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Authentic Leadership and Leadership Ethics: *Proposing a New Perspective*



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Abstract

Authentic leadership is considered a new field of leadership research. Its formative status makes it possible to attract unique commentary and re-examination. Based on a comparison between authentic leadership and leadership ethics and focusing on the theoretical perspective of authentic leadership, this essay argues for a new perspective of authentic leadership. Consistencies resulting from the comparison serve to reinforce this essay's central argument, namely, that just as ethics is central to all forms leadership, the main perspectives and components of authentic leadership as well as factors that influence it are also central to the various leadership approaches. In other words, the centrality of ethics to leadership seems consistent with the centrality of authenticity to leadership. Therefore, rather than continue research in authentic leadership as a unique leadership approach, this essay recommends research in concepts such as authentic transformational leadership, authentic servant leadership, authentic team leadership, authentic transactional leadership, among other forms of leadership. The essay concludes with a study recommendation, sampling some research questions and a hypothesis.

Introduction

Authentic leadership has been described as “one of the newest areas of leadership research” still undergoing exploration in view of determining its parameters and clear conceptualization (Northouse, 2013, p. 253). This developmental and formative status of authentic leadership gives it room to attract some unique commentary and the possibility of proposing further research. Characteristically, authentic leadership focuses on the genuineness of leadership and leaders’ authenticity. It is perhaps for this reason that leadership scholars have presented authentic leadership as an ideal to be sought by any leader, similar to leadership ethics, and therefore suitable for every form of leadership.

Based on a comparison between authentic leadership and leadership ethics and focusing on the theoretical perspective of authentic leadership, this essay argues for a new perspective of this leadership approach. Consistencies resulting from the comparison seem to reinforce the argument that just as ethics is central to leadership, the main components of authentic leadership, which leadership scholars have identified, as well as the factors that influence this leadership model, are also central to the various forms of leadership. The essay focuses on the theoretical perspective of authentic leadership, which describes what this approach of leadership is and what accounts for it.

Therefore, the main argument of this essay is that while the components that constitute authentic leadership and factors influencing it are valid, all these combine to constitute ethical leaders. In other words, the centrality of ethics to leadership seems consistent with the centrality of authenticity to leadership. To this extent, rather than continue research in authentic leadership as an independent leadership approach, it would seem appropriate to begin examining concepts such as authentic transformational leadership, authentic servant leadership, authentic team leadership, authentic transactional leadership, among other forms of leadership.

The essay begins with an overview of authentic leadership, including its background, definitions, and perspectives. The main components of this form of leadership as well as the factors that influence it are also presented. This primary information from a review of literature is used in the second part of the essay in which a new perspective of authentic leadership is proposed. The essay employs a comparative analysis approach, juxtaposing leadership ethics and authentic leadership.

Authentic Leadership: Background and Perspectives

Leadership scholars have traced research focusing on authentic leadership to corporate and political scandals in society (Caza & Jackson, 2014; Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May, & Walumbwa, 2005; Northouse, 2013). Experiences many societies are facing seem to bring about a certain longing for honest and genuine leaders, persons who can be trusted in their leadership positions. According to Northouse (2013), "People's demands for trustworthy leadership make the study of authentic leadership timely and worthwhile" (p. 253). It is worth noting, from the onset, that while research focusing on authentic leadership seems recent, the human interest in "authenticity" could be considered timeless.

The leadership approach termed authentic leadership had been identified under transformational leadership research, particularly in two works, the one by Bass (1990) and the one by Bass and Steidlmeier (1999). However, its meaning seems not to have been fully articulated. There was still the need for operationalizing the leadership style and creating a theoretical framework to explain it so that it is evidence based. An attempt to articulate the meaning of authentic leadership started with Luthans and Avolio (2003) in an article that addressed the development of authentic leadership and positive organizational scholarship.

Drawing inspiration from Luthans and Avolio's article, a leadership summit was organized at Nebraska University, focusing on the nature and development of authentic leadership. This summit has been known as "the primary catalyst" for research on authentic leadership (Northouse, 2013, p. 261) because it did prompt two sets of publications: a special issue of *Leadership Quarterly* in 2005; and another 2005 publication, *Monographs in Leadership and Management*. Upheavals and instability in the United States would eventually increase interest in authentic leadership, from 9/11 attacks to widespread corporate corruption, to a troubled economy, among other societal crises.

