “authentic relations with followers and associates” that are “characterized by: a) transparency, openness, and trust, b) guidance toward worthy objectives, and c) an emphasis on follower development” (p. 345). Ilies, Morgeson, and Nahrgang (2005) proposed four components of authentic leadership: (a) self-awareness (trust in one’s own values and motives), (b) unbiased processing (providing accurate accounts of knowledge and experiences), (c) authentic behavior–acting (acting in accord with one’s own values and preferences), and (d) authentic relational orientation (achieving trust and openness in relationships). When reviewing the historical work and values of leaders serving individuals with disabilities, which include valuing independence and inclusion for all people and working to deinstitutionalize services and supports (e.g., Braddock, Hemp, & Rizzolo, 2008; Parish, 2005; Silverstein, 2000), the authentic leadership framework emerges as a comprehensive lens through which we can understand future leadership transitions in the field.
Authentic leadership can be conceptualized as a process whereby leaders acquire personal insight, self-regulation, and positive behaviors while shaping a similar development in followers (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Gardner et al., 2005; Luthans & Avolio, 2003). Authentic leaders have the potential to develop authentic followers as they “actively and continuously model...through their words and deeds, high levels of self-awareness, balanced processing, transparency, and authentic behavior” (Gardner et al., 2005, p. 347). These leaders foster the well being and authenticity of followers through (a) inspiring followers to identify with the leader and organization, (b) establishing links between the authentic leader and follower moods and emotions, (c) providing positive behavioral modeling, (d) supporting self-determination, and (e) encouraging positive social exchanges (Ilies et al., 2005). These leader and follower dynamics have implications for emerging leader development in organizations serving individuals with disabilities, which we explored in the current study.

How Values Impact the Effectiveness of Public Policy for People With Disabilities

The authentic leadership framework is particularly applicable to the values orientation of organizations supporting people with disabilities. Leaders within these organizations have an obligation to uphold the values of person-centered, inclusive communities that treat individuals with disabilities with dignity and respect. Public policies, such as the ADA, highlight the importance of leaders’ values and actions. Silverstein (2000) described the core policies of the ADA as values that leaders of organizations supporting people with disabilities are expected to encourage. These values include equality of opportunity, full participation (empowerment), independent living, and economic self-sufficiency (Silverstein, 2000). In addition, Parish (2005) reinforced the importance of leadership on values for systems change by exploring the deinstitutionalization process in Michigan. Although Parish (2005) reported that various factors contributed to deinstitutionalization from 1970 to 1990, (e.g., legal victories, federal funds, the structure of Michigan politics), she also asserted that the most important factor in deinstitutionalization was the collaboration between leadership and the shared desire to promote civil rights. These shared values of social justice inspired a vision among leaders in Michigan. Parish (2005) credited leaders’ civil rights values and subsequent leadership as the cause of the successful transition of people with disabilities from institutions into community living. The authentic leadership framework highlights the importance of inspiring followers to share common organizational goals by modeling a self-awareness of values, behavior that reflects those values, and honest communication (Gardner et al., 2005), which are exemplified by leaders of the disabilities movement (Parish, 2005). These examples show that policies regarding the well being of people with disabilities are only as effective as the leadership that promotes person-centered values in communities and organizations.

Organizational Values and the Quality of Supports for People With Disabilities

Person-centered values and effective leadership are also crucial for the success of the services and supports delivered to people with disabilities. The ability of leaders to inspire a shared vision of values within a group or organization is essential to authentic leadership (Gardner et al., 2005) and essential for organizations serving people with disabilities. Hulgin (2004) reported on the necessity of values in leadership, specifically when providing person-centered services to people with disabilities through organizations identified as learning organizations, those that were “providing person-centered services for all individuals whom they supported or were actively moving in that direction” (p. 172). Person-centered planning became a reality in these types of organizations when leaders incorporated the following practices: reflected on the injustices of the past with staff; instituted a “circular” organizational structure based on relationships, not hierarchy; recruited staff with similar values or shifted staff values through “asserting a vision, creating opportunities for learning, and channeling resistance into problem-solving” (Hulgin, 2004, p. 173); and modeled organizational values through personal commitment and actions, by maintaining small agencies that had the capacity to consistently deliver person-centered services. These leadership activities are consistent with Ilies et al.’s (2005) conceptualization of authentic leadership, which included “authentic behavior.” Authentic behavior refers to the practice of not only expressing values through words and statements of organizational missions but acting in accord with one’s own values and
preferences. In addition, the commitment of person-centered organizations to circular organizational structures reflects the authentic relations between staff members that Gardner et al. (2005) explained are encouraged through transparency, openness, and trust, as leaders guide followers in abiding by the organizational values.

