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Leadership and the paradoxes of authenticity

In 2003, Bill George (former CEO of Medtronic Plc an S&P 500 constituent) argued that "*Due to the current crisis, complexities and challenges facing our society and organizations nowadays we need from a new type of leadership—the authentic leader*. Following that line of thought, Harvard Business Review published an article by Goffee and Jones in which they noted "Leadership demands the expression of an authentic self" (2005). One decade later "authenticity has become the gold standard for leaders" (Ibarra, 2015). On the surface, authentic leadership represents an ideal for leaders to aspire to. But unfortunately a simplistic understanding of authenticity can hinder a leader's development (Ibarra, 2015). This chapter exposes some of the complexities and nuances of authentic leadership by capturing some of the "true" and paradoxical essence of authenticity. This nuanced picture is informed by (a) the work of leadership scholars combined with (b) my background of 20 years studying and working in Psychology, (c) my experience as a CEO advisor and HR manager, (d) my work and reflections as a leadership developer and coach, (e) my academic theoretical understanding and (f) my own internal work aiming to become an authentic leader. In the next few sections four paradoxes are presented followed by suggestions for dealing with them.

INTRODUCTION

Many of the common understanding and scholarly approaches to authenticity revolve around a coherent picture of the authentic leader. Can authentic leaders be anything other than consistent and congruent? A simplistic view of authentic leadership would argue *No*. Yet a true understanding of authentic leadership requires that we comprehend its complexity. Accordingly, this chapter presents and comments on 4 paradoxes. A visual way of organising these paradoxes is by presenting them along two dimensions: horizontal and vertical. On the horizontal we find three paradoxes of breadth: (a) *the conceptual paradox*: aspiring to fit within the definition of authentic leadership can distance yourself from your authenticity, (b) *the contextual paradox*: in some contexts being authentic to your *Self* can be perceived as anything but authentic., and (c) *the identity paradox*: we may be authentic to different and contradictory selves. On the vertical dimension we find the paradox of depth in which aspects of the self that are encountered at

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different levels may contradict each other. The end, this chapter offers a reflective exercise as a means of starting a self-discovery journey.

PARADOXES OF BREADTH

CONCEPTUAL PARADOX

There are many definitions of authenticity and authentic leadership (for an overview see Gardner, Cogliser, Davis, & Dickens, 2011). The present chapter focusses on two commonly used conceptualisations and it explores the paradoxes that emerge from them. *Authenticity* is defined *as knowing oneself and acting accordingly* (Harter, 2002; Endrissat, Muller and Kaudela-Baum, 2007). In that sense, authenticity revolves around being true to your Self (Lid-Falkman, 2014). Another commonly used definition emerges from the Authentic Leadership Approach (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). According to this approach, authentic leaders are defined as those who "are deeply aware of how they think and behave and are perceived by others as being aware of their own and others' values/moral perspectives, knowledge and strengths; aware of the context in which they operate; and who are confident, hopeful, optimistic, resilient and of high moral character" Avolio, Luthans et al. (2004, p. 4) as cited in Avolio, Gardner et al. (2004, pp. 802, 803).

The first paradox emerges from the authentic leadership conceptualization itself. Leaders exhibiting high levels of authenticity (i.e., being true to themselves) do not always fit with Avolio and Gardner's definition. In fact, as Ladkin and Taylor (2010) noted having positive psychological capabilities (such as confidence, hope, optimism) may be authentic for some leaders but not for others. Similarly, Wilson (2013) explains that even if authentic leaders are 'confident, hopeful, optimistic and resilient' on some occasions they are also uncertain, pessimistic and fragile on other occasions. Finally, Shamir and Eilam (2005) argued that authenticity per se does not necessarily need to be related to positive, ethical or moral behaviour. In fact, controversially there are those leaders who are authentic to dubious immoral values. Following the aforementioned presented reasoning, they too can be acting from a place of authenticity and on that basis could be considered authentic leaders – albeit not in ways we would like to encourage.