Authentic Leadership: A Definition and Theoretical Overview

Authentic leadership is a complex process, difficult to characterize, the result being multiple definitions written from varying viewpoints and emphasis (Northouse, 2013; Chan, 2005). The main challenge that researchers seem to face in developing authentic leadership theory is defining the construct and identifying its characteristics, hence the reason for

multiple definitions. According to Northouse (2013), “Authentic leadership is a complex process that emphasizes the development of qualities that help leaders to be perceived as trustworthy and believable by their followers” (p. 267). He has identified three possible perspectives for this leadership form: *intrapersonal, interpersonal, development*.

Intrapersonal perspective. The intrapersonal perspective of authentic leadership focuses on the person of the leader, and what goes on within the leader including his or her self-knowledge, self-regulation, and self-concept. Some other characteristics, suggested by Shamir and Eilam (2005) include genuine leadership, leading from conviction, and being original and not copies. For Northouse (2013), intrapersonal perspective of leadership “emphasizes a leader’s life experiences and the meaning he or she attaches to those experiences as being critical to the development of the authentic leader” (p. 254).

Interpersonal perspective. While the intrapersonal perspective looks out for integrity within an individual leader based on ethical principles (Noelliste, 2013), the interpersonal perspective is about the relational factors between leaders and followers in a mutual way (Northouse, 2013; Uhl-Bien, 2006). Under this perspective, “authenticity emerges from the interaction between leaders and followers. It is a reciprocal process because leaders affect followers and followers affect leaders” (Northouse, 2013, p. 254).

Development perspective. The development perspective of authentic leadership, on the other hand, is viewed “as something that can be nurtured in a leader, rather than as a fixed trait.” (Northouse, 2013, p. 254). This also means that authentic leadership develops in a person over a lifetime and could even be triggered by significant events in a person’s life, including and not limited to serious illness or even a new occupation.

This development approach seems most favorable among scholars. Taking this perspective into account, Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing, and Peterson (2008) have conceptualized authentic leadership as developing from and grounded in a leader’s not only positive psychological qualities but also the leader’s strong ethics. In fact, the definition by Walumbwa et al. (2008) seems the most often cited. Having conducted a comprehensive literature review and complemented this review with elite interviews with experts in this field, they defined authentic leadership as,

a pattern of leader behavior 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 (p. 94).

From this definition and following subsequent considerations by other scholars (Holmquist, 2018), particularly Avolio, Walumbwa, and Weber (2009), authentic leadership is composed of four components, which are distinct but related. They include *self-awareness, internalized moral perspective, balanced processing, and relational transparency*. Each of these four types of behavior are developed over a lifetime. Northouse (2013) categorized these four types of behavior under theoretical approaches, namely, approaches based on social science research findings.

Self-awareness. Northouse (2013) has described this component of authentic leadership as “a process in which individuals understand themselves, including their strengths and

weaknesses, and the impact they have on others” (p. 263). This description implies that as a process, self-awareness is not an end in itself; it is a lifelong process, especially as it is about an individual leader coming to terms with who he or she really is at that individual’s deepest level (Ladkin & Taylor, 2010). This has a lot to do with personal awareness of one’s own core values, identity, emotions, motives, as well as goals. And as Gardner et al. (2005) have put it, when leaders have a clear sense of who they are (self-knowledge) including what they stand for, they would have a strong bearing for not only their decisions but also their actions. This implies a life and profession guided by some ethical principles and morality.

Internalized moral perspective. A self-regulatory process is implied in this perspective, with leaders using “their internal moral standards and values to guide their behavior rather than allow outside pressures to control them” (Northouse, 2013, p. 264). In this respect, societal or group pressures are excluded. Northouse (2013) further justifies the self-regulatory claim by positing that “people have control over the extent to which they allow others to influence them” (p. 264). Those with internalized moral perspective would act in a manner consistent with the beliefs and moral they express, which seems similar to what Aristotle termed virtue ethics (Aristotle, 1999; Cronin, 2006).

