

WHAT WOULD DOLLY DO?: Dolly Parton as Authentic Leader

Abstract

While Dolly Parton may be best known for her distinguished music career, her philanthropic and community work is equally impressive. This paper explains how Parton's work in these areas can illustrate the principles of authentic leadership from a popular media perspective. Parton's popularity and wide range of fans across generations and demographics make a case study of her work a poignant and effective pedagogical tool as an introduction to authentic leadership. We share an array of resources in popular media that includes videos, podcasts, and popular press articles and offer questions to facilitate class discussion and about the qualities of an authentic leader.

Introduction

Many people know her as a flamboyant, larger-than-life personality aglow with rhinestones shining on stage, with the lilt of an angel and a heart as beautiful as her home state of Tennessee. However, Dolly Parton's tale began in the hills of an almost unknown town called Locust Ridge, near Tennessee's Great Smoky Mountains. She was one of 12 children in a small town with little industry in the 1940s and began writing music when she was a child, inspired by the natural beauty in east Tennessee (Rockwell, 1975). Dolly has shared that her mother was an essential piece of her development, in large part because her mother instilled within her that she could do anything and be anyone that she dreamed possible. Quintessentially, Dolly began life emotionally supported by parents that showed her love, understanding, and respect (Schmidt, 2017). Her father never learned to read, which was not unheard of in more rural areas of

Tennessee in that era, but the stigma of illiteracy her father endured never left her thoughts (Dixon, 2020).

While Dolly is best known for her long and distinguished musical career, we will focus on her as an authentic leader who has made significant civic and philanthropic contributions locally, regionally, nationally, and even internationally.

Background

With her family's encouragement, Dolly's love of song began early in her life. She started writing poetry and crafting musical instruments so that she could transform her words into melodies. Fortunately, her uncle Bill Owens forged a path for her to gain exposure in the music world (Clouse, 2021). After years of practice and some radio play, Dolly found herself living her dream

of singing on stage at the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville, Tennessee as a teenager, introduced by Johnny Cash (Schmidt, 2017).

Big dreams have taken her from the soundstage to the big screen, entrepreneurship to philanthropy, endearing herself to an eclectic fanbase. Because she grew up in poverty, Dolly understood the plight of her Tennessee kinfolk and neighbors. So, she began several initiatives that would enliven and enrich the areas around where she grew up.

In 1986 she revitalized a theme park, Dollywood, near her ancestral home to generate economic revenue and jobs for the local community (Selinsky, 2001). One of her most prominent philanthropic endeavors is her Imagination Library, which started in 1995 as a response to high illiteracy rates in her hometown community (Neyer, Szumlas, & Vaughn, 2021). Her vision “was to foster a love of reading among her county’s preschool children and their families” (Imagination Library, 2021). The impetus for Imagination Library was her father, whom she felt was a brilliant man, but also surmised that he would have been able to do much more with his life if he had been literate (Dixon, 2020). What began as a local initiative is now sending over a million books a month to children worldwide (Neyer, Szumlas, & Vaughn, 2021).

In 2016, when a natural disaster struck the state, Dolly used her voice and capital to help to support relief efforts with the Gatlinburg, Tennessee fires (Flanagan, 2017). Dolly Parton’s My People Fund gave more than \$8 million to people who lost their homes in the Gatlinburg fires (Ahillen, 2017). In addition, Dolly recently donated a million dollars to Vanderbilt University in Nashville to help fund COVID-19 vaccine research (Ives, 2021).

Starting around 2004, Dolly began to use digital media to cultivate her brand globally (Rocque, 2020). Another generation of fans was created in the interim, intrigued by her “what you see is what you get” attitude. Her relevancy continues to grow as she appeals to an array of individuals where she transcends age, political leanings, religious affiliations, music tastes, and geography. She has been outspoken about her faith while also being adamant about Black lives’ importance and the plight of LGBTQIA2s+ issues in her philanthropic endeavors (Renkl, 2021). “Authentic yet synthetic, tough yet haunted, brilliant yet *aw-shucks*, with a constructed,

surgical femininity that somehow circles back into genderless and asexual. Wealthy enough to buy herself some taste, she always held on to a poor person’s idea of glamor and managed to make tacky classy” (Crispin, 2020).

