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Leading with Authenticity

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Leading with Authenticity

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Highlights of this Working Paper Brief

- Authentic leadership can be characterised by four attributes: self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced processing of information and internalised moral perspective.
- Myths of authentic leadership include just expressing what is on one's mind without regard to the situational demands and being approachable without maintaining professional distance.
- Authentic leadership is associated with leader and follower well-being, as well as positive individual, team, and organisation performance.
- Approaches to develop authentic leadership include reflection on critical life events and one's leadership purpose, as well as seeking feedback from peers and colleagues.

Keywords

Authentic leadership

Introduction

Interest in authentic leadership arose as a result of public scandals and a loss of trust in the government and corporate sectors (Banks, McCauley, Gardner, & Guler, 2016; Branson, 2007). The work which ignited scholarly interest in authentic leadership was Luthans' and Avolio's (2003) chapter on authentic leadership development. The study of authentic leadership is still considered to be in its infancy (Covelli & Mason, 2018); there is still much debate about its merit as a new leadership construct (Gardner, Karam, Alvesson, & Einola, 2021), and much of the research is conceptual rather than empirical in nature (Gardner, Cogliser, Davis, & Dickens, 2011; Larsson, Clifton, & Schnurr, 2021; Sidani & Rowe, 2018).

However, there is empirical evidence of the positive effects of authentic leadership on both leader and follower well-being, as well as on individual, team and organisational performance (Gardner et al., 2021; Steffens et al., 2021). On this basis, and with the caveat that any leadership theory should be taken as a guide and not a prescription, this Working Paper Brief presents a scan of the literature on authentic leadership for educational leaders who wish to explore this further.

Definitions

Luthans and Avolio (2003, p. 243) defined authentic leadership as

a process that *draws from* both positive psychological capacities and a highly developed organizational context, which *results in* both greater self-awareness and self-regulated positive behaviours on the part of leaders and associates, *fostering* positive self-development. The authentic leader is confident, hopeful, optimistic, resilient, transparent, moral/ethical, future-oriented, and gives priority *to developing associates* into leaders themselves. The authentic leader does not try to coerce or even rationally persuade associates, but rather the leader's authentic values, beliefs, and behaviours serve to model *the development of associates.*" (words italicised by authors to highlight antecedents and outcomes).

One critique is that this definition includes antecedents as well as outcomes of authentic leadership (Sidani & Rowe, 2018), making it difficult to distinguish the leadership construct from preceding factors and outcomes. However, the definition highlights some characteristics, or psychological capacities, that can serve as personal resources for an authentic leader: confidence, hope, optimism, and resilience. Authentic leaders are persons who have achieved high levels of authenticity in that they know who they are, what they believe and value, and they act upon those values and beliefs while transparently interacting with others (Avolio, Gardner, Walumbwa, Luthans, & May, 2004, p. 802).

After this attempt at defining authentic leadership and the authentic leader, there have been various other attempts, particularly since the construct is still being debated and evolving. This WP brief highlights one other definition that has been widely cited (Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing, & Peterson, 2008, p. 94):

...authentic leadership as a pattern of leader behaviour that draws upon and promotes both positive psychological capacities and a positive ethical climate, to foster greater self-awareness, an internalized moral perspective, balanced processing of information, and relational transparency on the part of leaders working with followers, fostering positive self-development”

Although this definition confronts us with the issue of including outcomes in the definition (Gardner et al., 2021; Sidani & Rowe, 2018), from a practitioner’s perspective, it usefully provided four core components of authentic leadership: self-awareness, an internalised moral perspective, balanced processing of information, and relational transparency. These four components were operationalised and validated through the Authentic Leadership Questionnaire (Walumbwa et al., 2008).

- Self-awareness refers to an understanding of one’s strengths and weaknesses and how these affect other people.

- Relational transparency is about presenting one's authentic self to others through open sharing of one's true thoughts and feelings while minimising displays of inappropriate emotions.
- Balanced processing is about objectively analysing all relevant data before making decisions, including views that challenge one's deeply held positions.
- Internalised moral perspective is a form of self-regulation that is guided by internal moral standards and values and leads to decision making and actions which are consistent with these values – resisting group, organisational and societal pressures when the latter are inconsistent with one's internalised values.