Balanced processing. This refers to the ability of an individual to analyze information objectively as well as exploring others’ opinions before he or she makes decisions. It has to do with avoiding favoritism about particular issues and being unbiased. According to Northouse (2013), “Balanced processing includes soliciting viewpoints from those who disagree with you and fully considering their positions before taking your own actions” (p. 264). The idea of authenticity here is reinforced by being open about personal perspectives while remaining objective in considering the perspectives of others. To this extent, it is also a self-regulatory behavior that borrows heavily from Aristotle’s virtue ethics.

Relational transparency. This is about presenting oneself to others in an honest and open manner. This is consistent with self-regulation to the extent that an individual controls his or her transparency with others (Kernis, 2003; Northouse, 2013). As Kernis (2003) argued, relational transparency happens when individuals make deliberate moves to share what they heartily feel, including their emotions and inclinations with others appropriately. In this case, both positive and negative aspects of the self are expressed. It is about open communication with others characterized with the ability to be “real” and genuine in relating with others, hence akin to virtue ethics.

This essay seeks to propose a new perspective of authentic leadership based on a comparison between authentic leadership and leadership ethics. The three perspectives and the four components of authentic leadership discussed above have provided some theoretical perspective of this leadership approach. This essay has considered the factors that influence authentic leadership as being significant in completing the theoretical overview of this leadership style. It is on the basis of the perspectives of, components of, and factors influencing authentic leadership that a new perspective will be proposed. In his discussion of the factors influencing authentic leadership, Northouse (2013) has formulated three groups: *positive psychological capacities*, *moral reasoning*, and *critical life events*.

Positive psychological capacities. Drawn from the fields of positive psychology and positive organizational behavior, positive psychological attributes on the part of an authentic leader

include *confidence*, *hope*, *optimism*, and *resilience* (Luthans & Avolio, 2003). All these positive attributes are helpful in enhancing a leader's capacity to develop the authentic leadership components. Confidence has to do with self-efficacy, namely, "the belief that one has the ability to successfully accomplish a specified task" (Northouse, 2013, p. 265). Various scholars have confirmed that leaders who have confidence are more likely to be inclined and motivated toward success, including persistence in the face of obstacles (Bandura, 1997; Luthans & Avolio, 2003; Northouse, 2013). This fits among the characteristics of a virtuous person (Aristotle, 1999; Cronin, 2006).

Hope has been described as "a positive motivational state based on willpower and goal planning ... Authentic leaders with hope have goals they know can be accomplished; their hope inspires followers to trust them and believe in their goals" (Northouse, 2013, p. 265). Meanwhile, the positive psychological capacity of optimism "refers to the cognitive process of viewing situations from a positive light and having favorable expectations about the future" (Northouse, 2013, p. 265). Leaders characterized with optimism are also positive about their capabilities as well as their achievable outcomes. As Covey (1990) contended, leaders with optimism would approach life not with a sense of scarcity but with a sense of abundance.

The fourth positive psychological attribute is resilience, which refers to the capacity to recover from as well as adjust to adverse situations including "the ability to positively adapt to hardships and suffering" (Northouse, 2013, p. 265). In the context of leadership, it is about a leader's ability to bounce back when faced with challenging situations, drawing strength from these challenges and even becoming more resourceful as a result of the challenges (Sutcliffe & Vogus, 2003). All the four capacities seem consistent with ethical principles, which serve to guide various leadership approaches. Servant leaders, transformational leaders, transactional leaders, all stand in need of confidence, hope, optimism, and resilience in going about their leadership functions with any success. The same could be true of moral reasoning and critical events in a leader's life.

Moral reasoning. This has to do with a leader's capability to make decisions that can be deemed ethical on issues of right and wrong, good and bad. Northouse (2013) has described moral reasoning as a lifelong process that enables "leaders to be selfless and make judgments that serve the greater good of the group, organization, or community," including the promotion of justice and rightful things for the community (p. 266).