The connection between authentic leadership practices and the values of organizations providing supports and services to people with disabilities is further reinforced through the values present in the personal outcomes and family quality-of-life domains that people with disabilities and their families express as being important. Gardner and Carran's (2005) study of the attainment of personal outcomes for people with developmental disabilities found that people enjoyed more personal outcomes when the following variables were present: (a) people could choose where and with whom they lived, (b) people were treated fairly, (c) people interacted with members of the community, (d) people were respected, and (e) people could choose where they wanted to work. Furthermore, a greater number of outcomes were attained in organizations with more years of accreditation. In turn, accreditation was most effectively predicted by (a) people being treated fairly, (b) people realizing personal goals, (c) people receiving respect, (d) people choosing personal goals, and (e) people participating in the life of the community (Gardner & Carran, 2005). These results suggest that the success of an organization lies not in how many people are supported but how the values of people with disabilities are honored and supported. If organizations ignore the values of personal choice, inclusion, and respect for the people who they support, they are not practicing authentic behavior and are not acting in agreement with the values that drive organizations serving people with disabilities (Ilies et al., 2005). Consequently, leaders who are unable to work authentically do not purposefully act on their values, as they are not conscious of them, and they cannot communicate clearly and transparently their awareness of values through their actions and words. We argue that an authentic approach to leadership, therefore, is vital to provide an optimal environment for supporting and encouraging people's rights to independence, inclusion, and respect.

**Current Study**

Effective service delivery to people with disabilities is impacted by a commitment to values that honor the rights of people with disabilities to make their own choices, provide opportunities for inclusion into communities, and exhibit a commitment to open, transparent organizational structures. Due to the parallels between these organizational values and authentic leadership principles, we explored how the leadership of organizations serving people with disabilities reflects an authentic leadership framework. As organizations supporting people with disabilities prepare for leadership transitions, attention must be paid to three components of the authentic leadership framework: the values, practices, and structures currently in place within their organizations. Organizations also need to identify leadership-development processes that create, nurture, and support effective, authentic leaders who can carry the field into the future. These processes will help organizations serving people with disabilities determine the unique aspects of leadership in the field that need to be supported and developed in their emerging leaders. The next wave of leaders will have the challenge of transforming and reinventing these agencies for the future. The purpose of this exploratory study was to understand the contemporary leadership practices in organizations supporting people with disabilities and the methods of leadership development in practice.

To explore these contemporary leadership practices in organizations supporting people with disabilities, the current study gathered information about various aspects of leadership within these organizations (i.e., values, practices, and organizational structures) and examined how current leadership in these organizations defined best leadership practices, through which an authentic leadership framework emerged. In addition, we explored concerns that current leaders had about transition issues, such as mentoring relationships and succession planning, which suggest how authentic leadership practices may be used to support organizations serving individuals with disabilities. These processes deserve attention as organizations strive to develop authentic leaders, continue to grow, and effectively support recipients of their services in the 21st century.

**Method**

We developed our research, which we call the Opinions of Leaders Study (OLS), to gain a better understanding of the views of current and emerging leaders in the field of disabilities. Leadership issues in the organizations serving people with disabilities
have yet to be fully examined in the empirical literature; therefore, we used an exploratory-survey research approach in this study. Although there is a large body of research on transitions to leadership in the human services and nonprofit sectors (Adams, 2004; Kunreuther, 2005; Teegarden, 2004), an exploratory approach was appropriate for the current study because it was crucial for us to understand the underlying specific needs, concerns, and issues that are relevant to leadership transitions in organizations serving people with disabilities. Obtaining the in-depth, subjective experiences (Berg, 2003) of executive leaders and emerging leaders in organizations supporting people with disabilities can lead to a theoretical and practice-based understanding of the fundamental challenges these leaders are confronted with in the 21st century.

Sample

Online surveys were answered by 30 executive leaders and 32 emerging leaders (N = 62) who worked in organizations serving people with disabilities. Participants were solicited from the membership of the American Network of Community Options and Resources Foundation (ANCOR), the National Council of Executives of The Arc, and the United Cerebral Palsy Executive Listserv. Collectively, these three national organizations represent over 2,000 organizations, although there is some overlap in membership. Participants fell into two groups: executive leaders and emerging leaders. Executive leaders held chief executive officer (CEO) positions, whereas emerging leaders were senior staff members referred to the study by the CEOs. Table 1 contains the demographic characteristics of executive leaders and emerging leaders.

Data Collection

First, e-mails were sent by OLS project staff to 500 CEO members of ANCOR. The e-mail addresses were obtained from the ANCOR CEO membership database. Although this database is not representative of all CEOs of organizations serving people with disabilities, it is the most comprehensive list of executive leaders in those organizations in the United States. E-mails were also sent to individuals belonging to the National Council of Executives of The Arc and the United Cerebral Palsy Executive Listserv. Executive leaders were directed to the Opinions of Executive Leaders Survey URL (a secure Web site, to ensure anonymity for all respondents). Second, executive leaders were asked in a follow-up e-mail to select a senior staff member in their organizations who may take on a higher leadership position in the next 5 to 10 years to participate in the study. Convenience sampling was used to recruit emerging leader participants who exhibited skills and potential to take on higher leadership positions in organizations supporting people with disabilities. Executive leaders forwarded the OLS e-mail request for participation to a senior staff member (i.e., emerging leader). Emerging leaders were directed to a different survey on the Opinions of Emerging Leaders Survey URL; this survey asked questions that paralleled the Opinions of Executive Leaders Survey but omitted questions about the current CEO of the organizations supporting people with disabilities. The main difference between the two surveys was that executive leaders were asked about their current experiences with leadership, whereas the emerging leaders were asked about how they would approach leadership issues if they were promoted to a CEO position.

