Cultivating Authentic Leaders: Toward Conceptual Coherence and Sustainable Practice

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is twofold. One is to better understand the contested construct of authentic leadership and its cultivation and practice. The other is to offer a conceptual framework for practicing sustainable authentic leadership. Based on a review of authentic leadership literature with a focus on its sustainability, we introduce a conceptual framework through a lens of an ecological model to capture the dynamics of individual and systems perspectives. Practicing sustainable authentic leadership is not a simple act; rather authentic leaders need to embrace paradoxes to navigate today's complex systems and to find new ways to create positive and valuable roles both in and outside of their organization. In addition to a new conceptual framework, this paper offers approaches for leaders and educators to develop and practice authentic leadership. It also provides opportunities for values-based leadership community members to further discuss and examine sustainable authentic leadership approaches with the proposed conceptual framework.

Introduction

The construct of authentic leadership has captured the interest of many researchers and practitioners in a variety of fields including leadership, management, psychology, and education (Leroy et al., 2015; Liu et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2014). Generally, the literature suggests three central themes regarding authentic leadership: a focus on self-awareness, an emphasis on the true self, and a foundation in moral leadership (Hopkins & O'Neil, 2015). However, how leaders practice authenticity and maintain it is still being debated. This

confusion is due to the daunting complexity of both defining and exercising authentic leadership. Approaching leadership authentically requires not only determining how to employ authentic behaviors (Dyjak-LeBlanc et al., 2016), and balancing internal needs with external demands, but navigating unique paradoxes and dialectics (Alvesson & Einola, 2019; Ibarra, 2015). Keeping in mind the contradictions and unfinished research agenda of authentic leadership, this paper poses an additional question: "How can authentic leadership be practiced sustainably?"

Sustainable leadership involves more than keeping an organization profitable and retaining existing leaders in their roles. It prompts individuals and organizations to consider organizational processes and products in light of their long-term effect on employees, communities, and the environment (Kiewiet & Vos, 2007; McCann & Sweet, 2014). From a sustainable leadership perspective, the ultimate goal of an organization goes beyond creating value for shareholders to making enduring and meaningful change (Hargreaves, 2007). Even as organizations move toward more sustainable practices, there are questions about how individuals sustain a practice of authentic leadership in these environments.

However, limited research exists that examines authentic leadership from a values-based and sustainability perspective. Based on the literature review of authentic leadership, we propose a conceptual model that incorporates aspects of sustainability to better cultivate and maintain authentic leadership. The paper concludes with recommendations for practice and research.

Authentic Leadership

The concept of authenticity traces its roots to the ancient Greek philosophy of 'know thyself' and 'to thine own self be true,' humanistic psychology, and positive psychology (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Lawler & Ashman, 2012). Humanistic psychology indicates individuals who see themselves clearly and are not hindered by others' expectations for them (Maslow, 1971). In leadership studies, authenticity in the leadership literature arose in the 1960s (Gardner et al., 2011). George's book (2003) raised the popularity of authentic leadership. He explained that "authentic leaders pursue purpose with passion, practice values, lead with heart and head, establish long-lasting, meaningful relationships, and demonstrate self-discipline" (Hopkins & O'Neil, 2015, p. 2). To date, even though there is a scholarly debate, scholars generally agree with Walumbwa et al. (2008)'s definition of authentic leadership, which is "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). What differentiates authentic leadership from other leadership theories is an emphasis on the deep sense of self as a leader (Avolio & Gardner, 2005).

Generally, the literature suggests that individuals who strive to practice authentic leadership seek a deep level of awareness of their values and beliefs and have self-efficacy in terms of who they are and what they stand for as leaders (Oh et al., 2018; Rao, 2017; Walumbwa et al., 2008). They seek to practice authentic leadership in ways that are consistent with their values and are viewed by others as legitimate due to their honest relationships, the considerable value they place on input and feedback, and a visible ethical foundation (Ilies et al., 2005). Positive psychological capital suggests that authentic leaders exemplify hope, resilience, optimism, and self-efficacy (Luthans et al., 2007). Leaders who possess these characteristics may be more prepared to face challenging tasks to achieve goals even in the face of adversity.

