

# **Boston** Hospitality Review

[www.bu.edu/bhr](http://www.bu.edu/bhr)

Published by the Boston University School of Hospitality Administration

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## **Dear Executive, Do You Believe in . . . Magic?**

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Leadership - May 2022

# About the Author



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## Dear Executive, Do You Believe in . . . Magic?



These days, I know why I pay over \$100 for one LEGO set for my six- and eight-year-old nephews. It's because they are completely captivated by the possibility of what those colorful piles of plastic blocks could be. Star Wars DeathStar™! Colosseum! Hogwarts™ Castle! Etc. If you've ever drained your bank account buying toys for a little human you simply adore, you know what I mean. Their excitement and wonderment are 100% worth the cash.

McDonald's similarly inspired children's excitement with their introduction of the Happy Meal back in 1979. Those kids' meals packed in color-illustrated cardboard boxes with surprise collectible toys inside have filled the appetites and imaginations of McDonald's customers ever since. There's a reason why children today tug at the bottom of their mothers' sweaters, asking for their next Happy Meal. I think it's less about the cheeseburger and more about the anticipation of what special gift might be hiding inside of that colorful cardboard box.

Children not only believe in magic, but they also crave it and they look for it. Their eyes glow in wonder when you make their noses disappear, when you show them how their doll's feet can slide into a pair of purple glitter slippers or when you take them on a flashing spinning carnival ride for the first time. Have you ever surprised a child by pulling a coin out of their ear, or watched them wake up to a gift the Tooth Fairy left

behind the night before? Kids obsess over feeling the heightened inspiration that magic can bring.

As adults and business leaders, sometimes it helps to be reminded of the anticipation, wonderment, surprise, and intrigue that magic can create. I believe it's time to call our industry leaders who have spent years preoccupied with urgent to-dos and formulas for success, to consider the potential benefit of infusing a little more magic into their worlds. I am proposing "magic" as a means to an end; this article is for any leader who may be interested in performing more influentially by adding a little more excitement, fascination, and enthusiastic participation into their workplaces.

### **Let go of your lists and logic**

Whether you are an executive or a leader of teams of people on the ground, your days may often blend as you have your normal responsibilities, your worries, your routines. In the midst of your regularly planned-out life, you lead your workplace in a similar, regimented way. From that frame of mind, you strive to build an organizational culture that actually means something to people. Maybe you do that by establishing a recurring company-wide meeting that reinforces the checklist of work culture values you desire, as your people prescriptively take turns around the table reciting the company values and reporting on how what they did that week reflects those values. You post your company's values on the wall of your building's entrance. But do your people really care about any of this? You may never know.

There's nothing wrong with a task-focused approach to building a company culture. After all, your team needs clear task lists to get things done. And some people may roll their eyes at the idea of singing at work or incorporating playful rituals. So why risk proposing silly activities, right? After all, you may be thinking that leading with "magic" sounds a bit childish, conjuring images of rabbits from top hats after a magician's sleight of hand? Actually, the amazement of an act like that is exactly what I wish to highlight here. There are many little and big things any leader can do to increase the feeling of magic in their workplace for their people, but the first step is for the leader themselves to believe that it matters.

At work, many people unknowingly shut themselves off from seeing magic "unfold before their very eyes" because their logical thinking brains habitually overlook how a leader's presence, preparation, and power *surround them*. As my almost-40-year-old self, I admit it's hard for me to acknowledge how much influence my leaders sometimes

have on my own decision-making. And I probably won't pretend like I'm interested if someone tries to pull a coin out of my ear.

However, I believe that a little recreational, shared intrigue can help heal the highly fragmented and siloed state of the world today. Right now, people need greater connection and more hope. *Magic*, when used skillfully by a leader, can spark imagination and excitement in followers. In leadership-focused literature, much has been written over the last 50 years on servant (Greenleaf, 1970), transforming (Burns, 1978), and transformational leadership behaviors (Bass, 1985). But, in addition to that, leading with a little mystery can inspire followers to contribute to something greater than themselves, and open minds in a world where people are caught in their narrowly selected sensational news bubble. For those of you who are leaders who aspire to have the kind of influence I am describing, I want to shed light on a few practices that involve a touch of mystery, a hint of *magic*.

If you want to step into a more magical version of your own leadership, consider three practices: 1) sit in your own front row, 2) craft your abracadabra, and 3) set the stage.

### **Practice One: Sit in your own front row**

If, when you lead, you aim to connect with others in a way that feels magically influential, when you deliver important messages to your people in a large-group setting, you *must* show up as yourself, from your essence. To do this, you need to first make sure that if *you* were an audience member at your own talk, *you* would choose to sit in your own front row.