Authentic Leadership

Authentic leadership describes a genuine person in leadership roles – they are the same in that role as they are in their personal lives (Luthans & Avolio, 2003). This section will focus on two well-regarded schools of thought to define authentic leadership and use their conceptual models as frameworks to analyze Dolly Parton as an authentic leader.

First, George (2003, p. 13) offers a more practioner-based definition of authentic leaders as “leaders [who] use their natural abilities, but they also recognize their shortcomings and work hard to overcome them. They lead with purpose, meaning, and values. They build enduring relationships with people. Others follow them because they know where they stand. They are consistent and self-disciplined. When their principles are tested, they refuse to compromise. Authentic leaders are dedicated to developing themselves because they know that becoming a leader takes a lifetime of personal growth.” Alternatively, based on the more scholarly model of authentic leadership, Avolio, Luthans, and Walumba (2004) define authentic leaders as “those who are deeply aware of how they think and behave and are perceived by others as being aware of their own and others’ values/moral perspectives, knowledge, and strengths; aware of the context in which they operate; and who are confident, hopeful, optimistic, resilient, and of high moral character” (p. 4).

George’s (George, Sims, McLean, & Mayer, 2007) work was built on interviews with 125 diverse leaders where the research team asked, “How can people become and remain authentic leaders?” He presented five dimensions of an authentic leader: pursuing purpose with passion, practicing solid values, leading with heart, establishing enduring relationships, and demonstrating self-discipline (George, 2010). Luthans and Avolio (2003) developed a multidimensional model of the authentic leadership construct where they identified four components of authentic leadership: self-awareness,

internalized perspective, balanced processing, and relational transparency. Table 1 summarizes each of these authentic leadership characteristics.

Table 1

Characteristics of Authentic Leadership (George, 2010; Luthans & Avolio, 2003; Northouse, 2021)

Model	Character	Description
George (2010)	Purpose	knows what they are about and where they are going; deep-seated interest in what they are doing and genuinely and passionately care about their work
	Heart	compassion and empathy for others
	Values	defined by personal values; shaped by personal beliefs; do not compromise values under challenging situations
	Relationships	trust and commitment built on the openness and depth of relationships
	Self-discipline	sets high standards for themselves; focus and determination; accept full responsibility for outcomes
Luthans & Avolio (2003)	Self-awareness	understanding of one's strengths and weaknesses; mindful of the impact one has on others
	Relational Transparency	appropriately shares feelings, motives, and inclinations with others; showing both positive and negative aspects of self to others; open communication
	Balanced Processing	objectively analyzes all relevant data before coming to a decision; solicit views that challenge their positions; avoids favoritism; remains unbiased
	Internalized Moral Perspective	guided by internal moral standards and values; actions consistent with expressed beliefs and morals

Other principles we find in authentic leadership include that leadership is developed over a lifetime, and critical events, or “triggers,” can contribute significantly to leadership development (Luthans & Avolio, 2003). These triggers may be positive events such as a promotion, an influential mentor, reading an important book, or adverse events such as the death of a loved one, a negative evaluation, or a conflict with a co-worker (Northouse, 2021). Luthans and Avolio (2003) also describe positive psychological antecedents that may contribute to authentic leadership. These antecedents include positive psychological capacities that includes confidence, hope, optimism, resilience, and moral/ethical. Gardner et al. (2021) said that most individuals embrace authentic leadership principles because they can readily identify with one or more leaders that they have worked with who they see as practicing authentic leaders.. Dolly Parton is an especially poignant example of authentic leadership because many people connect with her genuineness and resonate with her relatable grit.

Dolly Parton as an Authentic Leader

This section discusses authentic leadership characteristics related to Dolly Parton as a leader in her community and philanthropic endeavors. We have grouped similar attributes between George’s (2010) five dimensions of authentic leadership and Luthans and Avolio’s (2003) four components of authentic leadership as outlined above.