In everyday practice, authentic leaders can communicate their values clearly to their people in and out of their organization (Klepper & Nakamura, 2012). It can be through a formal speech such as an annual goal-setting message to employees or everyday team conversations. Because they are aware of own strengths and weaknesses, they know when they need help and often set up a support system that consists of mentors and peers beyond their organization to assist them, especially when they face challenging moments like ethical dilemmas (Williams et al., 2021). Furthermore, as authentic leaders genuinely care about others' growth and development, they help others succeed in their jobs by listening to what others need, integrating those needs, and clarifying their roles (Marques-Quinteiro et al., 2021).

Enacting authentic leadership tends to increase leaders' mental well-being through reduced job stress and strengthened work engagement (Weiss et al., 2018). Furthermore, scholars argue that authentic leaders have a positive impact on their followers in terms of motivation, job satisfaction, and performance (Gardner & Schermerhorn, 2004: Wang et al., 2014; Yagil & Medler-Liraz, 2014).

Despite the many possible benefits of authentic leadership, scholars have noted several major concerns with the authentic leadership construct (Alvesson & Einola, 2019). Ibarra (2015) suggested that there is a "tension between managing impressions to attempt to look like a leader as opposed to seeking congruence at the risk that others may evaluate one's behavior as not demonstrating effective leadership" (p. 55). For example, individuals in formal leadership roles may argue that acting as their 'true' selves will make them better leaders, while simultaneously insisting that to be perceived as good leaders they will need to hide or alter their 'true' selves (Nyberg & Sveningsson, 2014). This paradox is particularly relevant to issues of race and gender. Although the concept of authentic leadership is often portrayed as gender-neutral (Liu et al., 2015), the 'Think manager, think male' mindset and masculine leadership behaviors are still the predominant social norm (Hopkins & O'Neil, 2015; Schein, 2007).

Furthermore, the suggestion that one can find consistency between values and actions rests on the outdated notion that there is some true, essential, and fixed self (Wheatley, 2006). This Western notion suggests a mythical level of individualism that does not account for the interdependent and intertwined nature of humans and societies. This notion of a single, intractable self also does not allow for the evolution of values and beliefs that occur throughout an individual's life, particularly if one does possess high levels of self-awareness (Ibarra, 2015). In addition, Williams et al. (2021)'s study revealed that authentic leaders often struggle with balancing their own values with those of the organization, which can be a challenge to sustaining authentic leadership. These can be substantial tensions for an authentic leader, highlighting the inherent conflict between self (personal and ethical values, beliefs about decisions and the importance of change, familial and cultural background) and the context (organizational structures, pressures, tensions such as work and home life, and push back against change).

Authentic and Sustainable Leadership
Understanding that authenticity is not a fixed construct, but rather an ebb and flow of awareness and alignment, and requires practice, leaders and organizations can support employees by consciously creating environments for individual wellness and flourishing (Avery & Bergsteiner, 2011; Gigol, 2020; Heizmann & Liu, 2018). But how has an aspect of "sustain-

ability" been examined by scholars and researchers with regards to authentic leadership?

Sustainable leadership practice is generally defined as leadership with a long-term vision, social integrity, and ensuring wellness of others and their development (Malik & Mehmood, 2022; McCann et al., 2014). Originally, the sustainable leadership research was heavily focused on green management and strategies concerning United Nations sustainable development goals (SDGs) to save our planet (Malik & Mehmood, 2022). Yet, the concept of sustainable leadership gradually extends its meaning to broadly cover sustainability across levels from individuals, organizations, to societies and these systems interact with each other (Williams et al., 2021). The purpose and goal of a sustainable organization is to create a meaningful change across the systems, which goes beyond making a profit or creating value for shareholders (Hargreaves, 2007; Kiewiet & Vos, 2007; McCann & Sweet, 2014). Core values of such organizations include: adopting a long-term perspective, investing in people, and supporting innovation (Avery & Bergsteiner, 2011; Gerard et al., 2017). Organizational leaders focusing on sustainability also build relationships with others through reflexive and participative approaches (Gerard et al., 2017).