The Opinions of Executive Leaders Survey and the Opinions of Emerging Leaders Survey were developed by two OLS project staff to include closed-ended and open-ended questions about executive and emerging leaders’ opinions about how to best support, educate, and train new and emerging leaders in the field. Participants shared their perspectives on questions in the surveys that included the following overarching topics: (a) experiences in the field (e.g., length of time working in organizations supporting people with disabilities, number of individuals with disabilities served by current organization of employment), (b) values and skills essential for authentic leadership (i.e., the five most important values and the five most important skills needed for leadership in organizations serving people with disabilities), (c) suggestions for developing and supporting new leaders (e.g., suggestions for educational programs in leadership, field experiences needed to support leadership), (d) mentoring relationships between executive and emerging leaders (e.g., description of experiences in organization with an executive mentor, importance of mentoring relationship to leadership development), (e) organizational issues within their agencies (e.g., strengths and weaknesses of staff, managerial challenges), and (f) demographic characteristics (i.e., age, race–ethnicity, gender).

The survey was offered in two parts (i.e., Topics 1 through 4 were addressed in the first section and Topics 5 through 6 were addressed in the second section) so that participants could choose to respond
to the entire survey at once or to take the second section within 1 week of completing the first section. Participants were assigned random, computer-generated identification numbers so that their anonymity was preserved. The entire survey took approximately 45 min to 1 hr to complete. The sample analyzed included only participants who answered both sections of the survey.

Data Analysis

Two OLS project staff analyzed the data to generate categories, subcategories, codes, and interpret overarching patterns and themes. All surveys were initially read to begin the inductive process of reducing the data (Creswell, 2003). Data reduction assists researchers in simplifying and transforming raw data so that they are manageable for further refinement (Berg, 2003). Initial data analysis was aided by use of the Ethnograph (Version 5.0; Qualis Research, n.d.), a code-and-retrieve qualitative software analysis program that assisted in dividing text into segments or chunks, attaching codes, and reviewing coded items. After the data were organized through this system, all data were read and coded by hand. The two project staff met on a biweekly basis to compare emergent categories, subcategories, and codes. Any discrepancies in data interpretation were resolved through discussion, consensus building, and repeated rechecking of generated categories and codes. When chunks of text from the surveys were coded into particular categories, project staff cross-checked each other’s work to reach consensus.

Overarching patterns and themes were generated as the categories and codes were refined through the project staffs’ rereading of data and meetings to reach agreement on findings. This was accomplished through the constant-comparative method (Lincoln, 1995; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) of analyzing the data from the Opinions of Executive Leaders Survey and the Opinions of Emerging Leaders Survey to explore intragroup consistencies and differences in perspective, as well as possible convergent and divergent themes between the two groups.

Validity and Reliability

Validity and reliability were addressed through the triangulation of sources (i.e., executive leaders and emerging leaders) and researchers (i.e., two project staff; Patton, 2002). Themes were identified across data sources and perspectives. Intercoder reliability was achieved through the collaborative

### Table 1 Executive and Emerging Leader Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Executive</th>
<th></th>
<th>Emerging</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average age</td>
<td>52.17</td>
<td>45.13</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Female</td>
<td>60 (18)</td>
<td>65.6 (21)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Male</td>
<td>40 (12)</td>
<td>34.4 (11)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Caucasian</td>
<td>96.7 (29)</td>
<td>100 (32)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Other</td>
<td>3.3 (1)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of organization</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Not for profit</td>
<td>93.3 (28)</td>
<td>90.6 (29)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% For profit</td>
<td>6.7 (2)</td>
<td>9.4 (3)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Average no. of staff members in org.</td>
<td>258.47</td>
<td>323.03</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Average no. of individuals served</td>
<td>734</td>
<td>717.38</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average no. of orgs. at which leader has served as CEO</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>—</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average length of time in current organization (years)</td>
<td>15.11</td>
<td>13.65</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average length of time in current position (years)</td>
<td>12.04</td>
<td>7.93</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average length of time in organizations supporting people with disabilities (years)</td>
<td>24.9</td>
<td>18.5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average length of time as CEO in organizations supporting people with disabilities (years)</td>
<td>19.08</td>
<td>—</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Organization has a CEO succession plan in place</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Yes</td>
<td>50 (15)</td>
<td>—</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% No</td>
<td>43.3 (13)</td>
<td>—</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Missing</td>
<td>6.7 (2)</td>
<td>—</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* org. = organization.
process of two OLS project staff independently analyzing data and then coming to consensus about how to refine categories and proceed with data refinement and emergent themes through biweekly meetings (Kuraski, 2000). Coding and emergence of patterns and themes were checked by each researcher through rigorous, systematic review of data. The entire analysis process took 6 months.