Purpose, Values, and Morals. Two of George’s (2010) dimensions of authentic leadership include purpose and values. He refers to purpose as an authentic leader knowing what they are about and where they are going and to values as involving one’s personal beliefs. Similarly, one of Luthans and Avolio’s (2003) components of authentic leadership is an internalized moral perspective where the leader is guided by internal moral standards and values.

One of our favorite Dolly quotes is “Find out who you are and do it on purpose.” Dolly’s quest for understanding her life’s purpose has been a life-long exercise in self-exploration. Through her songwriting and interviews, she illustrates the depth commensurate with an examined life.

For Dolly, her core values are seen not only in her impeccable work ethic but also in her unwavering faith in

the God of her understanding. She makes no secret of either of these qualities, and her brand is bolstered despite them, in some cases. She always arrives early, goes the extra mile to get what she wants, demonstrates resilience, and is thought of as one of the smartest, most sincere, and respectful professionals in the industry (Cole, 2014). Moreover, because of her well-known faith, she has not alienated her conservative Christian base, as expected after showing support for Black Lives Matter in the wake of tension over policing during the pandemic in 2020 (Cohen, 2020).

Every time she rallies for literacy, disaster relief, fundamental human rights, or any notable cause, she acts out in the world the sense of duty she feels according to her set of morals and values. Dolly sets an example with her actions and philanthropy that align with her unique code. In early 2021, after she helped fund the vaccine for Covid-19, she challenged everyone to be vaccinated as she received her injection and sang, “I just want to say to all of you cowards out there: Don’t be such a chicken squat. Get out there and get your shot” (Ives, 2021).

Relationships and Heart. The Luthans and Avolio (2003) model includes relational transparency as one of their four components of authentic leadership. They describe relational transparency with behaviors that include sharing feelings, motives, and inclinations and open communication. Likewise, George’s (2010) model includes heart which is showing compassion and empathy for others, and relationships which involves trust and commitment. The models share a commonality in including the the importance of the emotional aspect of relationships in authentic leadership.

Dolly claims to be a sensitive person who wears her heart on her sleeve. She said, “I was born with a happy heart. I’m always looking for things to be better” (Cole, 2014). While she has received hundreds of offers to judge various contests, she has declined them all, saying that it is hard for her to tell someone they are better than, or not as good as, someone else (Parton, 2012).

She takes her commitments very seriously in both her personal and professional relationships. She has been married more than 50 years (although she and Carl Dean are rarely seen in public together). Her best friend

in elementary school remains her best friend today, and she has many business relationships that have endured her entire career. She says, “I think success has a lot to do with commitment. They are committed to me, and I am committed to them. It also has a great deal to do with the wisdom of deciding just whom you are committing” (Parton, 2012, pp. 70-71)

Dolly wants others to feel like they know her and that they can relate to her. In her book, *Dolly on Dolly*, she mentions her battle with the emotional turmoil that affected her so much that she contemplated dying by suicide (Schmidt, 2017). Mental health troubles are often either hidden or omitted by celebrities, so Dolly candidly sharing her battle with depression with her fanbase is viscerally courageous in her level of honesty and transparency.

In her song *Better get to Livin'*, Dolly talks about giving, forgiving, and loving while moving on with your life. Baldoni (2008) took this tune to heart concerning leadership when he authored an article titled “The Leadership Lessons of Dolly Parton” in the *Harvard Business Review*. He said that leaders “give of themselves so that others can succeed,” “cannot afford grudges,” “encourages people,” and must “let go of the past...and cycles of negativity that hinders personal growth as well as alienates the very people the individual should be leading.”

Self-Discipline, Self-Awareness, and Balanced Processing. Our third category of authentic leadership qualities center on the “self” aspect of authentic leadership. George’s (2010) model includes self-discipline described as setting high standards, focus and determination, and accepting responsibility. While Luthans and Avolio’s (2003) model involves self-awareness (understanding one’s strengths and weaknesses and mindful of the impact one has on others) and balanced processing (objectively analyzing relevant data in making decisions, soliciting views that challenge their positions, and avoiding favoritism/bias). Self-discipline, self-awareness, and balanced processing describe the internal aspects of authentic leadership involving motivation, objectively knowing oneself, and decision-making