Refer to Annex A for a table that uses these four components as a base to organise behaviours mentioned in the literature related to authentic leadership. Do note that this list was compiled for the convenience of practitioners who are interested in the leadership construct but it is not meant to constitute a new model of authentic leadership. The list includes Diddams and Chang's (2012) suggestion to integrate an acknowledgement of human weaknesses into one's sense of authenticity. Annex B provides a list of questions asked by the authentic leadership inventory (ALI) developed by Neider and Schriesheim (2011), which can be used as a guide for leaders' practice or as a survey instrument to assess the practice (or lack) of authentic leadership.

What Authentic Leadership is Not

The above clarifies what authentic leadership is. Some have written about what it is not. The word "authentic" can be problematic as it conjures images of the leader being "real, genuine and not fake or false" (George, 2016). For example, George (2016) in countering Ibarra (2015), argued that authentic leaders do not just say anything that comes to their minds or "express what they really think or feel, even when it runs counter to situational demands" (Ibarra, 2015, p. 55). Goffee and Jones (2005) call this notion of the "uncontrolled" expression of one's inner self as "not only simplistic, it is also

wrongheaded” (p. 94) as authentic leadership needs to be cultivated. Besides this “simplistic” notion of authenticity, it is also not about giving “licence” to principals to behave as they wish to behave – perhaps out of narcissism - because by doing so they are being authentic to themselves. More will be discussed about authenticity and narcissistic leaders further below.

Ibarra (2015) observed that being an authentic leader is not simply about being approachable and people oriented. Rather, authentic leaders need to also maintain professional distance and make decisions based on their knowledge, experience, and expertise, with the intent to benefit the organisation.

Effects of Authentic Leadership

The bulk of research on the effects of authentic leadership has been based on cross-sectional surveys, meaning that the relationships found are more correlations/associations than cause and effect (Alazmi & Al-Mahdy, 2020; Covelli & Mason, 2018; Kulophas, Hallinger, Ruengtrakul, & Wongwanich, 2018). Although small in number, Gardner and colleagues (2021) pointed out that there is empirical evidence of the positive effects of authentic leadership on both leader and follower well-being, as well as on individual, team and organisational performance.

For example, Kulophas and colleagues (2018) found that principal authentic leadership had a significant though moderate association with teachers’ academic optimism and their work engagement – two variables that are associated with positive school learning cultures. Academic optimism is defined as a belief that academic achievement is important, that teachers have the capacity to help students achieve, and that both students and parents will co-operate with them to achieve this objective. Work engagement is characterised by dedication, vigour and absorption in one’s work, and is positively correlated to work performance (Alazmi & Al-Mahdy, 2020).

Similarly, Alazmi and Al-Mahdy (2020) found that authentic leadership by school principals positively affects teacher work engagement by enhancing the latter's self-efficacy, which contributes to academic optimism. In a study of three different contexts – Chinese, Kenyan and American settings – Walumbwa and colleagues (2008) found that followers' perceptions of their leader's authentic leadership were positively correlated with the follower's job satisfaction as well as the supervisor's rating of the follower's job performance. Besides being positively linked to desirable work outcomes, Gardner and colleagues (2021) noted that authentic leadership has been found by studies to be negatively related to turnover intentions, anti-social behaviour and burnout.

Although studies on authentic leadership in the educational field focus on the principal, Gardner and colleagues (2005) proposed that a leader's positive modelling of authentic leadership will result in authentic followership: meaning that followers who work for authentic leaders will model authentic leadership themselves, leading to a cascading effect. Shamir and Eilam (2005) suggest that authentic leadership is contagious in that authentic leaders encourage others to behave authentically as well.

Developing Authentic Leadership

As authentic leadership is still a relatively new leadership construct, much of the literature on how to develop authentic leadership is theoretical and not studied in practice (Covelli & Mason, 2018; Shamir & Eilam, 2005).