Considering the key aspects of sustainable leadership, there are indeed commonalities between sustainable leadership and authentic leadership as its core values and characteristics are similar, such as long-term vision, integrity, moral perspective, and developing others (Gigol, 2020; Malik & Mehmood, 2022; Williams et al., 2021). What is unique about sustainable leadership, which authentic leadership has less focus on, is that sustainable leadership provides a multi-layered view from individual, to organization, to society, though there is very limited research in this area (Williams et al., 2021).

Despite the potential benefits of a sustainable leadership approach, pursuing sustainability may not be an easy task for authentic leaders. Due to a range of external events, including changes in market, political, and/or economic conditions, organizations can be vulnerable to disruptions (Avery & Bergsteiner, 2011), challenging one's ability to keep up with an authentic approach. Indeed, we know little about how individuals maintain a practice of authentic leadership in such environments. Therefore, it may be helpful to explore authenticity in leadership as both individual and systemic - focusing on the self and the whole simultaneously from a sustainability perspective.
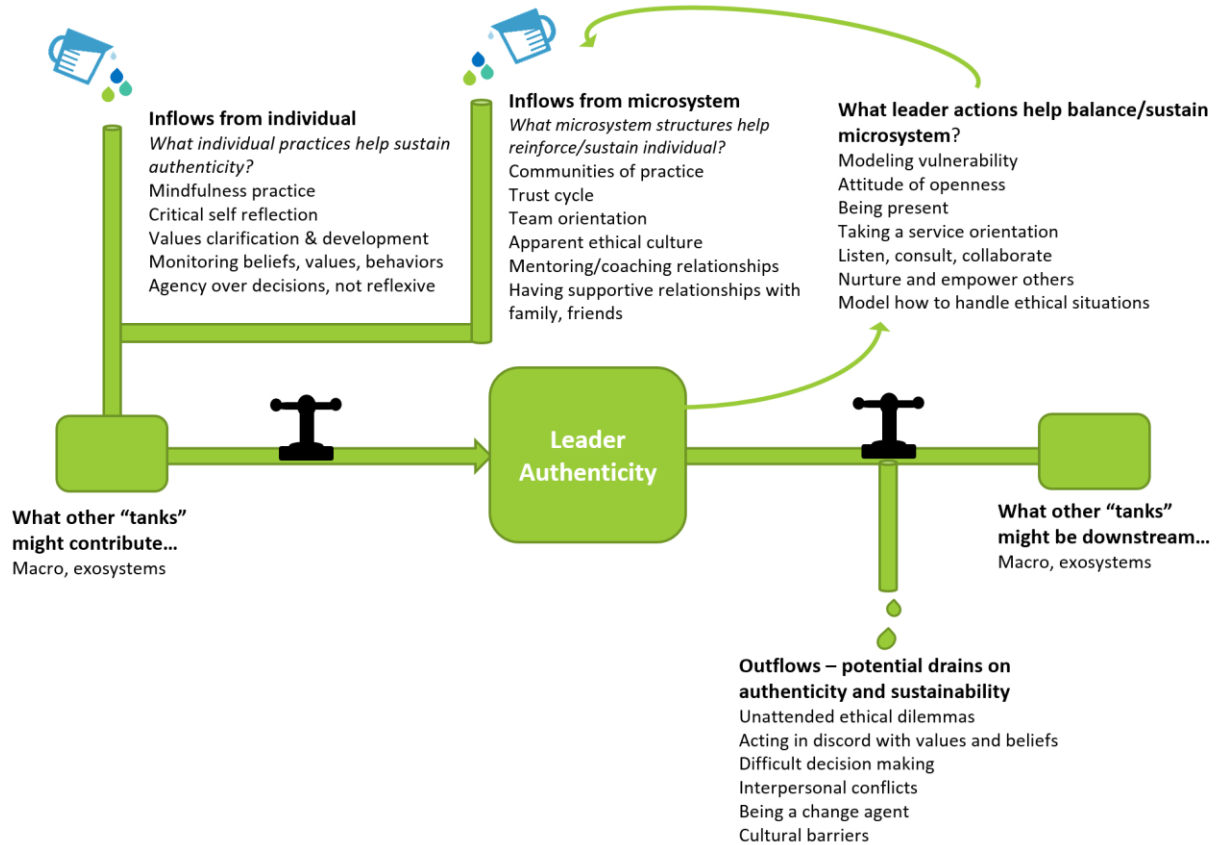
Authentic and Sustainable Leadership Ecological Model
Based on the literature review, the sustainability perspective can help advance the authentic leadership theory. The sustainability view offers a systems perspective and an emphasis on an ongoing, long-term perspective to expand their definition of authentic leadership. Especially when we think about a challenging gap between 'true self' and expectations dictated by an organization or society (Ibarra, 2005; Williams et al., 2021), system's thinking can help leaders better understand and navigate unique paradoxes and dialectics demands.