I first encountered this paradox when I started teaching authentic leadership. I used to explain the authentic leadership approach during the lecture and then invite the students to enter into a journey of authentic leadership development. Paradoxically*, some of my students needed to be*

inauthentic (e.g., pretend to be optimistic) *to fit with the definition of an "authentic leader"*. My students felt an inherent contradiction when they were invited to discover and enact their authentic self, but the Self that they discovered was in many instances far away from the definition postulated by Avolio and colleagues. Even if they were good leaders who were true to themselves they did not qualify formally as authentic leaders. To fit into the authentic leaders' "box" these leaders needed to metaphorically hide and/or exaggerate some aspects of themselves. How authentic was that?

> Paradox 1: Leaders may need to sacrifice their authenticity to fit within a definition of authentic leadership.

CONTEXTUAL PARADOX

Followers' assessment of leaders' authenticity is context dependent (Fields, 2013). Some of the factors that impact on followers' evaluations are: (a) job role expectations, (b) past experience with leaders, (c) followers' implicit models of the characteristics associated with a good leader, and (d) the norms present within the culture of the organisational setting (Fields, 2013, p. 147). Therefore if a leader wants to be perceived as authentic, *being authentic is not enough.* Nyberg and Sveningsson (2014) argue that while authenticity is meant to make good leaders, these leaders also have to restrain their claimed authenticity depending on the context. Accordingly, while it has been argued that authentic leaders need to let others see their negative states such as uncertainty (Wilson, 2013), doing so maybe risky (Ibarra, 2015). In her Harvard Business review paper Ibarra (2015) described a general manager who, when she was promoted, said to her employees "I want to do this job, but it's scary and I need your help". This could be seen as authentic disclosure of emotion and thus she could be seen as an authentic leader. Nonetheless, in the context where she was working, she lost credibility as the followers needed a confident leader to take charge. Paradoxically although authenticity is said to be required for good leadership (Nyberg & Sveningsson, 2014) the challenge of great leadership is to manage their authenticity (Goffee & Jones, 2005).

I experienced this paradox in action in my own work with the Exeter's One Planet MBA (OP MBA), co-founded and delivered with WWF International. This programme aims to develop a new generation of business leaders with a strong sustainability mindset—a One Planet Mindset (for more details see Jeanrenaud, Adarves-Yorno & Forsans, 2015). The module I was co-leading aimed to develop leaders differently and it placed a great emphasis on authentic leadership. Five years ago, during my first lecture I made sure that I portrayed myself as authentically as possible. I came to the lecture theatre as "Inma", I dressed to represent who I was not as an academic but as a person (using informal clothes and wearing vibrant colours). It was a well-planned strategy. I didn't use any status cues as I wanted the students to connect with the "real" Inma, not with the

academic lecturer. Furthermore, I wanted students to know that during the module there was space to be themselves and for that wanted to role model the process by being "myself". To my surprise, the MBA students neither recognised nor appreciated my authenticity. Furthermore, some of them thought that I was a junior academic and they complained to the MBA director for sending someone who they considered to be an inexperienced lecturer. Using the aforementioned analysis by Fields (2013) my authenticity was at odds with their implicit models of what an MBA module leader should look like. Moreover, my "true self", moving away from status, wearing informal clothes and displaying warmth of connection did not fit with the MBA culture. Intentions rooted in authenticity may in some contexts, like in this case, be misinterpreted. Aiming to act from an authentic place is an activity worth pursuing. But equally we should not ignore who we are leading and the context in which we are operating.

