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Defining the Authenticity in Authentic Leadership

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Abstract

Leadership is an expansive term with many definitions and applications. Over the years, adjectives have been applied in an effort to further define and narrow its scope and application, i.e., transactional, transformational, and servant. The term *authentic leadership* is no different. However, what sets it apart as a field of study and method of practice is both its definition and innuendo. Defining authenticity in terms of values, ethics, and self-will delineate its meaning in terms of its application and relevance amongst contemporary theories. Furthermore, identifying it as a brand of leadership will demonstrate its value — both intrinsic and external. *Authentic leadership* is a generic term that connotes genuineness. That is, it conveys to the follower the leader is the real thing as compared to others. This article explores the meaning of the term *authentic* in terms of values and ethics and identifies it as part of a personal branding process in regard to leadership.

Introduction

Leadership is a term that frequently rears its head amid organizational failures and is often the scapegoat for the same, i.e. a failure of leadership. Leadership is an expansive term in that one size does not necessarily fit all. One definition states, “Leadership is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (Northouse, 2007, p.3). Another defines leadership as the “quality of the behavior of individuals whereby they guide people or their activities in organized effort” (Novicevic, Davis, Dorn, Buckley, & Brown, 2005, p. 1400). The first definition associates leadership with a process while the second relates to behavior. However, both identify the role of individuals within a group to act in a seemingly beneficial manner to the group.

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These definitions are accurate descriptions of leadership and the role of leaders within organizations. Over the years, adjectives have been placed in front of the word *leadership* in an attempt to further define the term and narrow the focus of a particular *type* of leadership. For example, consider the terms *transactional* leadership, *transformational* leadership, *servant* leadership, and *situational* leadership. All deal with different types of leadership and differentiate one style from another as well as identify situations and cultures to which they are best suited.

More recently, the adjective *authentic* has been placed in front of the word *leadership* in an effort to add to the study of leadership and expand its application in organizations. The term *authentic* has particular connotations and innuendo that may well lead an individual to conclude that it is perhaps a superior or more genuine form of leadership. “The ‘development’ of authentic leadership stems from positive organizational behavior (POB) and positive organizational context, which reflect human resource strengths and psychological capacities that can be measured, developed, and effectively managed for performance improvement in today’s workplace” (Novicevic, Davis, Dorn, Buckley, & Brown, 2005, p. 1404).

A recent search on Amazon.com for the term *authentic leadership* revealed 1,968 results, and a search for the same term on Google produced 1,790,000 results. Clearly, there is no shortage of interest or material on the subject. *Authentic leadership* is the new buzz-term in the leadership realm and has been written about extensively in recent decades. “The concept of authenticity has its roots in Greek philosophy (to thine own self be true)” (Avolio & Gardner, 2005, p. 319). Being true to oneself is a key component of authenticity and is found in many definitions of authentic leadership.

The term *authenticity* as used here refers to owning one’s personal experiences, be they thoughts, emotions, needs, wants, preferences, or beliefs — processes captured by the injunction *to know oneself* — and further implies that one acts in accord with the true self, expressing oneself in ways that are consistent with inner thoughts and feelings (Avolio & Gardner, 2005).

This article explores the meaning of the word *authentic* and its relationship to leadership as well as defines authenticity in terms of values and ethics.

What is Authentic?

In the early 1970s, *Coca Cola* featured an advertising campaign with a large crowd of people singing: “I’d like to buy the world a Coke and keep it company (That’s the real thing).” When people hear *authentic*, they associate it with *the real thing*, the genuine article, not an imitation or knockoff, i.e., an *authentic* Ming vase, an *authentic* Rolex, an *authentic* Picasso, etc. In other words, the brand remains intact and retains its worth as determined by its intrinsic value which is what the consumer expects and demands. Leadership is no different. Followers want *the real thing!* But what is the *real thing* when it relates to leadership?