You need to personally and authentically connect to *your own* message—your own *purpose*—before that message comes out of your mouth in front of the people you are leading. This message is at the heart of Simon Sinek's bestselling book "Start with Why." Sinek (2009) shows how people and organizations lead more effectively when they clarify their core purpose for themselves.

But can you do more than clarify your core purpose? Can you also *own it* from the depths of your being, from the same place that would keep you climbing a treacherous mountain despite you being barefoot, bleeding, and dying of thirst?

If *you* don't "believe you," your listeners won't believe you either. Or at least you will lose their attention. If *you* are not present with you, you won't be fully available for your people. If, in the moment of your message delivery, you are talking solely to get the job

done, or if you are worried about how your listeners are receiving you, you will have less bandwidth to do what you really need to do with your followers – and that is to *connect* with them. Show up for them, and they will meet you there. As Walt Disney, our industry’s beloved early guru of magic, said, “When you believe in a thing, believe in it all the way, implicitly and unquestionable.”

I have coached hundreds of undergraduate seniors through the delivery of authenticity presentations where I ask them to present “their true selves” to their Leadership class. The goal of this assignment is for them to connect with their audience after they have reflected on who they are as a person (e.g., their core values, formative life stories, and what they care about contributing to the world) so they can present the synthesis of their self-analysis to the class. In addition, students are asked to express themselves in a candid, authentic tone of voice, such that their classmates feel like they really get to know the person who is presenting. These presentations are challenging for people who dislike talking about themselves, or who haven’t thought much about who they truly are. As you can imagine, these presentations require preparation, commitment, and guts.

In every Leadership class, there are always at least 1-2 students (out of a class of 25-35) who do such a stellar job with their message that they reach the level of magic. These students have shared topics involving triumph over personal struggles, such as what they had learned from overcoming drug addiction, managing their lifelong journey with ADHD, being born into a first-generation American family — you name it. However, their effectiveness in delivery hasn’t only been about the choice to offer their truth and raw vulnerability. There was also something magical about *the way* they were doing it.

The first few times I ran this exercise, I couldn’t quite put my finger on what the students who had magical presentations were consistently doing much better than the rest. But after watching enough of these presentations over the years, I started to notice commonalities among the most memorable talks. The presenters who left the room with a heightened sense of magic *always* had three things in common: they took risks, they spoke from their heart, and they were deeply invested in their own message. Presenters with the most memorable messages showed up with a piece of their journey to share, and they gave a damn so listeners had a reason to care, too. These presenters were sitting in their own front row.

The lesson I have taken away from observing authenticity presentations is this: If you want to lead others at the level of magic, in advance of delivering an important message, privately take the time to clarify what you stand for, and how you personally connect to what you hope your followers will believe *with* you. That preparation enables your passion to organically blossom in the moment of your talk, and in the best case,

you will feel comfortable and free to be present with your audience. I say “free” because, when you do it this way, you are operating from purpose, rather than from performance. *Purpose* is bigger than you for a reason, while *performance* includes your own fixation on yourself (subtext: get over yourself and whatever “achievement” you might be reaching for, if you can).

## **Practice Two: Craft your abracadabra**

Just as leadership takes practice, casting spells takes practice, too. I’m not talking about witchcraft here, although that would be fun. Instead, I am highlighting what Hollywood’s best actors already know: what counts is not only *what* you say, but *how* you say it. If you can deliver a substantive message while waving your magic wand, that is a wicked combination. Part of Brené Brown’s abracadabra, I believe, is personable and relatable storytelling. Oprah’s abracadabra involves spirituality and inspiration. Robin Williams’s abracadabra incorporated his entertaining impressions of characters. Morgan Freeman’s abracadabra is giving meaningful life lessons in a soothing tone of voice. What’s yours?

When you tell an important story about the organization you are leading, and you use your abracadabra effectively, you’ve hit the level of magic when your message rings into the ears of your people and your listeners respond with “Wow, I never knew *that* . . . or “I feel so inspired by this,” or “Hmm, earlier I disagreed, but when you put it *that* way, I see where you’re coming from now.”

If you’ve seen great coaches portrayed in sports TV and film, you know what I mean by this. High school football coach Eric Taylor in the sports drama television series and film *Friday Night Lights* has a purposeful and sincere way of connecting with his players that instills confidence and renews their focus ([example clip here](#)). Or, the sports film *Remember the Titans* features high school coach Herman Boone, who has his own firm and authoritative style for connecting with his players.

For a historical example, American minister and civil rights activist Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was a master of rhetorical technique in his messaging. He would allude to America’s history and use metaphors, imagery, symbolism, repetition, and parallel phrasing for rhythmic delivery. From his famous, I Have A Dream speech, e.g., “No, no, we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream [...] Let us not wallow in the valley of despair.”



