

# LINKING THEORY TO PRACTICE: AUTHENTIC LEADERSHIP

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## ABSTRACT

*The plethora and enormity of corruption across industry sectors (e.g., higher education, corporate scandals and political unrest) during the early 21<sup>st</sup> century helped develop a profound sense of distrust among the public and prompted scholars and business leaders to propagate a new leadership theory that could effectively address these new challenges. Authentic leadership, a relatively new leadership theory, is a construct that incorporates traits, behaviors, styles and skills to promote ethical and honest behavior and thus has greater positive long-term outcomes for leaders, their followers and their organizations. According to proponents of the theory, authenticity is believed to make leaders more effective, lead with meaning, purpose, values and be better equipped to deal with organizational challenges. In this paper, the authors define authentic leadership and present an exploratory research study on its theory and application in practice.*

**Keywords:** Organization, Behavior, Leadership, Corporate Scandals.

## INTRODUCTION

Ancient Greek philosopher Socrates is attributed for the maxim “know you.” This sentiment appeared more than 2,000 years later in English playwright William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* with the use of the aphorism “to thine own self be true.” Today, more than 2,400 years after Socrates emphasized the importance of self-awareness, researchers and practitioners posit that self-awareness, self-regulation and authenticity are critical aspects of leadership.

Leadership, however, in modern day international organizations is often lacking and corruption is well documented with institutions vying for resources, fame, enrollment, cheating, fake programming and more (Mohamedbhai, 2015). These scandals that have taken place both domestically and abroad over the past decade have resulted in the need for an ethical approach to leadership. Indeed, these incidents have motivated academics and business leaders to reexamine existing leadership practices and to set forth leadership models in which leaders act genuinely, morally and inspire their followers to do the same. The issue is not unique to a specific organization as evidenced by corporate bailouts, blatant abuses of power on the part of executives, false accounting practices and fraud. These unethical practices have generated public outrage and led to the support of the contention of some, including Richard Edelman, CEO of public relations firm Edelman that we are “clearly experiencing a crisis in leadership” at this time in history (Bush, 2013).

Unethical behaviors likely took place throughout other periods in history. Unlike the past however, our current society makes information regarding scandals (and any other subject imaginable) easily accessible to anyone, anywhere, at any time in the world due to the reach of the internet and twenty-four-hour television news cycles and social media. Therefore, it might

not be that leaders (and people in general) are more corrupt and engage in unethical management practices at a rate higher than ever before, but rather there is a greater awareness about administrative and executive malfeasance because scandals are much more widely publicized than in the past.

A recent Gallup poll found that 62% of Americans believe there is widespread corporate corruption (Feldman, 2012) and 75% believe there is widespread government corruption (Gallup, 2015). Lewis (2014) and others are indicating that the public is losing trust in organizations and leaders. This mistrust creates an environment for development of a new model of leadership that fosters ethical behaviors. Organizations can address this crisis through purposeful professional development programs that teach from the ethical, moral and authentic grounding of leadership with integrity.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Authentic Leadership Theory

As mentioned, the construct of personal authenticity was initially credited with ancient Greek philosophers, who stressed the importance of knowing and being true to one's self (Tibbs, Green, Gergen & Montoya, 2016). More than 2,400 years later, Chester Barnard in his 1938 *The Functions of the Executive*, made the first reference to authenticity in management and organizational literature (Kliuchnikov, 2011). Barnard (1938) (as cited in Kliuchnikov, 2011) postulated that the authentic capacity of a leader should be used as a measure of executive quality.

Bill George (2007) popularized authentic leadership in management studies and popular culture by reflecting on his success in the business world spanning 30 years with his publications, *Authentic Leadership: Rediscovering the Secrets to Creating Lasting Value* and *True North: Discover Your Authentic Leadership*, published in 2003 and 2007 respectively. According to George (2010), the five dimensions of authentic leadership include: passion, values, relationships, self-discipline and heart. Authentic leaders embody the following characteristics: 1) understanding their purpose, 2) practicing solid values, 3) establishing connected relationships, 4) demonstrating self-discipline and 5) leading with heart (George, 2010). Rather than completing these characteristics in a sequential process, authentic leaders develop these qualities over the course of their lifetime because authentic leaders are not born that way (George, 2010).