In 2007, Bill George coined the term *True North* and related it to authentic leadership,, defining it as “based on what is most important to you, your most

cherished values, your passions and motivations, the sources of satisfaction in your life” (George, 2007, p. xxiii). In fact, his book of the same title is regarded as the principal resource used to instruct *Authentic Leadership Development* at the Harvard Business School Executive Education Program. In this course, students “examine [their] life experiences and identify the essence of [their] authentic leadership in guided exercises and case studies” (www.exed.hbs.edu). Essentially, students discover their *True North* — their “internal compass” (George, 2007, p. xxiii) — and learn to follow it, which presumably will make them better leaders.

Stated differently, *authentic leadership* concerns how an individual feels. Thus, it is internal. But what makes it authentic? The *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* defines *authenticity* “as being what it professes in origin or authorship, as being genuine” (Simpson & Weiner, 1991, p. 796). Therefore, being an authentic leader is tantamount to little more than being true to oneself or being who you profess to be. “The idea of ‘being true to oneself’ has manifested itself in of the form of authentic leadership, which focuses on those behaviors that indicate that leaders are self-aware and regulate the self accordingly” (Leroy, Palanski, & Simons, 2012, p. 255). While this certainly is not a bad thing, we must explore the reason why this style of leadership has grown in popularity and what value it has, if any, for individuals and organizations.

Surprisingly, *authentic leadership* is a somewhat generic term and “can incorporate transformational, charismatic, servant, spiritual or other forms of positive leadership” (Avolio & Gardner, 2005, p. 329). While the popular definition of *authentic leadership* focuses on the individual, one study described it as “a process that draws from both positive psychological capabilities and a highly developed organizational context, which results in both greater self-awareness and self-regulated positive behaviors on the part of both leaders and associates, fostering positive self-development” (Novicevic, Davis, Dorn, Buckley, & Brown, 2005, p. 1404). In this definition, “positive behavior” is listed as a characteristic of authentic leadership, which raises the issue of ethics and values and how a leader ought to act. Do authentic leaders exhibit superior values and exemplify ethical standards beyond the capacity of their contemporaries who are *not* authentic leaders?

Interestingly enough, “Authentic leaders are by definition more aware of the values that drive their decisions — which makes them better able to describe those values accurately and so align their words and actions” (Leroy, Palanski, & Simmons, 2012, p.257). The peculiar thing about values is they “make sense only because they allow us to act in context, precisely where the boundaries of the self are at issue” (Freeman & Auster, 2011, p.19). The question, though, is whether those values are congruent with established ethical standards. For instance, based on the definitions previously discussed, one could argue Adolf Hitler was an authentic leader. Certainly he was true to himself and understood the values that drove his decisions. Yet few would argue his actions were ethical.

Ethics and Authentic Leadership

When leaders fail, people are often left to ponder the cause. Ethical failures often

cause us to search for an “explanation of the leader’s behavior” (Ciulla, 2004, p.129) rather than conduct an “analysis of the moral status of what was done” (Ciulla, 2004, p.129). Again, we return to a leader’s behavior and note that it is at the center of leadership. Leaders are expected to conduct themselves ethically. That is, their behavior must align with established standards, particularly in terms of the organization. Minkes, Small, and Chatterjee (1999) note, “Corporate governance and the standards of behavior that should be followed fall under the rubric of ‘business ethics’” (p. 332).

So if an authentic leader is acting in accordance with his or her values, what is the relationship between values and ethics? “Values are defined as the core set of beliefs and principles deemed to be desirable (by groups) of individuals while ethics are defined as the conception of what is right and fair conduct or behavior” (Joyner & Payne, 2002, p. 299). Based on this definition, what is deemed *ethical* will be greatly influenced by one’s values. As such, a leader’s behavior might be viewed as unethical by others (that is, not fair conduct), while the leader may view his conduct as ethical because it is in keeping with his values (that is, what is desirable).