Training in authentic leadership appears to be less about developing skills than about developing the leaders' capacity for self-reflection and introspection (Begley, 2006; Walumbwa et al., 2008). Shamir and Eilam (2005) proposed a "life stories" approach, on the basis that self-knowledge, self-concept clarity and the development of a leader identity are derived from a person's life stories. This is in alignment with Luthans' and Avolio's (2003) argument that the

leader's personal history and trigger events are potential antecedents to authentic leadership emergence. Trigger events are defined as events, planned and unplanned, which have challenged the leader's ability and contributed to the development of authentic leadership. Shamir and Eilam (2005) argue that leaders can be guided to reflect on their life stories with the aim of achieving greater self-knowledge and clarity by getting them to identify major events/ turning points in their lives and reflecting on them with the help of questions asked by a facilitator. An example of a reflection protocol adapted from George and colleagues (2007) is included in Annex C. Alternatives include guiding people to reflect on current events and challenges, or to discuss and reflect on other leaders' life stories. George (2016) added seeking honest feedback from colleagues, peers and friends, as well as reflection on and understanding of one's leadership purpose. Ibarra (2015), however, cautioned that over-focusing on past crucibles or defining moments can lead to rigidity in self-concept. She proposed that occasionally it might be necessary for leaders to alter their life stories dramatically and allow themselves to be re-formed by new stories moving forward.

Covelli and Mason proposed a similar approach (2018) in getting leaders to examine critical life events and how these have shaped them as leaders: examine their weaknesses and values; create value statements; write their own definitions of authentic leadership and then create action steps to put these steps into practice. Again, the proposed training programme was not implemented.

In a rare applied study, Branson (2007) used a deeply structured process of self-reflection to lead seven principals into reflecting on significant life experiences and their impact on their self-esteem, motives, values, beliefs and behaviours as leaders, both positive and negative. The vignettes provided suggest that the process enabled the principals to raise their self-awareness so that they can critique the antecedents of their behaviours and work towards more authentic leadership practices. However, Branson (2007) cautioned that this approach takes a considerable amount of time and requires commitment and courage from the participants.

In general, the literature on how to develop authentic leadership has been mainly theoretical and not implemented as training programmes that can be evaluated. Cooper and colleagues (2005) suggested that a socialisation process which includes in-the-trenches training, a system of shared values and role models, and a corresponding reward system might be more impactful in developing authentic leaders than traditional training programmes.

Caveats

There are still many questions related to authentic leadership that have no clear answers. For one, if trigger events in life histories are critical in the development of authentic leaders, how does this translate into actions (if any) which may be taken by policy makers or professional developers? If the development process is highly personal (Shamir & Eilam, 2005), is it even feasible to develop general training interventions to develop authentic leadership?

Some question whether authenticity is a good thing if a leader is narcissistic or possesses other dysfunctional personalities (Gardner et al., 2021). One counter argument is that an authentic leader is by definition someone with high moral standards (Walumbwa et al., 2008). It is also questionable if it is possible for someone to possess deep personal values or convictions and still be open to other viewpoints. In addition, it may not always be desirable for a leader to firmly stick to his or her core values and ignore the equally important needs and values of society (Kulophas, Hallinger, Ruengtrakul, & Wongwanich, 2018).

In a high-power distance culture, it may be difficult for principals to enact authentic leadership (Alazmi & Al-Mahdy, 2020) as principals in such a culture may not be comfortable sharing their vulnerabilities and feelings with subordinates. Furthermore, it is possible for people who are skilful at managing impressions to come across as 'authentic' even if they are not (Diddams & Chang, 2012; Gardner et al., 2021).

In this working paper brief, we have focused on the leader and leadership components of authentic leadership. However, other studies have alluded to other components, such as authentic followership and the authentic follower (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Crawford, Dawkins, Martin, & Lewis, 2020), as well as the role of the follower in attributing authenticity to leaders depending on whether there is value congruence between the leaders and followers (Larsson et al., 2021; Owusu-Bempah, Addison, & Fairweather, 2014; Sidani & Rowe, 2018).

Conclusion

As indicated in the introduction, authentic leadership is a relatively new construct in the field of leadership research, and there is still much debate about its characteristics, enactment, and measurement. However, for practitioners who seek to improve their leadership, authentic leadership does provide some useful pointers. As suggested by Gardner and colleagues (2021), authentic leadership and authenticity are aspirational goals whose achievement has the potential to improve follower and organisation outcomes.