George (2010) believed that authentic leaders lead with their hearts and learn from their own and other people's experiences but strive to be authentic with their values and convictions. A central tenet of George's (2010) authentic leadership model is the importance of the leader's life story in his or her development. George, Sims, McLean & Mayer (2007), in a study of more than 125 leaders of various ages, racial/ethnic and religious backgrounds, found that there were no universal traits, styles, or skills of successful, authentic leaders. Rather, in this study, the authors found that for respondents, being authentic to their personal life story made them more effective as leaders. Furthermore, George (2010) asserts that the authenticity of the leader, rather than his or her style, is most important.

Around the same time that George (2003) released his first book; the authentic leadership construct was introduced to academic literature. These early works were initially built upon the writings on transformational leadership that suggested there are pseudo versus authentic

transformational leaders (Avolio, 2010). This suggests that leaders can be more or less authentic and simultaneously possess characteristics of transformational leadership (Avolio, 2010).

Authentic leadership is a multi-dimensional leadership theory and therefore has similarities to transformational theory and several other leadership theories including ethical, charismatic, spiritual and servant leadership. Conceptually, there are numerous similarities between servant, ethical, charismatic and authentic leadership. Servant leaders strive to serve first by putting the goals and needs of others before their own and then lead (Senjaya & Sarros, 2010). Transformational, servant and authentic leadership all share a moral component (Northouse, 2013). The primary difference between these, however, is that servant leaders' primary goal is to serve; ethical leaders' desire to be ethical; charismatic leaders aspire to be charming; whereas authentic leaders strive above all else to be authentic (Northouse, 2013). Thus, authentic leaders do not have any fixed skills, styles, or traits. Authentic leaders will each have their own style, which incorporates various behaviors and skills and fits the specific context of the situation, based upon their particular life experiences (George, 2010).

What differentiates authentic leadership from other forms of leadership is that a leader may be more or less authentic and possess various characteristics of each of the aforementioned leadership models. In other words, a leader may be charismatic but inauthentic or authentic but not charismatic. Nevertheless, the most important element of authentic leadership is not the leader's style and whether he or she is transformational or charismatic or not but rather the extent of their authenticity (George, 2010).

While conducting his research, Avolio (2010) indicated that there was an absence of leader self-awareness at the time and he viewed this omission as an opportunity for creating and validating authentic leadership models and methods as a new addition to the study of leadership. Tibbs et al. (2016) outlines numerous studies that have posted relationships between authentic leadership and positive ethical leadership behavior. This type of leadership is in stark contrast to the negative, unethical behavior of corporations in the news where failings in leadership have caused, in some cases, the collapse of companies. In the past decade, multiple definitions of authentic leadership have been introduced and explored with each emphasizing different components of the theory-intrapersonal, interpersonal and developmental (Mazutis, 2013). For example, Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing & Peterson (2008) defined authentic leadership "as a pattern of leader behavior that draws upon and promotes both positive psychological capacities and a positive ethical climate" (p.94). Regardless of the personal dimension, the goal is to work toward "fostering positive self-development" in followers (Walumbwa et al., 2008).

While researchers may not wholeheartedly agree on an operational definition of authentic leadership, it is widely accepted that there are three primary antecedent factors that influence authentic leadership development which include positive psychological capabilities, moral reasoning and critical life events. An authentic leader possesses positive psychological capabilities, including confidence, hope, optimism and resilience (Northouse, 2013). Moral reasoning is used by authentic leaders as a compass that guides their actions and behaviors to promote the highest levels of morality and integrity (Northouse, 2013). Authentic leaders consistently use ethical reasoning and a moral compass to make and support their decisions, which supports a moral organizational culture that is self-sustaining; followers then work to emulate the ethical behaviors of the authentic leaders (Datta, 2015).