**Results**

Three overarching topics emerged from the data. The first focused on how emerging and executive leaders defined authentic leadership. Second, these individuals described steps to develop authentic leadership in individuals working within organizations providing services and supports to people with disabilities. Last, emerging and executive leaders discussed how to sustain authentic leadership in organizations supporting people with disabilities in the 21st century. Although the emerging and executive leaders were not asked to define the term authentic leadership and were not asked how authentic leadership, in particular, manifests itself in organizations serving people with disabilities, the analysis of their responses concerning current organizational values, practices, and structures revealed a pattern of responses that indicated the leaders were answering questions from an authentic leadership perspective. Emerging and executive leaders discussed authentic leadership principles, such as commitment to organizational values, development of these values in emerging leaders, and open communication. Overall, issues of leadership and the relationship between leaders and followers in organizations were the common threads throughout each theme.

**Defining Authentic Leadership**

Both executive leaders and emerging leaders were asked to list values and skills that are important to leadership. The executive and emerging leaders characterized values and skills that reflected components of authentic leadership (Gardner et al., 2005). In addition, their categorizations of values and skills were largely congruent with definitions of leadership in other fields (e.g., business, human services; Covey, 2005; Dye, 2000; Ulrich, Brockbank, & Smallwood, 2005). The values and skills listed by the executive and emerging leaders suggest that the most effective practices of leadership in organizations supporting people with disabilities reflect the foundations of authentic leadership (see Table 2).

Emerging and executive leader participants expressed similar leadership values as important in guiding organizations supporting people with disabilities. Having “passion for the organizational mission and the people served” received the highest number of endorsements within both sets of leaders, while “ethics” received the least. Although the values expressed by each set of leaders were similar, there were some key differences between the values they emphasized. “Passion for the mission and people served” was the primary value expressed among executive leaders, while “integrity” was the primary value expressed among emerging leaders. In addition, more emerging leaders felt that “honesty,” “respect for diverse individuals and views,” and “compassion” were important than did executive leaders. However, more executive leaders felt that “ethics” was an important leadership value, with only 2 emerging leaders reporting ethics as vital to leading organizations supporting people with disabilities. Overall, the responses indicated that it is important for leaders of organizations supporting people with disabilities to be aware of their values and act with integrity, in accord with those values.

The executive and emerging leaders also reported similar skills as necessary in leading organizations providing services to people with disabilities. Among both sets of leaders, “communication” was the primary response, with “people skills/relationship-building” as the second most common response among the combined responses of emerging and executive leaders. However, the responses also showed differences between the two types of leaders. None of the executive leaders chose “ability to influence others/charisma” as an important leadership skill, whereas 7 emerging leaders listed it as necessary. In addition, fewer executive leaders reported “conflict resolution,” “envisioning and planning for the future,” and “creativity,” than emerging leaders. Alternately, more executive leaders expressed the importance of “people skills/relationship-building,” “financial development and management,” “team development,” and “adaptability.”

Overall, this exploratory survey provided executive and emerging leaders with an open-ended format in which to contemplate the values and skills they believed are crucial to leadership in the field. Leadership values and skills listed by participating leaders reflect the foundations of authentic leadership.
organizations serving people with disabilities and to explore methods of supporting authentic leadership in the organizations serving people with disabilities for future generations. Moreover, participants discussed the challenges and issues of leadership that are unique to leaders who work in the field.

Mission statements and authentic leadership values in organizations providing services and supports to people with disabilities. Emerging and executive leaders discussed qualities they believed individuals must have to lead organizations supporting people with disabilities. These leaders emphasized the importance of having a passion for serving individuals with disabilities. This passion was exemplified in executive and emerging leaders’ accounts of their organizations’ mission statements and those organizations’ commitments to serving individuals with disabilities. One executive leader recounted that his organization’s mission statement was “to provide supports for persons with developmental disabilities” leading to “achievement of independence, self sufficiency and full inclusion in their communities.” In addition, one emerging leader stated that having a passion for serving individuals with disabilities means putting “the person before the disability.”

These statements illustrate the organizations’ stated obligations to ensuring human rights and quality of life for the individuals served. An expressed commitment to the quality of people’s lives was acknowledged as the primary concern for organizations supporting people with disabilities. Ultimately, being attuned to organizational missions and having a passion for serving individuals with disabilities emerged as dominant themes in participant responses.