We propose a model highlighting a systems view of sustainable authentic leadership, beginning with the individual but encompassing organizational and societal systems (*see* Figure 1). Issues of the "self" have been long debated in the psychological literature (Leary & Tangney, 2012) with some views highlighting the dynamic interaction between social and psychological systems (Morf & Mischel, 2012), while emphasizing the need for self-awareness (Carver, 2012). Thus, one's authentic self is influenced both by awareness of one's core psychological sense of self and personal values as well as by one's social context (Yakushko

et al., 2009). It is this inherent interaction between the self-concept and the individual's environment that suggests the potential usefulness of an ecological model as a conceptual framework.

Figure 1: **Visual Model of Cultivating and Sustaining Authentic Leadership**

Inflows from individual
What individual practices help sustain authenticity?
Mindfulness practice
Critical self reflection
Values clarification & development
Monitoring beliefs, values, behaviors
Agency over decisions, not reflexive

Inflows from microsystem
What microsystem structures help reinforce/sustain individual?
Communities of practice
Trust cycle
Team orientation
Apparent ethical culture
Mentoring/coaching relationships
Having supportive relationships with family, friends

What leader actions help balance/sustain microsystem?
Modeling vulnerability
Attitude of openness
Being present
Taking a service orientation
Listen, consult, collaborate
Nurture and empower others
Model how to handle ethical situations

Leader Authenticity

What other "tanks" might contribute...
Macro, exosystems

What other "tanks" might be downstream...
Macro, exosystems

Outflows – potential drains on authenticity and sustainability
Unattended ethical dilemmas
Acting in discord with values and beliefs
Difficult decision making
Interpersonal conflicts
Being a change agent
Cultural barriers

Considering the individual within their context has been a foundational part of psychological theory and empirical work for nearly a century since Lewin (1936) proposed his famous equation of behavior as a function of both person and environment. Career theorists have long suggested that success in one's work has to do with both knowledge of self (interests, abilities, values) and the context in which one finds oneself (Gelso & Williams, 2022). In Bronfenbrenner's (1977, 2009) ecological model, context is represented in concentric circles with the individual at the center divided into four systems.

The first layer outside the individual (the microsystem) is an individual's immediate context, including family members, friends, peers, and coworkers. In this layer, one's social identities are developed and tested, as one's sense of self in relation to others develops over time. In the second layer (the mesosystem), the interconnections between the elements of the microsystem interact (e.g., inter-work group relationships, cross-functional groups, etc.). In the third layer (the exosystem), the individual is impacted indirectly by the environment, such as through organizational culture, state and federal policies, and broader systems (educational, economic, political and religious). And finally, the individual works within a macrosystem of overarching social beliefs and values and cultural norms. While the individual most often feels

connections across the micro and mesosystems, the exo- and macrosystems are also part of the overall context of an individual's relationship to others.