Dolly is proud of where she came from and who she is. Her stories, often through song, reflect impactful events

and people in her life who have shaped her, influenced her, and supported her life’s work (Fox, 2016; Parton, 2012). She is aware of her seemingly contradictions of being genuine yet with a “fake” appearance, a serious businesswoman who is “sexy,” and a public figure who has a very private marriage and makes it a point to learn from her mistakes (Cole, 2014; Parton, 2012)

On many occasions, Dolly has discussed how dedicated she is to her work, and part of that work is staying focused on her dreams (Parton, 2012). Dolly is known for her commanding work ethic and dedication to reach her goals. She estimates that she has written 5,000 songs in her career (Fox, 2016). In her own words, “I don’t require a lot of sleep.” Parton said. “Three to five hours I can work on. Five hours I like to get. But usually, I’m between three and five. But usually if I’m on the job, I’ll take a little power nap” (Heyward, Giulia, and Willingham, 2020).

Since Dolly’s career spans over decades and demographics, she has had to create an equilibrium between what she would wish to share about a topic and what she has spoken about. Gracefully staying out of gossip, mudslinging, and politics (until recently) shows Dolly’s tacit grasp of balanced processing.

Teaching Authentic Leadership through the Lens of Dolly Parton

This section curates popular media resources – videos, popular press articles, podcasts, and social media – that illustrate the many facets of Dolly Parton’s life as an authentic leader. With each resource, we include the authentic leadership characteristics from George’s model and/or Luthans and Avolio’s model as a roadmap for leadership educators. Following the resources, we have included discussion questions that can be applied and adapted to the resources.

Videos

- **Commencement Address: (Purpose, Values, Relationships, Internal Moral Perspective)** In this 18-minute video, Dolly delivers the commencement address for the University of Tennessee College of Arts and Sciences class of 2009, where she shares the mission for the Dollywood Foundation - to dream more, learn

more, care more, and be more – and how those principles can apply to the graduates.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EuOm2LlOoU>

- Dolly Parton Katie Couric 2016 Interview: (Self-awareness, Balanced Processing) In this 13-minute interview, Dolly talks about why she is so attractive to a wide demographic. She is also candid about her “look” and how she has a knack for the balancing act of remaining being humble without being condescending while also portraying confidence.
- <https://sports.yahoo.com/news/dolly-parton-love-songs-rhinestones-and-no-1-hits-033420379.html>
- Dolly Parton on Giving Back and What She Wants Her Legacy to Be: (Heart, Purpose) This inspiring 2019 7-minute video showcases Dolly’s philanthropic efforts.
<https://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/video/dolly-parton-giving-back-legacy-part-66958578>
- Beyond the Headline: Dolly Parton, the Philanthropist: (Purpose, Self-discipline) This 2020 video gives a brief, 2-minute summary of Dolly’s philanthropic efforts over the years.
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=niRaaAcYQqk>
- TIME 100 Talks with Dolly Parton: (Values, Relationships, Self-awareness, Relational Transparency, Internalized Moral Perspective) In this 2020, 16-minute video and her first Zoom call, Dolly talks about being a role model, current issues (including the pandemic and her thoughts on LGBTQIA2s+), Imagination Library, feminism, and how she has grown over the last year.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UyGUf2_uucw

Popular Press Articles

- Turning Pages: Inside Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library: (Purpose, Values, Balanced Processing, Internalized Moral Perspective) This 2021

Rolling Stone article outlines the history, community partnerships, and impact of the Imagination Library.

- <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-country/dolly-parton-imagination-library-1138409/>
- The United States of Dolly Parton: (Values, Relationships, Self-discipline, Balanced Processing, Internalized Moral Perspective) This 2020 *New Yorker* piece gives an account of Dolly’s life and popularity from a political and cultural perspective.
- <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/10/19/the-united-states-of-dolly-parton>
- Is There Anything We Can All Agree On? Yes: Dolly Parton: (Self-discipline, Self-awareness) This 2019 *New York Times* article discusses Dolly’s career renaissance and broad popularity.
- <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/21/arts/music/dolly-parton.html>
- Dolly Parton Funded the Latest Coronavirus Vaccine, and It’s Just Another Example of the Ultrawealthy Singer’s Quiet Policy Work: (Purpose, Heart, Values, Balanced Processing, Internalized Moral Perspective) This 2020 *Business Insider* article highlights Dolly’s \$1 million donation to Vanderbilt University’s coronavirus research while also describing her other notable philanthropic work.
- <https://www.businessinsider.com/dolly-parton-funded-donation-coronavirus-vaccine-moderna-vanderbilt-2020-11>