Critical life events. These refer to the positive or negative major events that shape a person's life, which act as potential catalysts in the process of change. Scholars have agreed that life experiences have an impact on leaders' performance. For instance, Shamir and Eilam (2005) saw authentic leadership resting heavily on the understanding people put on their life experiences. Northouse (2013) remarked that when leaders understand their personal life experiences including childhood experiences, they become more authentic. For Luthans and Avolio (2003), life events that are critical have the power to stimulate growth in individuals, helping them become stronger leaders.

Overall, the perspectives and components of authentic leadership as well as the factors that influence this approach to leadership combine to provide insights into this form of leadership. This theoretical framework of the meaning of authentic leadership grounded in a review of literature could provide the foundation for an analysis that proposes a new

perspective of authentic leadership. Therefore, the next section discusses the proposed perspective.

Authentic Leadership: Proposing a New Perspective

While leadership scholars have given specific components of what authentic leadership is and what accounts for it and considering these scholars' confirmation that authentic leadership as an approach to leadership is an ongoing research task (Northouse, 2013; Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing, & Peterson, 2008), this section proposes a new perspective for authentic leadership. This proposal seeks to compare authentic leadership with ethical considerations of the different forms of leadership. The main argument here is that the combination of the components and the factors influencing authentic leadership seems to be presented as ideals similar to leadership ethics. Therefore, rather than having authentic leadership as a unique approach, scholars could engage in developing authentic transformational leadership, authentic servant leadership, authentic team leadership, authentic charismatic leadership, authentic transactional leadership, among other leadership approaches.

Authentic Leaderships and Other Leadership Approaches

Various scholars have argued that the basis of authentic transformational leadership is altruistic principles (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; Kanungo & Mendonca, 1996; Northouse, 2013). Studies focusing on transformational and charismatic leadership (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; Kanungo & Mendonca, 1996) have actually suggested that the behaviors of authentic transformational leaders (as opposed to pseudo-transformational ones) and authentic charismatic leaders (as opposed to negative charismatic ones) and their respective strategies of influence need to meet high ethical standards (Kanungo, 2001). In fact, leadership behaviors that seem devoid of ethical legitimacy are considered lacking in authenticity.

For instance, in discussing the moral components of transactional leadership, Bass and Steidlmeier (1999) pointed out aspects such as granting others some liberty and opportunity, which a leader claims for oneself, "telling the truth, keeping promises, distributing to each what is due, and employing valid incentives and sanctions" (p. 185).

However, despite the identification of these aspects that show moral legitimacy, Bass and Steidlmeier (1999) have seen transactional leadership as founded on a self-interest worldview and indicated that such "pursuit of self-interest is found wanting by most ethicists" (p. 185). This way of thinking had been advanced by Kanungo and Mendonca (1996) who argued that a worldview of self-interest that characterizes transactional leadership is devoid of any moral legitimacy. They explained that in serving their self-interest, transactional leaders use control strategies by exchanging valued resources, aimed at inducing compliance behavior among followers.

Burns (1978) seems to have shared this argument, describing the self-interest pursuit of transactional leaders as not only self-absorbing but also manipulative, particularly when such leaders control their followers by addressing physical and social needs that are at a lower order, accomplished by concentrating "on method, technique and mechanisms rather than on broader ends and purposes" (p. 405). It is this essay's submission that the arguments above serve to illustrate the affinity between ethical considerations and

authentic leadership. In other words, leaders lacking in ethical legitimacy might not be considered authentic leaders.

In contrasting transactional with transformational leadership, the ethical factors at stake seem to merge well with most of the factors that influence authentic leadership. For instance, Burns (1978) seems to confirm the authenticity of transformational leadership, arguing that unlike transactional leadership that is self-absorbing and manipulative, transformational leadership is “moral in that it raises the level of human conduct and ethical aspiration of both leaders and led” (p. 20).

However, opposed to such a distinction between transactional and transformational leaders on the basis of ethical considerations, Keeley (1995) has argued for the possibility of unethical transformational leaders and ethical transactional leaders. He argued, “Unless leaders are able to transform everyone and create absolute unanimity of interests, transformational leadership produces simply a majority will that represents the interests of the strongest faction” (p. 77). Meanwhile, the lack of the requirement for a “consensus on ends” on the part of transactional leaders but a simple “consent to means-agreement on rules, rights, and responsibilities” serving their separate interests seems to give a transactional leader, who is seen to serve the interests of all parties concerned, a moral basis (Keeley, 1995, pp. 86-87).