Paradox 2: Being authentic does not directly enhance the perception of authenticity and can instead undermine one's leadership

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IDENTITY PARADOX

Until now, this chapter has revolved around authenticity understood as encompassing a *true self* (George & Sims, 2007) with the assumption that there is *one* true self. However, Wilson (2013) argues that there are multifaceted and often contradictory aspects of our "selves". Yet, multiple identities have to date, been largely overlooked in the area of authentic leadership (Gardiner, 2013). The multiplicity of identities is a key premise of a robust social psychological perspective. The social identity approach (encompassing social identity theory, SIT, Tajfel & Turner, 1979; and self-categorization theory, SCT, Turner, et al., 1987) argues that an individual's self is composed of a personal identity and as many social identities as meaningful groups the individual belongs to. The application and understanding of multiple identities has been proliferous in a wide range of areas including leadership (Haslam, Reicher, & Platow, 2011). A well-documented series of empirical studies emphasise that, among other things, the effective leader needs to be "one of us" (Haslam, Reicher, & Platow, 2011). That is, the social identity approach would strongly argue that leaders do not only need to be authentic to "I" but also they need to be authentic to "us".

This paradox is particularly pervasive when values and priorities from our different social identities conflict with each other (see social identity complexity, Roccas & Brewer, 1990). Let us's imagine two leaders that occupy a senior management position. Externally in their team meeting leaders A and B appear really attentive to the followers' ideas and concerns. For example, when the followers share their concern about their precarious work life balance Leaders A and B seem to share "authentically" their own lack of balance and promise they will look into ways of improving the situation. Subsequently, in the senior management meeting it is

announced that the organisation needs to become more productive and several options are discussed. In that meeting Leaders A and B commit their team to work under new challenging targets (increasing the precariousness of the work life balance). Externally both leaders are behaving inconsistently and therefore could be judged as inauthentic. But, the potential internal processes underpinning their behaviour may be quite different. Let me give you a possible scenario. Leader A's behaviour stems from his personal identity and he identifies neither with his team nor with the management team. In psychological terms Leader A has his personal identity activated in both contexts and he is acting out of personal interest in both contexts. On the contrary, Leader B's behaviour stems from his high identification with both groups which happen to have opposite values and priorities. That is, in his team meetings, his identity as "one of the team" is activated and he is acting and talking from that place (really caring about the work life balance of his employees). Nonetheless in the meeting with the senior management group his identity as "one of the senior managers" is activated and he is acting and talking from that place (really believing that challenging targets are the solution needed). In psychological terms Leader B has contrasting and competing social identities activated in each context.

To illustrate further, let's look at a real life example. Sarah was the founder and CEO of a successful engineering company. She was considered a leader with a transparent style of communication which elicited trust among employees. In her previous role Sarah was working as a graphic engineer for a multinational car manufacturer and she was heavily involved and committed to the Union. Her identity, values and norms as a Union rep were very strong and they determined her beliefs around work policies. However, as a CEO her identity revolved around different values regarding work policies. When I interviewed her she declared that the values of both identities were important to her but she acknowledged that sometimes these contradicted each other and therefore presented inner tensions. Through a series of conversations Sarah noted that when her CEO identity was salient she resisted the idea of hiring "a woman who is about to have children". On the contrary, when her Union identity was activated she passionately declared that organisations need to hire women who are about to have children and that policies of flexible working and childcare need to be changed. If someone had listened to Sarah they may have found it difficult to accept that these two opposing arguments came from the same person. Consequently the most common explanation of the incongruence would be to attribute the difference to her being inauthentic (to say the least). Through my conversations with her I can attest that it is not inauthenticity which lies at the root of the inconsistency but rather authenticity to competing identities.