Or take, for example, a talk I saw a charismatic professor deliver years ago when we were colleagues together at Boston University. I was a guest observing a class of his when he offered the following message to his *Introduction to Hospitality* class of 90 undergraduate students:

*Hospitality is a business unlike any other. For two thousand years, we have stood with our arms outstretched in front of our inns, restaurants, and hotels saying, "Come into my life for an hour or a night. Let me restore you, feed you, make you whole once again, you will be safe in my care."*

*Ours is a world that welcomes the stranger, comforts the sojourner, cares for those in need of rest and solace. We are the people who leave the light in the window on the darkest night, the place where there will always be another place at the table, another blanket against the cold. For we are the people who serve you a drink at the pool, help you celebrate a birthday, cater a wedding, commiserate over a divorce, pop the champagne at your retirement, serve at your parent's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, and console friends at your wake. We serve so others may share their lives together.*

*Because Hospitality is the central core of being human, the single activity that unites all of the world's religious, moral, and ethical beliefs. Only in service to others will we find the path to salvation, redemption, a better life. Hospitality is not just a job, it's a way of living, one that people in the industry would embrace whether they were paid or not.*

*~Chris Muller, Ph.D., 2019*

If your emotional state might have piqued even slightly from reading this passage about the hospitality industry, know that this is what emotional intelligence authors Boyatzis, McKee, and Goleman (2002) call *resonance*. Resonance is when a leader says or does something to strike a positive emotional chord with their followers, such that their hearts swell and their minds follow.

I'll speak for myself to recall the moment I heard Dr. Muller deliver the above idea. Before that moment, as a patron of hospitality, I was very familiar with the everyday experience of being a guest in a restaurant or hotel. But the artful framing Dr. Muller offered about the hospitality industry invited me to see the familiar anew, which was both inspirational and memorable. The beauty was in *how* he told the story, with vivid imagery held by a sincere tone of significance.



The framing of an important message is part of the work of any great leader. Leaders who illustrate what they are saying at a level of excellence invite the possibility of magic into the delivery of their message. A compelling frame invites followers to remember the richness of the present moment. People listen when leaders skillfully recall the group's shared point in time, celebrate what everyone has overcome, and retell tidbits of history. When leaders tell the story in that way, they articulate how the group got to where they are today, why the future matters, and remind us of our values. For Dr. Muller, although he never says the following explicitly, the values he reinforces in his message highlight how people in hospitality are very dedicated to working hard to *care for everyone*.

Leaders who use magic retell beloved stories in inspiring ways that remind their people of the importance of their group's mission. When leaders creatively express what higher cause their group stands for, their followers may adopt that same meaning into their hearts and feel significant, too.

### **Practice Three: Set the stage**

Similar to how a magician would set the tone for their performance with dim lighting and dry ice flowing over their stage, leading with an air of magic involves attending to the aesthetics of your people's workplace. Many hospitality companies already know this and set the tone well. Mandalay Bay's coconut spice fragrance hits guests' noses as they enter the lobby. Wynn luxury hotel rooms feature proprietary floor-to-ceiling glass windows of a bronze color which make their guests look more attractive (Ross, 2014).

Have you ever walked into an ornately decorated hotel lobby to find an enormously extravagant display of fresh flowers commanding attention over the center display table? Similarly, at a wedding, have you seen how a room looks much more elegant with Chiavari chairs compared to standard chairs with covers? One reason why some people and establishments pay a premium for gorgeous decorative features such as fresh flowers and fancy chairs is that there is magic in aesthetics.

Sure, some hotel guests barely notice the lobby's fresh flower arrangement as they are rushing to check in, and some wedding guests are too enamored with the bride and groom to fully appreciate the quality of chairs they are sitting in. But no matter how backgrounded these and other aesthetic touches may be, their presence *sets the tone* for the look and feel of the space. As a leader, if the gathering space you are creating at work is intended to hold people in such a way that they are comfortable, productive, and inspired, the aesthetics of that space most definitely matter.

I'm not advocating here for blowing hundreds of thousands of dollars on gold-plated toilets (we're looking the other way, Kanye). What I am advocating for is for leaders to practice attention to detail that considers *how the design of any space* affects the life and performance of their group. Aesthetics and design matter because they invite people's imaginations to come alive. When a space is set up effectively and beautifully, that can give people comfort and heightened sensation.

How much do you think about how the aesthetics of a space contribute to supporting your group's purpose? I'm talking about more than the logistical basics of workspaces like ensuring your people aren't competing for scarce outlet plugs or squinting from sunshine glaring off of the windows of a neighboring skyscraper. I'm talking about how aesthetics connect to purpose.