Authentic leadership focuses on the self and presupposes that doing so is beneficial to others because it provides a genuine example. Indeed it does. But is that example ethical? Hsiung notes, “Authentic leaders exemplify high moral standards, integrity, and honesty and authentic leaders acknowledge their personal limitations and shortcomings, and are therefore less likely to adopt a defensive attitude about organizational problems” (Hsiung, 2012, p.353). Moral standards are closely linked with the codes of ethics corporations adopt in order to establish universally acceptable behavior by those in the organization. “A corporate code of ethics by most definitions is a written, distinct, and formal document which consists of moral standards which help guide employee or corporate behavior” (Schwartz, 2005, p. 27). Ethics are comprised of moral standards, which have their own unique characteristics and applications:

1. Moral standards deal with matters that we think can seriously injure or seriously benefit human beings.
2. Moral standards are not established or changed by the decisions of particular authoritative bodies.
3. Moral standards should be preferred to other values including self-interest.
4. Moral standards are based on impartial considerations.
5. Moral standards are associated with special emotions and a special vocabulary (Morris, 2004).

Morals are an inherent component of good leadership whether transactional, transformational, or authentic, and must be discernible by followers. “Pinchot implies that morals and values can be taught, and that managers should be able to distinguish between ethical and unethical behavior” (Minkes, Small, & Chatterjee, 1999, p. 331). Perhaps that is true, but does authenticity by its very nature necessitate such an ethical distinction, or does it provoke an assumption predicated on a preconceived ethical implication?

Defining Authenticity

Most people may consider morals, values, and ethics as somewhat synonymous. They all have something to do with “right” and “wrong” and are open to interpretation depending on the situation and circumstances. Applying the terms to leadership does little to refine their meaning or expand their application due to the expansive nature of leadership. However, as we have seen, values, morals, and ethics all play a role in leadership, specifically *authentic* leadership.

Based upon the OED definition, authenticity of values, morals, and ethics amounts to little more than being true to one’s personal nature. Stated simply, authentic leaders are who they are. They don’t have to make excuses for their moral shortcomings, lack of ethical standards, or misplaced values as long as they are being true to themselves. Authentic leadership is thus a convenient term with positive implications that affords a leader a great deal of personal latitude in the name of authenticity. One definition states, “Authenticity, then, is the submission to the discipline of whatever morality exists within” (Duignan & Bhindi, 1997, p. 207). Such a perspective is subjective, vague, and arbitrary to be sure.

While this may appear to be the case in popular circles, and while it may sell many books, authenticity, as applied to leadership, is comprised of much more than being true to oneself. Authenticity involves integrity, ethics, morals, values, self, relationships, and learning (Duignan & Bhindi, 1997). It is the homogenous combination of these attributes that make it a form of leadership. These attributes must coexist both internally to the leader and externally in the leader-follower relationship for a leader to be truly authentic.

A leader’s values may serve as an internal compass of sorts. As such, they serve as a starting point for ethics and provide the motivation to justify one’s actions to self and to others (Freeman & Auster, 2011). “To act authentically assumes that values are either easy to know, but rather difficult to realize, or difficult to know but easy to realize. Acting authentically becomes either a matter of will or knowledge” (Freeman & Auster, 2011, p.16). This philosophy is superficial and is one of the causes of the ambiguity surrounding the term as it purports to advocate a static state. The problem that emerges is how we know our values and whether they are realizable through action (Freeman & Auster, 2011).

Nevertheless, values play a pivotal role in authenticity. They provide a point from which a leader can begin to maneuver, however standing alone, they are not singularly authenticity’s composite. Authenticity is a process by which a leader develops values conducive to the organization in relation to self. It revolves around the fact that each of us is unique (Liedtka, 2008). Chief among the process’s characteristics is the ability to openly dialogue with others, which serves as a catalyst to discovering one’s identity (Liedtka, 2008). All this is done in an effort to discover one’s authentic self. In short, “[E]ach one of us is what he pursues and cares for. In everyday terms, we understand ourselves and our existence by way of the activities that we pursue and the things we take care of” (Liedtka, 2008, p. 239).

Authentic leadership makes assumptions about “authentic self, relationships,

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learning, governance and organization, through significant human values, to leadership and management practices that are ethically and morally uplifting” (Duignan & Bhindi, 1997, p. 208). Authenticity is more than an individual’s connection to self. It is the ever-evolving process of discovery *rooted* in the self but existent within the confines of relationships amid congruent values. As such, *all* leaders are *authentic* regardless of performance or behavior. In this regard, the term amounts to little more than a fancy adjective used to imply intrinsic value beyond that which is perceived.