Paradox 3: An individual can be authentic to multiple, and in some cases contradictory, identities

DEALING WITH THE PARADOXES OF BREADTH

Within the authentic leadership approach the term "authentic leader" came initially from the need to differentiate between transformational leaders and pseudo-transformational leaders (Avolio, 2011). A way of dealing with the *conceptual paradox* is by calling those leaders who fit within the definition given by Avolio and colleagues (2004) 'authentic transformational' and calling those who possess authenticity 'authentic leaders' (Kernis, 2003) meaning that they know themselves and are true to themselves (Harter, 2002). Making this conceptual distinction would mean that under leadership development, individuals could choose what type of authentic leader they want to become (i.e. feels more aligned with who they aspire to be). During their developmental journeys some leaders may choose to acquire high levels of optimism, hope, resilience, efficacy and moral character and therefore aspire to become an authentic transformational leader (as defined by Avolio, et al, 2004). Other leaders may want to become self-confident, genuine, reliable and trustworthy which have been considered qualities of authentic leaders by Ilies, Morgeson, and Nahrgang's (2005). Yet others may choose to develop mindfulness, hope, and compassion and in doing so they will be an example of a 'resonant leader' (as defined by Boyatzis and McKee, 2005).

A way of dealing with the *contextual and identity paradoxes* would be by engaging in what Ladkin and Taylor (2010) considered a critical aspect of authentic leadership – "leaderly" choice. As part of that "leaderly" choice individuals need to decide what aspects of oneself are appropriate to share. As Jean Tomlin (former HR manager of Marks and Spencer) explained "I want to be me, but I am channeling parts of me to context. What you get is a segment of me. It is not a fabrication or a façade—just the bits that are relevant for that situation" (Goffee and Jones, 2005). To make that "leaderly" choice leaders need to identify what aspects are appropriate to express within the particular context as in the case of Jean. But also, which aspects resonate with the identity of the group they are leading (Gardner, 1995). For leaders to be perceived as authentic they need to relate to their followers (Taylor, 2013) and a successful authentic leader needs, among other things, to be perceived to be "one of us" (Haslam, Reicher, & Platow, 2011). In other words, to be an effective leader we need to represent and be authentic to "us". Therefore, while it is important to fully discover and embrace who we are, as leaders, we need to *lead others*, and we need to bear in mind who these others are and the context in which we are embedded.

When there is contradiction between the different identities within us, it is important to acknowledge that the activation of these identities depends on the social context (Turner, et al., 1987). By understanding the contexts that activate our different ranges of identity we are a step

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closer towards understanding ourselves. Some of us would like to minimize our inconsistency across contexts. However, doing so could make us be inauthentic to the activated identity that is operating at each point in time and would be forced and artificial. The tension between consistency and inconsistency of Self lead us to the paradox of depth.

THE PARADOX OF DEPTH

Authenticity is shaped by social identities and the context but also it varies depending on the depth in which we engage our "inner conversations". That is, as we enhance our awareness we uncover different levels of the Self, which may resurface tensions and contradictions.

An Authentic Leadership course provided by a prestigious and well-established Institute (Authentic Leadership in Action Institute, ALIA) started with the invitation "let's be confused together". And indeed to start with that provocation confused me. My preconceived assumptions let me expect some clarity and guidance. In due time, I realised that I was getting clarity and guidance on how to go deeper into myself and that when you go deep enough you encounter confusion. I then experienced that it is only through a certain level of accepted confusion that we can embark on truly deep authentic leadership development. One of the useful tools to navigate those dark waters of confusion is Mindfulness. In simple terms, Mindfulness is about being aware of what is happening while it is happening (Boyatzis and McKee, 2005, p. 2) But importantly, that form of awareness needs to be non-judgmental (Epstein, 1999). This kind of attention nurtures greater awareness, clarity and acceptance of present moment reality (Kabat-Zinn, 2011). But it is not just restricted to our inner experience. In fact, mindfulness is defined as the capacity to be fully aware of all that one experiences inside the self as well as to pay full attention to what is happening around *(*Boyatzis and McKee, 2005*, p. 2).* Judy Johansen, president and CEO sees mindfulness as "a way of life and a necessary baseline for success as a leader of a complex business" (ibid).

