



Authentic Leadership in Pediatric Healthcare

By Matthew A. Love, President and CEO, *Nicklaus Children's Health System*

Mark Twain, one of America's great writers, once said, "Always do right.

This will gratify some people and astonish the rest." As the CEO and President of South Florida's leading pediatric healthcare system, I aspire to do just that in my daily interactions with colleagues, patients and families, and the communities we serve. Doing what is right, in fact, is a central pillar of leadership, not just in healthcare but across industries.

However, leadership in healthcare is a complex and demanding endeavor. In our industry, we don't sell products or offer services that consumers simply may or may not purchase. In healthcare, we pursue one of the most precious goods: human health. I would argue that leadership in pediatric healthcare adds an additional layer of responsibility as the group we focus on—children and adolescents—are literally the future of our society. At Nicklaus Children's Health System, we play an important role in making sure that children in South Florida and beyond grow up healthy so they can live rewarding, happy, and productive lives.

Promoting and ensuring the health of children requires *authentic leadership*. The term is broadly defined as being truthful, transparent, and engaging, and it requires a high level of self-awareness by the leader. In sum, it means that a leader is their authentic self in interactions with employees, colleagues, other leaders, board members, and the communities they serve. Studies have shown that working for genuine and authentic managers leads to a happier and more productive workforce.¹ This should not come as a surprise to anyone—following one's values and convictions and being self-aware when it comes to strengths and weaknesses, are fundamental to being a credible manager of any team or organization.

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1 William Gardner, et al., "Authentic Leadership: A Review of the Literature and Research Agenda," *The Leadership Quarterly*, December 2011.

Authentic leadership—especially in pediatric healthcare—goes beyond these foundational features. It includes a high level of empathy and vulnerability on the side of the leader as well as the sustainability of the organization. Employees and leaders throughout our organization express very high levels of empathy and kindness in their day-to-day interactions with pediatric patients and their families. That is not simply a requirement of working with children, it's a dominant character trait of those who are passionate about their work in pediatric healthcare. One cannot be an authentic leader, particularly in healthcare, without high levels of empathy.

Authentic leadership requires a leader to be:

- Genuine
- Transparent
- Self-aware
- Vulnerable
- Empathetic

Authenticity is an important trait among leaders in pediatric healthcare because of the particular demands that arise from taking care of children's health.

All too often, I have seen leaders in my career that were self-conscious about their feelings. They considered expressing emotions as something negative when leading people. I strongly disagree. An authentic leader needs to be able to express feelings, even vulnerabilities. We are all human and we all have days when we are happier or sadder than others. In reality, sad things happen at children's hospitals. Hopefully, the positive days dominate for everyone at Nicklaus Children's. But employees, clinicians, and leaders should not hesitate to show their feelings. I, for one, would not enjoy working with anyone who does not show and discuss emotions. If you are not comfortable sharing your feelings, then pediatric healthcare is probably not for you.

At Nicklaus Children's, authentic leadership goes beyond operational leaders and also includes our boards. As volunteers, our board members are actively involved in our organization, advising operational leaders in a wide variety of areas, thereby having a significant impact not only on the success of our health system but also the children and communities we serve. To do that successfully, board members have to be authentic in their passion and commitment to children's health and pediatric healthcare. Across our four different boards, we are very lucky to have board members who are passionate and have a genuine desire to make a positive impact on children's health.

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Key Takeaways for Boards and Senior Leaders

Authentic leadership needs to be at the center of all pediatric healthcare systems and health policy if we are serious about ensuring the health and well-being of the youngest members of our communities. In healthcare, there are several angles to authentic leadership:

1. Be authentic as leaders—self-reflect and be open about your emotions.
2. Expand authentic leadership beyond organizational managers to include your boards as well as community partners.
3. Strive to be an authentic organization that firmly pursues its mission and doubles down on its focus on sustainability.

If the pediatric healthcare industry wants to succeed and be sustainable long term, in often challenging micro- and macro-level circumstances, we need to place more emphasis on *authentic* leadership. Only when we lead in an authentic manner can we face the challenges ahead of us. As Mark Twain reminded us: always do right!

The Governance Institute thanks Matthew A. Love, President and CEO of Nicklaus Children's Health System in Miami, Florida, for contributing this article. He can be reached at matthew.love@nicklaushealth.org. For more information about Nicklaus Children's, please visit nicklauschildrens.org and follow Matthew A. Love on LinkedIn at [linkedin.com/in/mattalove](https://www.linkedin.com/in/mattalove).