Podcasts

- Dolly’s Parton’s America: (Variety of characteristics depending on episode) This podcast includes a collection of nine episodes from 2019 with interviews with Dolly and Dolly experts on a range of topics, including her faith, her childhood and family, her career as a songwriter and musician, politics, and being a unifier, and Appalachia and Southern shame

and identity. This podcast has won a Peabody Award for excellence.

- <https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/dolly-partons-america>
- Brené with Dolly Parton on Songtelling, Empathy, and Shining Our Lights: (Purpose, Values, Relationships, Self-discipline, Relational Transparency, Balanced Processing, Internalized Moral Perspective) In this November 2020, 47-minute podcast, author Brené Brown talks with Dolly on a range of topics, including the challenges of leading organizations.
- <https://brenebrown.com/podcast/brene-with-dolly-parton-on-songtelling-empathy-and-shining-our-lights/#close-popup>

Social Media

- Dolly posts regularly on all popular platforms, including Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram.

Discussion Questions and Assignments

The following questions are designed to generate a robust discussion about Dolly as an authentic leader with a universal application of a single or combination of the resources above. The questions could also be used or adapted for other assignments such as a paper, presentation, video, or social media response. While you may want to allow students to consider Dolly as an authentic leader in the music industry, our paper highlights Dolly as an authentic leader in her community and philanthropic endeavors.

- Do you find Dolly Parton to be an authentic leader? Why or why not?
- Discuss how each of George's (2010) five dimensions of authentic leadership apply to Dolly Parton.
- George (2010) writes that authentic leaders "lead with purpose, meaning, and

values" (p. 13). Describe how these concepts apply to Dolly Parton.

- Discuss how each of Luthans & Avolio's (2003) four dimensions of authentic leadership apply to Dolly Parton.
- Luthans & Avolio (2003) describe positive psychological attributes contributing to authentic leadership – confidence, hope, optimism, and resilience. Explain how Dolly exemplifies these attributes and how that makes her an authentic leader.
- Authentic leadership is developed over a lifetime, and critical events or "triggers" can contribute significantly to one's leadership development (Luthans & Avolio, 2003). Discuss Dolly's triggers that contributed to her development as an authentic leader.
- Dolly was the commencement speaker for the University of Tennessee in 2009. Who would you recommend as an authentic leader for your commencement speaker? How does this person demonstrate authentic leadership?
- Learning about oneself is an integral part of authentic leadership. What role has self-awareness played in Dolly's story of leadership?
- Dolly is on all major social media platforms. Search for a collection of Dolly quotes, stories, or memes that you feel best exemplifies a particular characteristic of authentic leadership.
- Select a song written and performed by Dolly that you think best exemplifies any of authentic leadership characteristics.
- Provide a leadership dilemma and ask, "What would Dolly do?" as an authentic leader.

Conclusion

One of the fundamental principles of authentic leadership is being genuine. We want to be led by someone who is "real" and leads with honesty, integrity, and sincerity. Perhaps one of the best stories to sum up how Dolly Parton exemplifies authentic leadership and why so many people connect with her is her request to pull a Tennessee state bill that would have started the process for commissioning a statue of her. She was to be recognized for her role in country music history, her philanthropy, and her strong Tennessee roots. On her

social media accounts, Dolly wrote, “Given all that is going on in the world, I don’t think putting me on a pedestal is appropriate at this time.” She added, “I hope though, that somewhere down the road several years from now or perhaps after I’m gone, if you still feel I

deserve it, then I’m certain I will stand proud in our great State Capitol as a grateful Tennessean” (Jacobs, 2021). There are countless examples of how Dolly is an authentic leader. In developing oneself as an authentic leader, consider asking, “What would Dolly do?”

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