In 2013 I conducted a series of interviews and focus groups with members of ALIA, the aforementioned Institute, to explore the extent to which in depth authentic communication with oneself (mindfulness) changed the notion of authenticity. The sample was composed of ALIA participants (in this case mindfulness beginners) and ALIA faculty (senior consultants and leadership developers who have decades of experience of mindfulness practice). The findings of this research allowed me to capture the paradox of "depth". For ALIA participants, authenticity was about congruency, alignment, coherence and resonance (reflecting an understanding of authenticity similar to mainstream approaches to authentic leadership as outlined earlier in this chapter). The opposite picture, however, emerged in the interviews and focus groups with Faculty

members. Those faculty members who have gone deeper in terms of self-awareness talked about fluidity and continuous change. Paradoxically, at a deeper level congruency across times was not highlighted but instead it was congruency with what was happening moment by moment, including incongruence itself. Accordingly, for ALIA faculty being aware of their own moments of inauthenticity was the gateway towards authenticity (for more details see Adarves-Yorno, 2013). For them the main emphasis was on acceptance of "what is actually happening" even if that meant dissonance and incoherence.

PARADOX 4: At one level authenticity is experienced as congruency and coherence. At a deeper level authenticity is experienced as acceptance of *what is* including fluidity and inauthenticity.

To understand further this paradox it is important that we first comprehend **the illusion of congruence and the reality of disconnection.**

My experience working with leaders and aspiring leaders is that due to their lack of time and cognitive resources they tend to create a narrative that enhances their sense of congruence with themselves. However, in truth that narrative and the attachment to that narrative may be distancing them from reality itself. I used to work in a small company as both CEO advisor and HR manager. In that company I witnessed how the reality that the CEO had in her mind was in many instances quite different to that of the employees. But how could divergent realities coexist in a small organisation? To address this question, let's uncover the underlying process of the "disconnection to reality". In the *Neuroscience of Change*, Kelly McGonigal (2012) explained how our mind in its default state does four things: (a) *time travel*: remembering things from the past, planning or imagining things from the future; (b) engages in *inner commentary*, that is judges and comments on what happens around, "this is bad"; "this could be better", "this is wonderful"; (c) engages in *self-referential processes*, that is, it selects bits of information in order to define the Self (e.g., "I have spent two hours in that meeting listening patiently, because I am the kind of person who attends to everyone's views"); (d) engages into *social cognition*, that is we judge and label others "he is kind", "she is aggressive", "he is competitive".

Planning for the future and judging the environment ourselves and others gives us a (false) sense of knowing "in the future I am going to do X because the environment is Z, my colleagues are W and I am the type of person who does Y". When a group of people are functioning from a place of judging and labelling, rather than being fully present and aware, the reality that is perceived by each of them can be quite different. This is shaped by, among other things, their underlying beliefs and self-images. Let me give you an example. Three years ago in a conversation with

someone the person told me: "Inma, you just don't see yourself". My internal reaction was: "How dare he? He is the one who does not see himself" (I judged him, social cognition). Then, I internally undermined his comment using some self-referential processes "I have been working on developing my self-awareness for a long time and I am a person who is very self-aware". Following my perception that he was the one who was mistaken and assuming that there was no point in talking anymore I terminated the conversation. Later on that day I managed to have some detachment from the self-image of "I am an aware person". That detachment gave me space to see reality more clearly and then I realized that in fact he was right, I was not "seeing myself". Paradoxically, my attachment to the *self-image* that I was *self-aware* was in fact a *barrier to my own self-awareness.*

If leaders define themselves as 'authentic', in the sense that they are always congruent with their values, it is quite likely that they may become attached to that self-image. In that case, it is likely that their mind will disregard the instances in which they behave incongruently with those values. In that sense they will only stay on the surface "pretending" to be authentic. Detachment and willingness to embrace our own incongruencies and incoherences are needed to embrace a deeper sense of fluid authenticity.