While such controversy among scholars about the moral standing of these two forms of leadership might constitute a moral problem, Kanungo’s (2001) proposed resolution to this controversy, namely, reverting to the dimensions of ethical leaderships, can be favorably compared to the components of and factors that influence authentic leadership. In other words, one can speak about authentic transactional leaders and authentic transformational leaders.

Authentic Leadership and Leadership Ethics

Regardless of the form of leadership a leader exhibits, a leader’s behavior can be judged to be ethical or unethical. Beginning with dominant figures in the tradition of ethics, it is worth the effort to discuss ways in which leadership ethics seem consistent with what has been described under authentic leadership. The argument for a new perspective of authentic leadership, which this essay advances, is based on this consistency.

Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas could be considered the dominant figures in the tradition of ethics of virtue. However, before these figures, both Socrates and Plato deemed acts of virtue the basis of morality (White, 1993). For all these figures, a leader who engages in virtuous acts would pass the test of an ethical leader, which includes refraining from behaviors that harm others. They considered altruistic motives critical to the day to day behavior of a good and therefore virtuous leader.

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle (1999) has a teleological approach to ethics, which he sees oriented towards happiness (eudaemonist). Operating within the framework of the metaphysical categories of potency and act, Aristotle saw human beings in a lifelong developmental progression from potentiality to actuality, from childhood into adulthood. Rather than being born virtuous or vicious, human beings are born with that potentiality to become either virtuous or vicious. As Cronin (2006) has put it, “Aristotle builds up a picture of the good man by defining the moral and intellectual virtues,” including aspects such as

temperance, generosity, friendship, wisdom, intelligence, prudence, among other virtues that are cultivated throughout one's life.

This lifelong cultivation of all these virtues seems consistent with what leadership scholars have said about how a leader develops, also over a lifetime, the various components of authentic leadership. Self-awareness for authentic leadership can be seen as a process of understanding oneself, operationalizing the progression from potentiality to actuality that Aristotle alluded to. Internalized moral perspective of the authentic leader is in itself an exercise in growing in virtue. The components of balanced processing and relational transparency are best operationalized by Thomas Aquinas' perspective of ethics as they deal with how a leader relates with others.

Apart from addressing the philosophy of natural law, Thomas Aquinas has about two thirds of his *Summa Theologiae* devoted to the subject of virtues. He identified three factors that could be used to determine the ethical nature of one's behavior, which can be directly applied to leaders. These factors include: *motive*, the *manifest behavior*, and the *social context*. These factors take the altruistic dimension of virtuous acts, particularly if taken in the context of leadership. Aquinas' meaning is that for a leader to be ethical, he or she will need to have the right motives by engaging in virtuous behaviors, which benefit others, and refraining from evil acts that could harm others.

The components of balanced processing and relational transparency that partly constitute authentic leadership seem to fit within this description. Under balanced processing, an authentic leader seeks the opinions of others including those in disagreement with him or her and takes actions in full consideration of these divergent viewpoints. Meanwhile, relational transparency of an authentic leader takes the aspect of seeking others' opinions to a higher level, with the leader showing honesty and openness in reaching out to others. Is it not that both components of authentic leadership operationalize the ethical factors, which Aquinas enlisted, namely, that the basis of a leader's motives for behavior and the actions thereafter is the altruistic dimension?

The factor of the social context raised by Aquinas seems to be operationalized in factors influencing authentic leadership, particularly the one described as critical life events. Aquinas' proposed requirement that a morally right leader needs to consider the demands of the social situation he or she might face as well as the outcomes of his or her actions in that specific context serves to illustrate the factor of life experiences, which are always context-based.

This analysis of Aquinas' understanding of the ethics of virtues seems to illustrate the close affinity between leadership ethics and authentic leadership and reinforces this essay's argument that all forms of leadership require the components of authentic leadership to be considered ethical. As Kanungo and Mendonca (1996) explained in line with Aquinas' viewpoint, in ethical leadership, the motives, behaviors, and capacities of a leader result in not only the moral development of the leader but also the followers. Such mutual moral development serves the interest of the organization and even society at large, which would make the leader authentic and successful.

