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Citation: Turner, Jane and Mavin, Sharon (2014) Becoming More Authentic – A Restorative Journey. In: 15th International Conference on Human Resource Development Research and Practice across Europe HRD: Reflecting upon the Past - Shaping the Future, 4-6 June, 2014, Edinburgh.

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15th International Conference on Human Resource Development Research and Practice across Europe

HRD: Reflecting upon the Past - Shaping the Future

Leadership, Management and Talent Development

ABSTRACT FOR REFEREED PAPER

Becoming More Authentic – A Restorative Journey

To develop a deeper understanding of *how* leaders become more authentic, this paper presents the research findings from a qualitative study which explored the socially constructed lived experiences and understandings of senior leaders who had engaged in an authentic leader development (ALD) process through the vehicle of executive coaching. The aim of the research was to deepen understandings and challenge normative ideals by revealing 'what went on' for leaders.

Within the authentic leadership literature, there is a lack of consideration surrounding *how* leaders become more authentic, suggesting it is enabled with relative ease. The existential literature in consideration of authenticity, illustrates the impact of society and enculturation and as a consequence the challenges faced in becoming more authentic, yet this perspective is not embedded within authentic leadership research. In addition, the executive coaching literature, particularly the psychodynamic approach (at the early stages of development), suggests coaching can enable deeper self-awareness and greater authenticity (Lee, 2010), yet lacks empirical research and the theoretical underpinnings surrounding *how* a coachee actually develops.

The notion of 'Authentic Leadership' has steadily emerged over the last 10 years. Initially, Luthans and Avolio (2003) re-energised scholarly interest around authentic leadership as a response to the concerns relating to the ethical conduct of leaders, claiming authentic leadership is required to navigate through contemporary times, where the environment is unstable and the points of navigation ever-changing. However, despite the interest surrounding authentic leadership in the academic and practitioner literature, multiple conceptualizations of the notion have emerged over the last 10 years, leading to theoretical confusion around strategies for authentic leadership development (Popper and Maysseless, 2007; Gardner *et al.*, 2011; Ford and Harding, 2011).

Authentic leaders are described as being deeply self-aware, having a personal perspective, self-knowledge, which includes knowledge of one's values and operating in accord with one's values, one's vulnerabilities, motives, capabilities and an ability to be self-reflecting alongside the ability to be self-regulating (behaviours) (e.g. Kernis, 2003; Luthans and Avolio, 2003; Sparrowe, 2005; Avolio and Gardner, 2005; Michie and Gooty, 2005;). This implies the need for significant personal introspection. However, the ALD literature appears to oversimplify the requisite process, suggesting one can become

more authentic through “coming to reflect,” (Gardner *et al.*, 2005), “guided reflection” (Shamir and Eilam, 2005) and “thoughtful examination,” (Caldwell, 2006). In turning to the existential literature and the work of Heidegger (1962) in particular, the challenge in becoming more authentic is apparent. He considers the impact of society, referring in particular to two structures: Being the ‘They’ and Being an ‘Authentic Self’. In being ‘the They’, much of what we do is “average everydayness”, enculturation into the norms and expectations of a particular aspect of society. ‘Theyness’ for the most part constrains our possibilities of existence, suggesting conformity or in-authenticity as a result. The ‘Authentic Self’ implies a self that is mine (leading a life that one feels ownership of), whereby a person lives their life in full awareness, free to make choices, thus guiding their lives towards their chosen goal or project, referred to as ‘Daesin’ meaning ‘existence’ or ‘being-there.’ “*Coming to a deeper realization of who one is beneath the veneer of social trappings is what imbues life with a sense of authentic purpose*” (Schlegel, Hicks, Arndt and King, 2009, p.474), providing one with a deeper sense of meaning. Heidegger claims we will remain absorbed in ‘the They’ for the whole of our lives unless we discover ‘*how*’ to become more authentic.

Executive coaching, particularly the psychodynamic approach, is conceptualized as an individualized process, enabling the surfacing of unconscious material, leading to greater self-awareness, authenticity, learning, new perceptions and a more consciously engaged approach, enhancing the effectiveness of the leader and thus benefitting the organization (e.g., Carey, Philippon and Cummings, 2011, Lee, 2010; Levinson, 1996; Stokes and Jolly, 2010; Kilburg, 1996, 2000). Kets de Vries *et al.*, (2007) acknowledge the potential of executive coaching as a vehicle for leader development, yet suggest executive coaches focus upon the obvious; what we see; the conscious elements that are largely already known to the individual, leading to rather superficial conclusions and perpetuating a rather two dimensional view of the world of work. Focusing purely upon the executive’s role does not get behind the mask to reach the authentic human being in the process of development (Fosdick, 1943; Luthans and Avolio, 2003). This perspective chimes with Heidegger (1962) and his consideration of ‘the They’ and in drawing the fields of literature together, the shared aspirations of authenticity are apparent. Yet there is a need to develop deeper understandings of ‘*how*’ leaders can become more authentic.

Fifteen senior leaders who had engaged in an executive coaching process incorporating elements of ALD were interviewed, seeking to understand their ‘lived experiences’ and ‘understandings’. A hermeneutic phenomenological approach was adopted, using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to go beyond individual participant understandings borne out in the text, resulting in a number of super-ordinate themes, representing distinct stages of a leader development process, alongside corresponding sub themes, thus bringing the lived experiences of the participants and the interpretations of the researcher to life.

Five super-ordinate themes emerged from the research, characterizing an integrated Authentic Leader Development Process (iALD): 1) *Dubitation*, 2) *Excavation* 3) *Materialization* 4) *Restoration* 5) *Amalgamation*. Four of the super-ordinate themes are multi-dimensional, with a number of sub-themes attached to them. The themes

conceptualize participants' experiences of the ALD process, particularly how it unfolds. The fifth relates to participants' experiences of the coach and the amalgamation of support and challenge.

The paper extends the discussion here and fuses the ALD and executive coaching literature with Heidegger's (1962) approach. We then outline the research approach and process of analysis, drawing upon narratives from the senior leader participants before presenting the five super-ordinate themes and the subsequent Integrated Authentic Leader Development process (iALD) which illuminates, for the fifteen senior leaders, the experienced process of becoming more authentic. The iALD journey is enabled through the vehicle of executive coaching, adopting a psychodynamic approach, which illustrates the 'how' of ALD and creates a profound leader development experience, where depths are scaled and personal challenges faced, leading to sustained change, arguably a more authentic, confident and reflective self, better equipped to address the increasing challenge and ambiguity leaders' face in the global context.

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