**Winning with Authentic Leadership**

#### Matrix Headliner Awardee Denise A. Gray-Felder, APR, chief communications officer of Michigan Medicine, delivered a keynote speech on authentic leadership at Celebrate & Elevate: A Toast to Women in Communications on June 6, 2018. The following is the main part of her speech:

…So what about this concept of an authentic leader winning?

I suspect that authenticity is as hard, if not harder, to own than leadership. There are probably many reasons, but for us as women, socialization plays a significant part.

Starting as small girls – at least for women in my generation from the west side of Detroit – we grew up imagining being someone that we were not: thinner with a perfect size 4 like Gidget – taller and prettier surely. Or of being a better pitcher or more accurate homerun hitter. A faster runner, a better dancer. A songbird who put Aretha to shame. Straight hair along with a Wendy Ward Charm School certificate of completion.

Not always the last one picked on the team each night of the summer when we played street softball.

I cannot recall a single time between the ages of 8 to 14 when a girlfriend confided in me that she was perfectly happy with who she was or how she looked.

Yet we were incredibly smart, safe, well-fed, well-groomed and adored by our soon-to-be upwardly mobile, middle-class parents – living in neighborhoods where everyone knew your name. And your story. And cared about you and loved you. (And those that are still alive still do know your name.)

That said, I CAN recall many a teenaged boy in junior high who overly estimated his intelligence, his good looks, his charm and even his dance moves – almost daily. (Junior High: the original rite of passage.)

In my case it was Ronald (“no-last-name” to protect the innocent) at Beaubien Junior High.

(I am quite pleased that the younger women in my orbit now are more authentic than we ever were back then. I’m pretty sure that my daughter will not put on lipstick to take out the trash. In fact, I’ll bank on it.)

So when and how did we become – or will we become – authentic leaders?

I suggest some in my generation of “women who could do more” were helped on their journey to leadership due in part to **the political and social turmoil of the times – during our formative years.**

Before we could wear stockings, we, as a nation, buried a President – the first to give our black, brown and yellow parents hope during tumultuous times.

We followed that with our collective “long walk to Martin Luther King’s gravesite” and the New York to Washington memorial train carrying Bobby Kennedy’s body.

We didn’t know it at the time, as little girls, but the grieving widow in the pink suit may have been foreshadowing our future marked by social discord, inexplicable racial hatred, basic dignities ignored, people of difference scorned, and families ripped apart unnecessarily. Politics and our country unhinged. Year: 2018.

Then and now.

Yet, what our parents may have characterized as tough times, gave birth to greater self-realization among Blacks, women and recent immigrants, notably from the Caribbean, Puerto Rico and, Asia-Pacific. My dad among them.

**And there I was, in-authentically headed for authenticity. Unknowingly.**

My undergraduate years sculpted me, and many others, in ways that we did not perhaps see, nor understand, until we sent our own kids off to universities.

What is it about our youth that plays so prominently into today’s narrative of authentic women leaders?

A – Someone needed to be in charge. Natural leaders stood up; others were dragged up. The smart men fell back.

At the University of Michigan, 4 years before Alice (my roommate-to-be) and I showed up for orientation, students chained themselves in the U-M Administration building demanding racial equity in the student body. When we – Alice and I -- became active on campus, it was about the women’s movement as often as about racial inequality.

We learned, quickly, that our authenticity included convincing others to believe in themselves and their abilities – as much as we believed in them.

From those formative years, we, a collective of women, tried on different leadership styles, sometimes 2 or 3 times a year. We scoured everything Gloria Steinem wrote, thinking there was an epiphany in there somewhere.

Others signed up for global activism fancying ourselves Winnie Mandela or Gracha Machel.

And to our complete and utter delight, we drafted and introduced an amendment to the U.S. Constitution insuring equal rights for women. Within WICI (previous name of AWC) and elsewhere we worked and worked for passage – yet we are still one vote shy of ratification, 40 years later.

We despaired – and then moved on with our lives in black and navy blue suits – showing up with our uniform *de jure* in classrooms, boardrooms and newsrooms.

I started to see the truly authentic women leaders for what they are: ahead of their time as well as visible targets. For many institutions do not want people who put value before profit; right before expedient; who challenge in order to educate.

**An authentic leader** continually exposes you to new ways of thinking – takes the road less travelled – asks “what if?” – when most would prefer to be safe just doing it the old way.

**The truly authentic leader** challenges you to think beyond and perform above where you are – and do far more (than you think you can do) …

**An authentic leader** directs you to follow the horizon when you have not even seen the sun for days.

She defines success differently.

The dean of the U-M Ross School is a mountain climber. One of the things he says often sticks with me – for mountain climbers, the goal is not to get to the top of the mountain. It is to get back home. **An authentic leader** presents multiple trails home.

There is fair amount of literature written about authentic leaders – much by scholars, such as my Ross Business School colleagues in Ann Arbor. Or by Wall Street types who believe that any of us can be rich, and we deserve to be rich. Carla Harris, of Morgan Stanley, is one such writer and speaker.

**Authentic leaders** are honest, unselfish and driven FIRST by values not by ambition. They leverage their life stories in the workplace – and in every other aspect of being. They win not because they are always right, but because they are most often REAL.

Before I close, let me share some other attributes of authentic leaders:

1. Courage
2. Forward-thinking and hopeful; a visionary
3. Impatient – not satisfied with the status quo
4. Values-driven/ethical
5. Compassionate and passionate
6. Honest and a direct relationship builder
7. Self-aware and genuine
8. Brings her or his real self to the workplace
9. Truthful - promotes openness and self-reflection
10. Understands and embraces her own life stories, and of others on the team.

I am personally frustrated too often when trying to keep my authentic self alive, or witnessing others trying to keep theirs, in some institutions. I admire, greatly, women who manage to hold on to authenticity when it is easier to give in.

For each of you, I **will you** the courage to live the life – work and personal – that you define, based on the terms you set. Authentic leadership is needed in every aspect of our lives, our state, our country – and our world.

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