Besides Aristotle's teleological approach to ethics, other perspectives of leadership ethics have identified deontological and virtue-based theories, which seem to be also operationalized in authentic leadership and therefore consistent with this essay's argument.

Northouse (2013) has described the deontological perspective of leadership ethics as that which “focuses on the actions of the leader and his or her moral obligations and responsibilities to do the right thing” (p. 426). This is distinguished from the teleological perspective, which looks at the kind of outcomes a leader’s actions might produce.

In this case, deontological perspective considers the inherent goodness of the actions, irrespective of their consequences. Examples include telling the truth, showing respect, keeping promises, exercising fairness, among others. Having their theoretical basis in Aristotle who emphasized the vitally important role of character formation by way of practice and habit, these examples seem to constitute the nature of an individual’s moral development. Is this not how a leader develops the internalized moral perspective, which characterizes authentic leadership as discussed above? This seems the case considering the aforementioned assertion that leaders with internalized moral perspective act in a manner consistent with the beliefs and morals they express.

Still in a manner consistent with the authentic leadership component of self-awareness, White (1993) has observed, “by making our character, will, and intentions central elements of moral virtue, Aristotle pointed out how critical it is to study our motivation and master the inner forces that could lead to moral compromises” (p. 4). Again, these assertions provide a direct link between ethical leadership and authentic leadership and serve to further the central argument of this essay.

A final consideration of this analysis concerns virtue-based theories, which “focus on who leaders are as people” (Northouse, 2013, p. 427). Traced back to the ancient Greeks and the writings of Plato and Aristotle, these theories draw attention not so much to what leaders do but rather to what they are, with emphasis on becoming virtuous and good persons. In a manner consistent with Aristotle’s argument discussed above, Northouse (2013) has observed, “When practiced over time, from youth to adulthood, good values become habitual, and part of the people themselves. By telling the truth, people become truthful” (pp. 427-428). He further noted that even though people can be able to learn and develop good values, “this theory maintains that virtues are present in one’s disposition” (p. 427). This latter assertion seems consistent with the positive psychological attributes as one of the factors that influence authentic leadership. In this regard, considered helpful in enhancing a leader’s capacity to develop the authentic leadership components, the attributes of confidence, hope, optimism, and resilience could be part of the virtues present in a leader’s disposition.

Overall, just as leadership scholars have argued for the centrality of ethics to leadership (Ciulla, 2012; Ciulla & Forsyth, 2014; Northouse, 2013), what constitutes authentic leadership seem equally central to leadership. Based on the analysis that has been grounded in a review of literature, the various ethical considerations in leadership seem consistent with the components of authentic leadership. Furthermore, the factors that influence authentic leadership seem to be operationalized in leadership ethics.

Conclusion

This essay has compared the key aspects of authentic leadership and leadership ethics and found consistency. While Northouse (2013) has taken into consideration leadership devoid of authenticity and stated that there is “a tremendous demand for authentic leadership” (p. 253), this essay has sought to propose a new perspective about authentic leadership. The

main argument has been that while the perspectives and components of authentic leadership as well as factors influencing this leadership approach seem valid, all these aspects of authentic leadership could actually combine to make ethical leaders. Consistent with this argument, leadership scholars have presented authentic leadership as an ideal to be sought by any leader, a factor that makes this leadership approach suitable for every form of leadership. Therefore, this essay has proposed that rather than continue research in authentic leadership, leadership scholars could launch studies that examine concepts such as authentic transformational leadership, authentic servant leadership, authentic team leadership, authentic transactional leadership, among other forms of leadership. Beginning with a review of literature and guided by the theoretical framework of both authentic leadership and leadership ethics, further research could be guided by the following research questions: does authentic leadership and leadership ethics share the same principles? Can leaders devoid of ethical considerations be considered authentic leaders? Is authentic leadership an ideal leadership construct achieved by ethical leaders? Finally, considering this essay's central argument, such a study could be guided by this hypothesis: the centrality of ethics to leadership is consistent with the centrality of authenticity to leadership.

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