Importance of communication and authentic leadership skills in organizations serving people with disabilities. Executive leaders discussed skills leaders must have to communicate and achieve their organizational mission and objectives. Overall, executive leaders affirmed that communication and the dissemination of values are crucial to building and sustaining an organization serving people with disabilities that will truly meet the needs of its population. However, they also noted the effort and perseverance it takes to disseminate the organizational mission and values to their staff. One executive leader stated,

We have spent a great deal of time drilling our mission, vision, and values into the entire organization for the past year. All of the full time staff “get it” as witnessed on the satisfaction surveys. We are still only as good as the third shift on Saturday night in the DSP (Direct Support Professional) workforce.

Overall, these leaders expressed that the quality of the supports their organizations provide is

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leadership variable</th>
<th>Percent of executive leader confirmations (n = 30)</th>
<th>Percent of emerging leader confirmations (n = 32)</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Values</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passion for mission and people served</td>
<td>66.7 (20)</td>
<td>50.0 (16)</td>
<td>58.0 (36)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrity</td>
<td>53.3 (16)</td>
<td>56.3 (18)</td>
<td>54.8 (34)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honesty</td>
<td>30.0 (9)</td>
<td>40.6 (13)</td>
<td>35.5 (22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect for diverse individuals and views</td>
<td>26.7 (8)</td>
<td>37.5 (12)</td>
<td>32.6 (20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compassion</td>
<td>23.3 (7)</td>
<td>28.1 (9)</td>
<td>25.8 (16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethics</td>
<td>16.7 (5)</td>
<td>6.3 (2)</td>
<td>11.3 (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Skills</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>56.7 (17)</td>
<td>62.5 (20)</td>
<td>59.7 (37)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People skills–relationship-building</td>
<td>33.3 (10)</td>
<td>28.1 (9)</td>
<td>30.6 (19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial development &amp; management</td>
<td>33.3 (10)</td>
<td>21.9 (7)</td>
<td>27.4 (17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team development</td>
<td>30.0 (9)</td>
<td>12.5 (4)</td>
<td>20.9 (13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adaptability</td>
<td>20.0 (6)</td>
<td>15.6 (5)</td>
<td>17.7 (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict resolution</td>
<td>16.7 (5)</td>
<td>18.8 (6)</td>
<td>17.7 (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Envisioning and planning for the future</td>
<td>13.3 (4)</td>
<td>21.9 (7)</td>
<td>17.7 (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creativity</td>
<td>10.0 (3)</td>
<td>15.6 (5)</td>
<td>12.9 (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to influence others–charisma</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
<td>21.9 (7)</td>
<td>11.3 (7)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Perspectives on leadership

Developing Authentic Leadership

Emerging and executive leaders discussed the unique values and skills necessary to lead in organizations serving disabilities; the characteristics, qualities, and skills listed reflected the authentic leadership construct. Moreover, emerging and executive leaders discussed the authentic leadership skills that they felt must be developed in new leaders. Both cohorts of leaders believed that to develop authentic leadership within organizations, a business and organizational model must be instilled that fosters leadership in senior staff. In addition, executive leaders recognized the strengths and weaknesses of their senior staff, which suggested needs for education, training, and support to assist those staff members in developing their strengths and addressing their weaknesses. Furthermore, both executive and emerging leaders made recommendations for developing quality staff, organizational culture, and leadership through lifelong learning opportunities, professional development, networking, and mentoring—all crucial components of an authentic leadership framework.

Recommendations for balancing leadership skills and business skills in organizations serving people with disabilities. Overall, executive and emerging leaders discussed the importance of balancing business skills and the implementation of values important in serving the population. Although these business- and value-related skill sets are qualitatively different, they were both seen by leaders as equally important to successful leadership practices in organizations serving people with disabilities. One executive leader confirmed the tension between the two necessary skill sets as such:

How to become a leader and to continue to be a leader while maintaining the focus of business operations on the provision of services. This is an extremely difficult balance for true leaders to maintain. Too much of either perspective can be difficult when operating a business that provides services to people.

This leader’s comments highlight the importance of balancing leadership skills and values with business skills and competencies. Other leaders discussed the need to decipher the differences between leadership and management skills. One executive leader noted the importance of “understanding the difference between leadership and management and understanding which situations require which discipline.” Overall, to foster successful emerging leaders in the organizations serving people with disabilities, executive leaders recommended that both the managerial business skill set and the values-based leadership skills be nurtured. Establishing an appropriate balance between these two sets of priorities was shown to be an important foundation of leadership development in these organizations among the executive leaders.

Recommendations for fostering quality staff and leadership development. Executive leaders were asked to discuss their senior staff’s strengths and weaknesses and to then make recommendations for how to best foster leadership development through training, education, and other resources. Executive leaders suggested that some major strengths of the senior staff included commitment to their agency’s mission and objectives and commitment to individuals with disabilities, both characteristics that defined authentic leadership in organizations serving people with disabilities. These reported senior staff strengths paralleled emerging and executive leaders’ perspectives that authentic leadership in organizations supporting people with disabilities is largely dependent on an awareness of the values that are central to the field. The executive leaders also expressed the belief that these strengths in values are accompanied by the senior staff’s strengths in skills and experience. Specifically, these skills and experiences included (a) extensive experience in the field and in their respective organizations, (b) a strong work ethic that often included a willingness to be proactive, and (c) modeling the way through their positive support, motivational presence, and promotion of teamwork. These strengths illustrated the leadership characteristics executive leaders saw as vital to the development of authentic leadership in organizations supporting people with disabilities. On the other hand, executive leaders believed that their senior staff sometimes lacked perspective, suffered from division and conflict, and were resistant to change and growth. This list of senior staff weaknesses indicated the need for authentic
leadership development activities that addressed the specific leadership challenges within a given organization serving people with disabilities.