The model reveals the porous nature of the various systems. The center of the model indicates the individual leader's authenticity "tank." The tanks represent an accumulation of a leader's beliefs, values, and behaviors that reflect their authenticity, so that, when regulated, the leader and the outer systems can be preserved. For simplicity, we provide a visual of this model focusing on the individual level with input from the microsystem. The sustainability of the leader's authenticity is fed by "inflows" (Meadows, 2008), such as various supportive factors, mindfulness practice, or values clarification. The inflows nourish the leader's authenticity and therefore are a large contributor to maintaining it. However, the "outflows" (Meadows, 2008), such as the drain that happens when a leader acts in discord with values and beliefs or an ethical situation goes unattended, must also be monitored when striving to practice authenticity. Inflows and outflows can be attended to by the individual leader and members of the microsystem. The faucets suggest the agency of the leader to adjust and be flexible in preparation for and in response to the complexities of leading. The aspiration for the authentic leader is not perfection, but rather an attentiveness and intentionality to keep the contents of the tank within a range of desired/acceptable levels (Meadows, 2008), or "sustainable." In *Figure 1*, the loops represent the fluid nature of the individual and the microsystem where, for example, modeling vulnerability could contribute to both the microsystem inflows and then, eventually, contribute to the leader's ability to practice authenticity. Outflows are inevitable, but our model suggests that they could be moderated or minimized by leaders' internal self-practices and actions, and by microsystem supportive structures. Within the larger systems perspective, the model represents those factors over which the leader could have some agency; adjusting the faucets by, for example, actively engaging in critical self-reflection, nurturing and empowering others, working with a leadership coach or mentor, and attending to ethical dilemmas. The proposed model serves as a guide to practice authentic leadership and for some areas of future research.

Recommendations for the Practice of Authentic Leadership

Considering the model, our recommendations focus on the ways that leaders can bolster inflows or supportive factors and moderate outflows. We provide specific approaches to practices for leaders and organizational development professionals. See the list of suggested practices under each category in the model (*see* Figure 1).

Inflows from the Individual

While followers expect leaders to be consistent, stable, and fair, they paradoxically expect leaders to cater to individual demands, be flexible, and take specific situations into consideration (Ibarra, 2015; Iszatt-White et al., 2019). Increasing and maintaining *self-awareness and discovery of one's evolving values* is one good approach to build the stamina to deal with complexity and contradictions (Michie & Gooty, 2005; Qu et al., 2019; Shamir & Eilam, 2005). To achieve this type of practice, *a critically reflective mindfulness* can be useful, whereby individuals in leadership roles question deeply held assumptions about how they make meaning of their world (Brookfield, 2011; Nesbit, 2012). Kegan (1982) describes the powerful moments when the ideas, thoughts, beliefs, values, and assumptions (in which individuals are so deeply embedded that we lack active awareness) come into view. When a value, belief, or feeling shifts from being taken-for-granted to becoming part of one's awareness, it allows an individual to make an intentional decision, as opposed to being governed by their reflexive responses (Kegan et al., 2009). Integrating new meanings into

one's life story requires individuals to see themselves as others do (Mälkki, 2012). Thus, authentic leaders are aware of their values and beliefs and can clearly communicate them with others (Dyjak-LeBlanc et al., 2016; Klepper & Nakamura, 2012). Leaders can develop their ability to voice their values through informal or formal learning settings such as mentoring, coaching, and/or leadership development workshops that focus on values development. More specifically, developing a leader's story that articulates their own values with life episodes that explains why they are important for the leader is a useful practice, and the story can, in turn, be shared with others as part of leadership messages in every-day work situations (Klepper & Nakamura, 2012). It is also important for leaders to continuously engage in these helpful activities and revisit the values and beliefs along with their core story as part of a reflective practice, particularly as they face transitions such as promotions, transfers to a different organization, etc.