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Annex A

Components	Description	References
Self-awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Demonstrates an understanding of one's own strengths and weaknesses and influence/impact on others. Can accurately describe how others view one's capabilities- Knowledge of one's personal values, how these values influence one's behaviours & how one's values have the potential to cause both desirable & undesirable behaviours- Able to analyse one's motivations and values & confirm/amend them- Solicits feedback to improve interactions with others- A highly developed sense of how one's role as a leader carries a responsibility to act morally and in the best interests of others- Possesses the humility to realise one's self-knowledge is incomplete and thus seeks feedback from others	<p>Walumbwa et al., 2008</p> <p>Branson, 2007 Alazmi and Al-Mahdy, 2020</p> <p>Diddams & Chang, 2012</p>

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Components	Description	References
<p>But also aware of one's limits in self-knowledge and job-related knowledge</p> <p>Awareness of the collective self</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Awareness of the strengths and weaknesses of one's staff, develops/ harnesses the staff's strengths and helps them to overcome their weaknesses - Demonstrates a deep understanding of the organisation/group one is leading - Awareness of collective concerns and interests 	<p>Avolio et al., 2004</p> <p>Owusu-Bempah et al., 2014</p> <p>Steffens et al., 2021</p>
<p>Relational Transparency</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Demonstrates personal values in interactions with stakeholders. - Minimises displays of inappropriate emotions - Makes sure actions are aligned with words, acts according to what one says - Shares critical information, perceptions and feelings with transparency with followers; inspiring followers to share information, perceptions and feelings openly in return - Says what one means - Admits mistakes when they are made - Admits when one has limited knowledge about something 	<p>Walumbwa et al., 2008</p> <p>Kulophas et al., 2018</p> <p>Owusu-Bempah et al., 2014</p> <p>Alazmi & Al-Mahdy, 2020</p> <p>Avolio et al., 2004</p>

Components	Description	References
Balanced Processing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Able to objectively analyse all relevant information when making decisions (in contrast to biased processing) - Willingness to seek and consider followers' ideas/views, even those that challenge one's own ideas/deeply held positions - Creates a firm and fair environment where there is no discrimination, and everybody has equal access to resources and opportunities 	<p>Walumbwa et al., 2008</p> <p>Owusu-Bempah et al., 2014</p> <p>Alazmi & Al-Mahdy, 2020</p>
Internalised Moral Perspective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Behaves in ways that adhere to articulated values even in the face of institutional and/or social pressures - Makes decisions and acts based on core beliefs and values - Practises moral modesty in not assuming that one is more ethical and altruistic than others, and are able to empathise/forgive when others transgress 	<p>Walumbwa et al., 2008</p> <p>Alazmi & Al-Mahdy, 2020</p> <p>Diddams & Chang, 2012</p>

Annex B

An authentic leadership inventory (Neider & Schriesheim, 2011)

S: self-awareness

R: relational transparency

M: internalised moral perspective

B: balanced processing

Questionnaire items

1. My leader solicits feedback for improving his/her dealings with others. (S)
2. My leader clearly states what he/she means. (R)
3. My leader shows consistency between his/her beliefs and actions. (M)
4. My leader asks for ideas that challenge his/her core beliefs. (B)
5. My leader describes accurately the way that others view his/her abilities. (S)
6. My leader admits mistakes when they occur. (R)
7. My leader uses his/her core beliefs to make decisions. (M)
8. My leader carefully listens to alternative perspectives before reaching a conclusion. (B)
9. My leader shows that he/she understands his/her strengths and weaknesses. (S)
10. My leader openly shares information with others. (R)
11. My leader resists pressures on him/her to do things contrary to his/her beliefs. (M)
12. My leader objectively analyses relevant data before making a decision. (B)
13. My leader is clearly aware of the impact he/she has on others. (S)
14. My leader expresses his/her ideas and thoughts clearly to others. (R)
15. My leader is guided in his/her actions by internal moral standards. (M)
16. My leader encourages others to voice opposing points of view. (B)

Annex C

Adapted from George and colleagues (2007).

A self-reflection protocol to develop Authentic Leadership

1. Which person(s) and experience(s) in your early life had the greatest impact on you?
2. What are the moments when you say to yourself, this is the real me?
3. What are your most deeply held values? Where do they come from? Have they changed significantly? How do your values inform your actions?
4. What motivates you extrinsically? What motivates you intrinsically? How do you balance the two?
5. What is your purpose of leadership? Why is it your purpose of leadership? How did you arrive at your purpose of leadership?
6. What does being an authentic leader mean to you? Are you a more effective leader when exercising authentic leadership? Have you had to pay a price for exercising authentic leadership? Was it worth the price?
7. What steps can you take today, tomorrow and over the next year to develop your authentic leadership? What support systems can you draw on to enable your development process?

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