CONCLUSION

Aiming to fit into a prescribed definition of authentic leadership may distance leaders from their own authenticity. Equally pretending that authentic leadership is just a question of being yourself does a disservice to the complexities and nuances inherent in that aspiration (Taylor, 2013. p. 186). Authenticity is not a discrete quality that you either possess or you don't - for authenticity to be 'authentic' a quality of detachment and fluidity is needed, otherwise there is a danger of shaping "reality" to give us an illusion of congruency. Paradoxically then we need to authentically accept our own moments of incoherence and incongruence if we are to truly embark on a journey towards authentic leadership. However, this is not an invitation to get so trapped with our own mental activity that we lose touch with the people we are leading and the context in which we are operating. If we get too tangled in the workings of our mind, our effectiveness as leaders will be reduced as the cognitive energy that will be left to perceive what is around us will be severely diminished. What to do then? As aforementioned, mindfulness may help us to be aware of what is happening within us but also around us (Boyatzis and McKee, 2005). From a mindful state authenticity comes from witnessing our inner communication while being non-judgemental and non-attached to it. This will allow us to be truly open to what is within and without.

At this point you may be wondering, "why is this level of complexity, accepted confusion and fluidity necessary for authentic leaders? Why would anyone want to dedicate so much intense and invisible inner work to acquire this initially intangible quality?" The work by Otto Scharmer (2009) and Peter Senge and colleagues (2010) emphasizes how the internal state of the leader has a profound impact on their external actions and their influence on others. And at the fundamental level, leadership's first commandment is "Know Thyself" (Wetlaufer, 2001). Let me share with you an example of the negative implications that result when this commandment is not followed. The CEO Of that small company I used as an example above (let's call her Rachel) did not engage in a process of self-awareness. She was, like many CEOs, so busy that she had almost no time for introspection. One year, in my one to one meetings with employees I discovered that there was something unusual happening with Rachel. She was behaving in an extremely controlling manner and she was interfering with employees' daily work. Rachel was explicitly showing her employees that she did not trust them and that was very demotivating for them. Through a series of conversations and coaching sessions with Rachel I discovered that the problem lied "buried" within hidden, unresolved personal issues. To give you a brief picture, employees organised a Christmas night out and did not invite her. For other CEOs this may have been completely acceptable or even encouraged. But for Rachel, this activated an old pain of "being abandoned" which made her feel extremely hurt by her employees' decision. In turn, she felt that she could not trust anyone, and at a deeper level she reacted unconsciously from a place of vengeance. Without the appropriate conversations and coaching she would not have realised that the problem was "hers" and she would have continued controlling her employees and blaming them for the lack of motivation[1].

I strongly believe that deep inner training which truly puts us in touch with our inner state is key in bringing us closer to our inner and outer realities. This inner training also needs to allow us to witness our attachments (e.g., to our self-image). On this note, what I say to my MBA students and other leaders is the following: if you want to discover who the person underneath your skin is, welcome a journey that will be enriching but may not always be easy and in which you are likely to encounter contradictions within yourself. Enjoy the connection with your thoughts and your emotions, relish the inner gifts that you will discover on your way. If you witness contradictions, simply accept them and do not judge them, just see them from a detached place and be curious. Ask yourself where are these contradictions coming from? In this journey be prepared to find

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[1] If while you are reading this you catch yourself thinking "that is because she is a woman" just be aware that these personal issues have nothing to do with gender. Unfortunately, there are many people who have abandonment issues, but they may not be aware of them or they have them so well covered that they cannot find a connection between their reactions and the root cause.

some aspects of yourself which you may not like (some people call them shadows). If you don't find those for a long time, that is ok too[2].

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[2] It took me three years from the time I first encountered the concept of "shadows" to discover my first one. My ego created such a perfect self-definition that I couldn't see shadows as they didn't fit with the image I had created for myself. Once I witnessed my mind acting from a shadow it was time for celebration, "Yes! I've got one" In time the other shadows are revealing themselves, this is a life-long journey.

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