Inflows from the Microsystem

As leaders interact with others across systems, their attitudes and actions can help foster their authentic leadership, as well as create potential ripple effects across broader systems. Similar to recommendations at the individual level (self-system), both internal awareness and attitudes as well as more outward, observable actions are critical to successful and interdependent functioning across systems.

What microsystem structures help reinforce individuals? It is well documented that authentic leaders value *trust, integrity, and accountability* which includes both trusting the team's expertise and being trusted by one's team (Williams et al., 2021). When leaders model integrity and accountability and have a disposition toward trusting (not micromanaging) their team, they engender commitment and trust from others, hence creating a *trust cycle* (Nienaber et al., 2015; Williams, et al., 2021). More broadly, authentic and sustainable leaders *value a team orientation.* Leaders who encourage a democratic approach to the work may also increase worker motivation (Popli & Rizvi, 2017) and empower others (Griffith et al., 2019). Thus, authentic leaders work in an ecological way when they deemphasize the role of the leader (except in service to others and the greater good) (Maak et al., 2016) and help others see their roles (on the team, at varying levels of the organization, on the board of directors, in the community) in the success of the organization as a whole (Lin & Liu, 2017). Such efforts eventually lead to a successful succession planning by nurturing the next generation of authentic leaders. In day-to-day practice, leaders often need self-regulation to prevent micromanagement or overuse of leader power, especially in hierarchical environments (Nair et al., 2022). Furthermore, engaging in team conversations about what trust means to the team helps strengthen the organizational culture (Lyubovnikova et al., 2017; Nair et al., 2022). Such team conversations can be part of regular meetings where authentic leaders provide a psychologically safe climate allowing others to feel comfortable enough to share their thoughts with each other (Harvey et al., 2019; Newman et al., 2017).

Supportive relationships with family, friends, co-workers, etc. (in the microsystem) are necessary for most human beings to thrive and most certainly when striving to live and lead with authenticity (Williams et al., 2021). In particular, relationships with *mentors and coaches* help facilitate and support leadership practices for authenticity. The leader can seek such support resources themselves, but organizations can also encourage authentic leadership practice by offering leadership coaching and other developmental/learning opportunities to increase self-efficacy (Baron & Morin, 2010) and promote reflective and mindful practice (Baron et al., 2018). Such opportunities could include self-assessments that incorporate

feedback and introspection, as well as address issues like listening, trust building, nurturing teams, and modeling vulnerability. Another benefit of such opportunities is that they connect leaders to others, building social capital and expanding connections at the microsystem level.

What leader actions help balance a microsystem? *Modeling vulnerability* may create more trust with followers (Nienaber et al., 2015). In action, this might mean being honest about mistakes, asking for feedback, apologizing when necessary, being forgiving of others, and being less judgmental about others and self (Williams et al., 2021). However, leaders may find it challenging to model vulnerability while attempting to inspire confidence. This challenge is especially pronounced for people of color and individuals who identify as women and non-binary individuals. However, if leaders demonstrate vulnerability while showing an unrelenting commitment to the larger purpose of the organization, they are likely to engender respect through their commitment and humility (Williams et al., 2021) and may encourage followers' own positive emotional expression toward colleagues and customers (Yagil & Medler-Liraz, 2014).

Akin to vulnerability, leaders might develop and possess an *attitude of openness* in two areas: by being present with others and by being receptive to new ideas, voices, processes, and innovations. The state of openness and presence can help create an environment where new ideas are shared freely in the spirit of what is best for the organization and shared from people at all levels of the organization (Yagil & Medler-Liraz, 2014). In contrast, a complacent stance may keep an individual and an organization stuck (Kotter, 2012), thereby limiting the potential systemic influence or the in- and out-flow between systems and the individual leader.