To build on the strengths of senior staff and help them overcome weaknesses, we found that the analysis revealed resources that both emerging and executive leaders believed are helpful to developing authentic leadership skills and competencies in senior staff members. Executive and emerging leaders discussed the importance of lifelong learning, professional development, and networking within the field to enhance leadership skills. Executive and emerging leaders noted the importance of supporting staff in their efforts to attend conferences, workshops, retreats, and trainings that update professionals on changes in organizations serving people with disabilities, ethics, and leadership development. When asked about the types of skills that need to be developed in these programs, one emerging leader replied, “Leaders should be developing knowledge and skills in the functional area of their profession. Managerial and people skills are necessary parts of leadership development.” In addition, executive and emerging leaders stated that helping senior staff “climb the ladder” within their organizations was important in the development of new leaders. The goal was that these emerging leaders would eventually take on leadership roles, as they interacted with their superiors and climbed the workplace ladder into leadership positions.

Mentoring authentic leaders. Executive leaders also discussed the importance of providing mentoring relationships for their senior staff who may someday take on more senior leadership roles in their organizations. They stated that this one-on-one mentoring or coaching relationship fostered professional and personal development in their staff. One executive noted, “We have a curriculum for leadership development. Senior coaches are assigned to emerging leaders. Curriculum includes both professional and personal development.” Another executive affirmed, “Providing emerging leaders with senior coaches, those who are or have been CEOs, over an extended period of time has been successful in our organization.” A third stated, “Some leadership skills are innate. Others can be learned. Frankly, I think that mentoring and tutoring from a really talented exec in the many skills that a great exec needs would be the preferred way to bring along next-generation leaders.” These statements reinforce the need for lifelong learning, educational opportunities, and mentoring relationships for developing leaders in the organizations supporting people with disabilities.

Sustaining Authentic Leadership

Ultimately, for authentic leadership development to be meaningful, the initial foundations of authentic leadership must be sustained. Consequently, executive and emerging leaders were asked to identify current obligations, skills, challenges, and issues unique to the organizations serving people with disabilities. Both reported concerns they had for the sustainability and survival in the 21st century. To ensure the survival of these organizations, emerging leaders must be equipped to authentically lead the field into the future.

Adapting to advancements in technology. Emerging leaders were especially concerned with the ability of the field and its employees to continue to learn new technologies and stay current with contemporary developments. These developing leaders viewed technology as a crucial component in improving the services organizations provide and sustaining those organizations into the future. One emerging leader observed, “Our communication and data systems are antiquated. In a geographically dispersed service area we have great difficulty providing timely and accurate information to employees and consumers.” The technology focus of emerging leaders that executive leaders did not share indicated the importance of paying attention to the unique abilities and perspectives of emerging leaders when considering the necessary factors in sustaining organizations. Therefore, the authentic leadership principle of providing a supportive organizational context that promotes leader and follower growth was implicated in the emerging leaders’ focus on technology.

Succession plans. Among the 30 executive leaders, 43% reported that their organizations had no succession plan, which is an obvious concern for sustaining these agencies into the future. Although many emerging leaders welcomed the chance to act on their loyalty to the organization and skills by pursuing the executive positions at their organizations, many others expressed their hesitation to move into executive positions. Stress, demands on time, satisfaction with a current position, and dislike for the types of responsibilities they saw as necessary at the executive level were all factors in this hesitation. One emerging leader wrote, “I am
Despite some concerns, the future of leadership in organizations serving people with disabilities is dependent on an awareness of the importance of succession planning for the sustenance of authentic leadership in organizations supporting people with disabilities.

Both executive and emerging leaders expressed concern over the succession issue as it related to the younger generation of workers in organizations supporting people with disabilities. Executives are concerned about the lack of replacements for their positions; one executive said, "We recognize a need to identify and mentor new leaders, but do not see many potential candidates for new leadership positions. We need help planning their succession." Leaders from both positions felt that difficulty with succession was partly due to the low resources available. For organizations to sustain authentic leadership for a new generation of leaders, those organizational leaders will need to confront generational differences and close the leadership gap.

**Discussion and Conclusions**

The purpose of this study was to explore executive and emerging leaders’ concepts and practices regarding leadership in organizations providing supports and services to people with disabilities. Findings exemplified the principles of authentic leadership, suggesting that an authentic leadership framework is ideal for the analysis of leadership in organizations serving people with disabilities as well as leadership development for the future. In addition, although we found that certain values and skills emerged as necessary components of authentic leadership in organizations supporting people with disabilities, other variables emerged as necessary for continued leadership, such as the organizational structure, culture, and succession planning.