If your group's purpose is to impress a client you're inviting on-site, you may want to arrange an abundant appetizer spread down the center of the lunch table. If your objective is to remind people of your authority, arrange the room so you sit at the head of the table. Alternatively, if the purpose of a meeting is teambuilding, perhaps you create a more casual indoor-outdoor setting with warm lighting that encourages relaxation. If you are leading a national forest recreation and leisure group, perhaps you would want the setting of your gatherings to reflect the values and priorities of your group — repurposed pine tabletops and tree stump chairs, and tin mugs with a side of fresh air, anyone?

The way leaders dress and carry themselves is important for setting the stage as well. Do you, in your clothing, hairstyle, and shoes, for example, express yourself in a way that reflects who you truly are as a leader? If you are a high-powered leader, see if you can avoid showing up to work in your street cycling biking gear, because we all know how alien normal people can look in helmets, thigh-length spandex bike shorts, and reflective vests. Your interns would rather not see that. The way you show up is part of the environment you provide to your followers – it's part of your influence and part of your people's work experience.

As a leader, when you prioritize aesthetic decisions that may seem invisible or unimportant at first, you are laying the groundwork for magic to happen in your team's process, because minding the quality of your people's work experience can result in them enjoying the moment while deepening their admiration for you *and* the organization.

## **Build connection, not a cult**

Some of you may be uncomfortable with the idea of magic because you associate magic with the deception behind a magician's sleight of hand. I'm not advocating for manipulative or twisted Jim Jones or Charles Manson types of influence, or for the practice of any kind of influence that creates a cult mentality and results in your followers' inability to think for themselves. Instead, I am advocating for inspiring awe and wonderment in your people through the mysterious practice of connecting with their imaginations, *while* you maintain ethical, fair treatment of them. If you find that your people "drank the Kool-Aid" such that they no longer have free choice in following you, and that your group's cause ultimately harms your people or others, this is when your magic has become evil, and you have the ethical responsibility to stop toxic practices.

The kind of magic I'm celebrating in this article is the *Glenda, Good Witch of the North* kind of magic that inspires and gives hope to people, as your people maintain their autonomy and ability to think critically. I'm intending to advocate for the kind that *makes positive change* in people's lives. When you lead, trust your own good character and your pure intention to serve others, and the rest will follow.

When ethical leaders unite their team in a common cause *while* respecting and encouraging independence and free choice among all members, they can build a highly empowered team. Additionally, skillful leaders who pay attention to the three practices I'm suggesting above are more likely to earn their followers' idealized influence. By "idealized influence" I mean one of the most potent kinds of relationships a leader can have with a follower, which is a component of the Full Range Leadership Model (see Avolio, 2010). This is when a follower is proud of being associated with their leader, and when they look up to their leader as their role model—because the leader is someone that the follower deeply *respects*. It is much more likely for a follower to look up to their leader when the leader speaks with conviction, tells stories skillfully, presents themselves with credibility, and when they constantly invite their group into well-appointed, delightful, and inspiring spaces.

### **Keep the secret**

For magic in leadership to work, is it critical to pinpoint exactly where the magic comes from? Not really. Neither the leader nor the follower is solely responsible for the occurrence of magic because magic is a co-created process. Walt Disney's passion for magic would have fallen flat without being met with the astonished expressions and ear-to-ear smiles of the children who entered his theme parks. Magic arises from the participatory, *relational exchange* between the magician and the audience at a point in

time. Similarly, when the leadership process involves joy, awe, and inspiration that is mutually shared by the leader and their follower, all members of the group bond through a heightened experience, lift each other up, and create solidarity that invites new possibilities. When followers trust their leader's commitment to consistently inviting profound, productive moments into their group's work, the group's mission feels within reach.

Also, just as any great magic trick has a secret behind it, leading with magic means that a leader should not reveal to their followers precisely *how* the leader recently connected with them effectively. When a leader speaks to their followers from their own deep purpose, thoughtfully crafts the framing and storytelling behind their message, and prepares their workplace atmosphere for productive flow and inspiration to happen, followers will not see all the energy it took to prepare what they just experienced. And that's a good thing. Followers don't need to know *why* their leader's leadership works, they just need to feel and believe that it *does*.

I truly believe that any leader, regardless of their personal brand or leadership style, can benefit from inviting a touch of magic into their leadership practice. If you've been leading people for a long time, then I bet you already have the basics down for managing and leading. But, really, how much time have you spent thinking about leading with magic? To call back to the boundlessness of a child's imagination, I'll close with some advice from Peter Pan, who never wanted to grow up: "Your wings already exist. All you have to do is learn how to fly."

## **Acknowledgment**

We would like to acknowledge Peter Peyton, Drea Zigarmi, Duncan Cork, and Alex Pratt for the peer review of this article. This article has been accepted for publication by Taylor Peyton and Priyanko Guchait, Editors of BHR's Leadership edition.

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