Authentic and sustainable leaders also *listen, consult, and collaborate* as the best leaders may very well be the best listeners (Harris, 2006). Those who truly take time to listen to others in the external systems around them are likely to have more success, particularly as collaborative models of leadership have been shown to be successful as they can *nurture and empower* others (Rice, 2015). Leaders can inspire loyalty and respect, and often cultivate powerful motivation to work in their teams (Decker & Van Quaquebeke, 2015). Here, adopting a stance of being present and using active listening (Weger et al., 2014) can be a useful skill for authentic leaders to practice.

Furthermore, authentic leaders who try to practice typically take a *service orientation* to their leadership. They strive for the good of others without pride or entitlement (Vinod & Sudhakar, 2011; Wang et al., 2017; Williams et al., 2021). It seems to be a key attitude of the successful authentic leader, and this attitude can be extended outwardly from the micro system of the team to the exosystem of the community and even further into more abstract value perspectives of macro or broader social systems. In the strategic planning process, leaders can think about the implications of the current and future organizations on the broader social systems; how it can be aligned with their values and beliefs and what ultimately holds themselves and their organizations accountable. Budgeting their time and efforts in attending conferences or workshops where industry and/or community leaders get together can also help widen their perspectives and promote critical thinking (Williams et al., 2021).

Contributing to a greater good (such as in the exosystem and macrosystem), leaders can personally *model how to deal with ethical situations*. A shared language or approach can be useful whether the ethical concerns are personal, interpersonal, inter-organizational, or relating to larger civic issues affecting the organization, such as changes in a political or educational system. A shared approach allows the leader and those in the organization to recognize biases and challenge problematic decisions that occur under pressure or in unreg-

ulated emotional states of anger or anxiety (Kligyte et al., 2013; Kouchaki & Desai, 2015). Using a shared team approach to make better-informed ethical decisions relies on many of the attitudes and practices previously mentioned, such as trusting one's team to employ a strategy, being open to discussing difficult situations and to others' perspectives, listening, collaborating in decision-making, and approaching the process with a service orientation (not only a compliance mindset), thus reinforcing authentic practices across individuals and systems.

Outflows: Potential Drains on Authenticity

Organizational culture consists of multiple relationships across systems, but the culture itself can have an important impact on the leader. Specifically, an *organization's ethical culture* is an important indicator of the health of the overall organizational culture (Tenbrunsel et al., 2003). "Outflow" moments may occur when the leader faces *cultural barriers*, such as serious ethical tensions or breaches encountered during *ethical dilemmas* (Williams, et al., 2021). The leader may experience *difficulty in making decisions* that are misaligned with their own *values and beliefs*. The leader may experience *interpersonal conflicts* in difficult situations as well. However, the leader can develop an ethical culture through ethical role modeling (Weaver et al., 2005). Therefore, the leader can develop ethical strategies that become part of the organizational culture through practice, repetition, and regularly ensuring diverse voices are represented in decision making.

Furthermore, organizational leaders may struggle with being *a change agent* who helps inspire the valuing and respecting of individual differences. For instance, leaders can help develop their organization's commitment to diversity and inclusion (Chin & Trimble, 2015). With growing attention to cultural and multicultural competencies (Egan & Bendick, 2008), organizations with a demonstrated commitment to diversity and inclusion may experience greater employee well-being, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment (Findler et al., 2007). The reverberations of this commitment strengthen organizations and their micro and exosystems, also benefiting the individual leader who can operate more effectively within a cohesive and collaborative environment.

Individuals often look to high-level leaders as the primary sources that shape an organization's identity and culture, when in reality, it is the people in our immediate microsystems that most affect our decision making and shape our cultures (Brown & Trevino, 2006; Weaver et al., 2005). The ecological model provides an aspirational strategy for creating supportive and reciprocal spheres of influence in the midst of challenges, such as interpersonal conflict, ethical dilemmas, cultural barriers, and the challenges of balancing one's values with the organization's values. By using this model, we can also more effectively investigate how systems surrounding an individual influence their authentic development and help to sustain them during challenging times.

Overall, it is clear that individuals both impact and are impacted by the systems around them. There are numerous ways that the individual leader may help cultivate and sustain their organizational systems, such as through showing integrity, valuing their teams, modeling vulnerability, and empowering others.