**Defining Authentic Leadership**

The researchers found that, overall, executive and emerging leaders in organizations supporting people with disabilities believed the most important defining element of leadership in the field was a dedication to the people served and the organizational mission. These findings suggest that authentic leadership in organizations serving people with disabilities is dependent on an awareness of valuing the needs of clients, in addition to open communication and transparency of these values with staff and clients. These values and skills reflect an authentic leadership framework, which emphasizes the importance of transparency and communication (Gardner et al., 2005, Ilies et al., 2005).

As suggested by Avolio and Gardner (2005), leaders’ self-awareness of these unique values and practices is essential in organizations supporting people with disabilities as they move forward to develop and sustain authentic leadership in the future.

**Implications of emerging and executive leaders’ different perspectives.** Although there was some agreement between emerging and executive leaders about values and leadership skills, there were also differing opinions on the relevant values and skills necessary for authentic leaders of the future. As executive and emerging leaders prepare for leadership transitions in organizations serving people with disabilities, these leaders will need to know not only the ways in which they agree upon the necessity of authentic leadership, but must also be aware of the ways in which their perspectives on leadership diverge from one another.

When asked to list the most important leadership values for organizations serving people with disabilities, both executive and emerging leaders felt that a passion for the mission and people served as well as integrity were the most central values. However, more emerging leaders felt that honesty, respect for diverse individuals and views, and compassion were important; executive leaders did not attribute the same importance to these values, but more executive leaders noted ethics as important to leadership than did emerging leaders. The fact that more emerging leaders chose honesty, integrity, and compassion as important character traits of leaders in their organizations and more executive leaders emphasized ethics seems to suggest that both types of leaders are concerned with the transparency of leadership in their organizations. However, the differences between the two types of leaders in regards to addressing diversity may indicate that emerging leaders are increasingly conscious of the growing need to be sensitive to the differences and potential conflicts among both the people served and

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the people employed by organizations serving people with disabilities.

When asked to list the most important leadership skills for organizations serving people with disabilities, both executive and emerging leaders expressed that communication, people skills, and financial development and management were important. However, more executive leaders felt that team development and adaptability were important, whereas more emerging leaders found envisioning and planning for the future, creativity, and an ability to influence others as fundamental components of leadership. The results that emerged from the emerging leaders' responses revealed a hesitance to take on executive-level positions in organizations serving people with disabilities; the fact that more emerging leaders felt that charisma and the ability to influence others were important to leading these organizations, whereas none of the executive leaders listed it as important, suggests that there may be a disconnect between the way executive leaders view their positions and the way emerging leaders view them. More executive leaders listed team development and adaptability as important, indicating that they placed less emphasis on the efforts of the individual leaders than emerging leaders and more emphasis on developing an environment in organizations serving people with disabilities where open communication among staff members and community members facilitates effective leadership. An emphasis on adaptability suggests that executives believed that this need for teamwork necessarily involved the leader’s willingness to adapt, rather than his or her ability to influence others to adapt. These varying views of leadership between executive and emerging leaders revealed a need for focused conversations between emerging and executive leaders about the future of organizations serving people with disabilities. Emerging leaders can learn the importance of teamwork and adaptability as they become executives; these conversations may allay emerging leaders’ fears and hesitation concerning their ability to lead these organizations. At the same time, emerging leaders can educate executive leaders about the new ideas and technologies for which both types of leaders can start building foundations. Increasing communication between emerging and executive leaders, however, necessarily involves a discussion of how to ease an authentic leadership transition for organizations in the future.

Developing Authentic Leadership

Executive and emerging leaders emphasized the importance of developing an understanding of the balance between managerial business skills and values-based leadership skills as crucial to serving individuals with disabilities and their organizational missions. Executive and emerging leaders asserted that organizations can promote both authentic, values-based leadership skills and business-related skills by providing developing leaders with opportunities for continuing their education, gaining professional development, and networking within the field. These recommendations for leadership development in organizations supporting people with disabilities are consistent with the theories of authentic leadership, which promote a supportive work environment for authentic leadership development (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Overall, the leaders’ acknowledgment of the importance of lifelong learning and growth opportunities supports Avolio and Gardner’s (2005) belief of the importance of a supportive work environment that encourages continuous learning.

The executive and emerging leaders’ recommendations for mentoring also reflects the importance of developing followers in authentic leadership development (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). According to this concept, emerging authentic leaders develop through observing and interacting with established leaders who model the values of the organization. The executive leaders echoed Kunreuther’s (2005) recommendations for intergenerational dialogue and mentoring between veteran and developing leaders, supporting Avolio and Gardner’s (2005) recommendations for authentic leadership development through modeling. Avolio and Gardner (2005) noted that leaders who model the values that are important to an organization may create the same awareness and modeling of values in followers, inspiring those developing leaders to strive toward common goals for the organization. Leaders in the field have the opportunity to create an open work environment in their organizations to help their “followers,” or emerging leaders, strive toward common goals and values by creating mentoring relationships.