Authenticity: The Brand

Bekker (2012) noted, “If you want to sell a book, write about authentic leadership.” The implication is clear: authenticity sells! It sells because followers want the *real thing* and *authentic leadership* is a term that conveys genuineness and value, i.e., *the real thing*. Ironically, as with most things, the value ascribed it is via external means. For example, what makes a Rolex watch worth thousands of dollars? Perhaps it is made of gold and that gives it some value based on current commodity prices. However, the amount of precious metal used to make the watch is not comparable in price to the retail value of the watch. Technology, quality, and craftsmanship all add to the price, but clearly there is more to it than this unique combination of attributes. At work is the ascribed value, or what the manufacturer wants customers to believe is the inherent value, of its product that makes it superior to its competitors. Thus, it is valued above and beyond other brands based on the *belief* that it is superior and genuine. Ergo, it is *authentic!*

There is a certain amount of validity to such claims about authenticity. If something is what it professes to be, it is in fact authentic and has a particular amount of inherent value. However, beyond the superficial and obvious level, authenticity, as it applies to leadership, involves something more because defining inherent value in people is more difficult than with inanimate objects. Leadership involves personal branding which plays a pivotal role in creating value. “Personal branding has become more important than company/corporate branding, because we trust people more than companies and people are more accountable than companies, especially in this post-Enron era” (Williams, 2010, p. 156). Although it is somewhat rhetorical, the brand of *you* is who you are, which makes you authentic. Furthermore, Williams stipulates, “Your personal brand should emerge from your search for your identity” (Williams, 2010, p. 156).

Discovering one’s identity is synonymous to discovering one’s authentic self. Authenticity, as has been discussed, emerges from within. Applied to leadership, it emerges from the discovery and realization of what is true to one’s nature. It then becomes an individual’s brand and defines the perception others will formulate in regard to it. Additionally, it will create brand value. However, the brand —the authentic self — must be comprised of the requisite attributes deemed essential by those who give it value. After all, a brand only has as much value as others ascribe to it. And a leader is only as authentic as others believe him or her to be. Therefore, authenticity is a branding process based on the evolution and discovery of individual identity that involves morals, ethics, values, and behavior as it relates to others and the organization.

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Conclusion

Authentic leadership is more than just a style of leadership than many mainstream authors and pundits would suggest. It involves more than just feeling good because one is true to oneself. Authentic leadership is *the real thing!* However, defining it accurately presents a challenge because it greatly depends on perception. At its core, it is comprised of moral behavior that is based on a system of sound values that align with others and the organization; it is continually evolving through relationships with peers and followers. To be an authentic leader, one must be true to oneself as it relates to the collective good of others and be ethically accountable.

Leadership is a complex dynamic that is perpetually evolving based on individuals, their values, and the particular situation and circumstances involved. Creating a brand takes time and requires the right combination of attributes to give it value. Maintaining and increasing that value is determined by behavior based on those attributes. It is analogous to the work of a great artist whose skill and ability have been developed and honed with years of practice and experience. An early Rembrandt may not catch one's eye as easily as one painted after decades of practice. However, both paintings are *the real thing*, the same *brand*, and *authentic*. And so it is with authentic leadership.

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His dynamic and energetic style made him a highly sought and engaging facilitator. The contributions he made to CNL had a lasting impact Navy-wide, and many of his ideas and designs are still in use today. He is a doctoral student at Regent University, where he pioneered and promulgated the concept of servant networking. Mr. Bishop is a prolific author whose works have been featured in *Talent Management Magazine*, *Leadership Advance Online*, and *The Journal of Strategic Leadership*. He is the author of *Going Home: A Troop's Guide for Successfully Transitioning to the "Real World."* He holds degrees from Excelsior College (B.S.), Regent University (MBA), and is a graduate of the Harvard Business School Executive Education Program.