A Model to Outline Future Research

It may be useful to include a broader set of theories in research on authentic leadership practice and its impact, such as organizational learning theory, social learning theory, critical theory, and adult development theory. We propose future research agendas on two levels

(both individual and systemic) and emphasize the need to test and validate the proposed conceptual model in various situations (both culturally and situationally).

Individual Level Research

It is important to examine how individuals develop and manage their authentic leadership practice and perspective over time through interventions such as critical reflective practices, mentoring, or coaching (Baron, 2016; Baron & Parent, 2015). Such interventions can be measured longitudinally through pre-post assessment of leaders' behavioral and/or perceived changes. More specifically, the multi-rater feedback (360-degree feedback), for instance, can be incorporated in pre- and post-analysis. The 360 review is a leadership development opportunity as leaders receive feedback from their boss(es), peers, and direct reports about their performance (Taylor 2014: Taylor et al., 2019). The systems model we have proposed (*see* Figure 1) is useful in this type of research. For instance, researchers can examine the impact of inflow factors (e.g., mindfulness practice, coaching, etc.) as interventions, such as an hour weekly session over the course of six months, and they can look into outflow factors (e.g., ethical failure) as possible obstacles facing leaders as they attempt to practice authenticity.

There is a growing need to study diversity and inclusion when we examine authentic leadership. Gender (both binary and nonbinary identities) remains an important factor for further exploration in authentic leadership studies. Moreover, globalization and cross-cultural research provide other lenses with which authentic leadership can be explored. How leaders perceive and practice authenticity may differ across genders and cultural contexts and may provide a different set of "inflows" and "outflows" depending on the leader's salient social identities. A case study focusing on a selected country, industry, or organization can be helpful to better understand how authentic leadership can be conceptualized and perceived in a particular cultural context through in-depth interviews.

Research at the Systemic Level

Considering the proposed systems model (*see* Figure 1), it is important to illuminate how a leader seeking to sustain an authentic practice affects the larger organization and how the organization affects the authenticity of its leader and people. For instance, a study can examine in what ways the organizational culture contributes to the inflow (support factors) and outflow (barriers) in creating an environment supportive of authentic leadership practice.

Researchers could examine a wide variety of possible inflows, such as relational factors (including mentors, peers, and team members), and their impact on authenticity in leadership. Researchers zeroing in on the moments when leaders make choices related to authenticity will illuminate the context and consequences of those choices at the systemic level. A critical incident approach (Brookfield, 2011) asking leaders to identify a challenging moment when they had difficulty enacting authentic decision-making can be a good way to measure the impact of authentic leadership in the organizational level.

Future research needs to more clearly distinguish among the four levels of context (e.g., micro, meso, exo, and macrosystems) as originally defined by Bronfenbrenner (1977, 2009). Analysis needs to consider the leader's immediate context, such as family and friends, as well as the mesosystem which includes the interconnections between the various microsystem elements. It also needs to consider organizational culture, which can be assessed by examining documents, artifacts, formal and informal processes, response to crises, and

ethical standards. Lastly, a comprehensive approach considers broader systems of belief and values that transcend organizations. Examining the context from this perspective allows for a more thorough understanding of the tensions and challenges of practicing authentically.

Conclusion

Focusing on individual and systemic levels, there is much research to be done in order for us to better understand authenticity in leadership. In today's ever-changing and complex society, the sustainability perspective is critical in developing authentic leadership as leaders continue to ground the "true self" and manage their organization's or community's expectations. Referring to our model, a metaphor of balancing inflow and outflow in our systemic model enables thinking about the complex concept of authentic leadership in a simple, and yet comprehensive, way. It includes the control leaders have or cannot have and the ways leaders cultivate and sustain themselves and their organizations. We are hopeful that this model, as well as the practical approaches for leaders and suggestions for researchers, will help not only support authentic leaders but also help foster more sustainable organizations.

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