Sustaining Authentic Leadership

Within the sample of 30 executive leaders, 43% noted that their agencies did not have a succession plan, and only 50% noted that their agencies did
have succession plans. Two executive leaders did not indicate whether their organizations had a succession plan. In addition, executive and emerging leaders were concerned about an insufficient pool of prospective leaders to succeed outgoing leaders of organizations serving people with disabilities. Many emerging leaders expressed their reservations about taking on executive leadership positions. Although each of these concerns was valid, succession planning is not merely concerned with who will replace the current leader but is concerned with what competencies the organization will need in the future and where in the organization these competencies exist or need to be developed (Kesler, 2002; Kur & Bunning, 2002).

Adams (2004) recommended executive transition management (ETM) services to organizations planning for successions. Using ETM, the process to find leadership successors must begin “months, even years before the actual transition takes place” (p. 11). The development stages that lead up to an ultimate succession decision are just as vital as that final result. CEOs’ focus on the ultimate goal of finding leaders to replace outgoing ones, therefore, may be misguided. Succession planning for organizations providing services and supports to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities must be an ongoing process that incorporates the definition and development of potential emerging, authentic leaders. Although the definition, development, and sustenance of authentic leadership are concepts that need to be examined in greater detail, it is clear from the interconnected nature of each of these elements of leadership that they cannot be considered separately from one another; each step and action in leadership growth informs the next.

Limitations

The current study had several limitations that must be addressed. First, the small, nonrandom sample (N = 62) of the current study cannot be generalized to the experiences and opinions of all executive and emerging leaders in the organizations supporting people with disabilities. The generalizability of this study was also limited by the use of ANCOR’s member list and other national organizations’ lists, which may not be representative of all organizations providing supports and services to people with disabilities. Many of these organizations served large numbers of people and employed large numbers of staff and are not representative of smaller and newer organizations. In addition, the quality of the services provided to people with disabilities by the participating organizations was unknown; if the study had used quality indicators to evaluate the services and outcomes these organizations were helping people achieve, the implications of the findings may have been affected. However, the study was exploratory and the open-ended questions of the surveys allowed leaders in these organizations to share their opinions and perspectives in their own words, which is a crucial first step in the exploration of authentic leadership development in these organizations. Second, because the survey was administered online, the investigators were unable to follow up with the leaders on their opinions. Therefore, leaders were unable to clarify or elaborate on their perspectives in follow-up interviews or surveys, limiting the analyses of the results. The researchers could not define leaders’ unique meanings for terms used by respondents, especially those terms identified as values (e.g., honesty, integrity, ethics). For example, each leader might have thought of the term “integrity” differently, but the researchers were unable to clarify the subjective thoughts of each leader. The current study was exploratory, however, and searched for key terms leaders would use about leadership without receiving prompts from pre-existing definitions of leadership values and skills. Future research can work to establish constructs or refine existing constructs on leadership values and skills that were identified by participants as vital to leadership in organizations providing services and supports to people with disabilities.

The online anonymity of the survey’s administration also prevented us from categorizing leaders into regional affiliations. Knowledge of the geographic locations of the organizations may have added another layer of analysis. If the study had access to the geographic locations of participating leaders, the analysis of responses to leadership needs and challenges would have been able to differentiate between regional differences or similarities, which may have, in turn, exposed region-specific challenges. Despite the limitations of this study, the responses of executive and emerging leaders from organizations supporting people with disabilities were valuable tools for exploring attitudes toward and perspectives on leadership in the field. Anticipating widespread leadership transitions, organizations providing services and supports to people with disabilities need to examine what defines authentic
leadership in the field, how to promote an authentic brand of leadership development, and which organizational structures and methods will sustain the effectiveness of authentic leadership into the future. Although other leadership frameworks may also be appropriate for examining leadership in organizations serving people with disabilities, authentic leadership provides a structure for thinking about the importance of the unique values, qualities, and relationships that contribute to development and leadership in these organizations.

The current study can offer several recommendations for future research. Because this study constituted an exploratory, preliminary investigation of leadership in organizations supporting people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, less open-ended research inquiries will be necessary in the future. Future research may acquire a larger sample, with representation of a wider variety of organizations that currently serve people with disabilities. A major limitation of this study was its assumption of the participating organizational leaders’ effectiveness. In the future, research on leadership development in organizations serving people with disabilities should use quality indicators to assess organizations as part of the evaluation of leadership in these contexts of excellence, or lack of excellence. Future studies may also contribute by clarifying and defining the leadership values and skills that were listed by leaders in the current study. Ultimately, more probing research into issues of organizational leadership has the potential to inform policy change within organizations serving people with disabilities, authentic leadership being: Understanding leader-follower outcomes. Leadership Quarterly, 16, 373–394.

References