There are some criticisms to the model of authentic leadership. For example, as authenticity is heavily dependent upon the authentic leader's life story, it will likely be affected

by their race, national origin, socio-economic status and other factors (Zhang, Everett, Elkin & Cone, 2012). Moreover, the extent and effectiveness of a leader's authenticity is relative to the cultural, organizational and situational context and so no singular interpretation of the theory is possible (Zhang et al., 2012). Sanchez-Runde, Nardon & Steers (2011) note that leadership is a cultural construct, its meaning based in various cultures where it is exercised and thus global leaders should act in authentic ways that are compatible with local expectations. Therefore, the practices of an authentic leader in an organization based in an individualistic society, like the United States, may come across as rude or disrespectful in a collective society like Japan. Gardiner (2011) suggests that the construct of authentic leadership is deeply flawed because it fails to take into account how social and historical circumstances affect one's ability to be a leader. Zhang et al. (2012) also suggest that authentic leadership theory lacks validity in non-Western contexts such as China; however, as economic growth of countries occurs outside the United States, the construct can be used to form greater cross-cultural understanding and thus might lead to more applicability in non-Western countries.

Despite its criticisms, authentic leadership theory continues to be studied, measured and considered as a modern leadership theory. Along with the three primary antecedent factors previously mentioned of positive psychological capabilities, moral reasoning and critical life events, researchers also agree on four core elements of the theory: self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced processing and internalized moral perspective (Avolio et al., 2009; Avolio, 2010; Gardner et al., 2011; Datta, 2015; Tibbs, 2016; Sagnak & Kuruoz, 2017). It is these four factors that will be explored further in this study.

## METHODOLOGY

This exploratory research study seeks to gain insight on authentic leadership theory in practice. The research objective and question is: Are there links between authentic leadership theory and professional development of leaders? This exploration is primarily designed to assist practitioners in application of authentic leadership in the workplace. The focus of the study is reviewing the literature to connect theoretical concepts with action areas and to connect current literature with ideas and insight to further explore.

## DISCUSSION

### Theory to Practice

Avolio's (2010) research provides "evidence that leaders were more made than born" (p. 736). George (2010) agrees with this notion contending that leaders are comfortable being their own person and developing their own unique leadership style. In Walumbwa, Wang, Wang, Schaubroeck & Avolio (2010) and many reviews of literature about authentic leadership, it is shared that authentic leaders have a deep knowledge of themselves, their needs, emotions, personality and values. Through introspective reasoning, then, it is assumed authentic leaders can be developed through a practice of training and development. Authentic leaders possess leadership characteristics, but they must also deeply understand and develop these characteristics to embody authenticity.

Various studies have found authentic leadership was associated with improvements in leader, follower and organizational outcomes. Wong et al. (2010) found that in a study of registered nurses working in acute care hospitals in Ontario, authentic leadership significantly

and positively influenced nurses' trust in their manager, their work engagement and perceptions of unit care quality. Giallonardo, Wong & Iwasiw (2010) found that authentic leadership was associated with nurses feeling more engaged and satisfied. Avolio et al. (2009) assert that through increased self-awareness and self-regulation, leaders facilitate the development of authenticity in their followers, which contributes to sustainable performance.

Earlier studies and current research support the importance of authentic followership especially as it relates to authentic leadership development and the use of the four core elements of authenticity (Avolio et al., 2009; Avolio, 2010; Gardner et al., 2011; Datta, 2015; Tibbs, 2016; Sagnak & Kuruoz, 2017). 1) Self-awareness is commonly regarded as the initial starting point of authentic leadership. Authentic leaders have a keen sense of self and a keen sense of their strengths and weaknesses. 2) Self-regulation (also referred to as internalized moral perspective) refers to the leader's ability to align their values, intentions and behaviors and demonstrate consistency between what they say and what they do (Mazutis, 2010). 3) Balanced processing is the ability and willingness to objectively analyze relevant data and explore the opinions of others before making a decision (Wong & Cummings, 2009). An authentic leader tries to be as unbiased as possible in collecting information to adequately examine and interpret various perspectives on an issue and make an objective, balanced decision. 4) Relational transparency refers to the leader's level of disclosure regarding information and the extent to which he or she reveals their personal thoughts and feelings.

Datta (2015) postulates that authentic leadership and self-awareness is a process of making meaning that occurs over time. Furthermore, George et al. (2007) notes that everyone must take responsibility for developing themselves professionally in an authentic way. George (2010) suggests strategies for increasing authentic leadership include: being aware of internal weaknesses, developing personal leadership style, recognizing internal and external factors associated with positive and negative behaviors, recognizing personal values and understanding self-purpose.

Authentic leadership, also referred to in the literature synonymously as "authentic leadership development," is an important correlation because of the relationship between the leader and their followers and the leader's influence on followers' attitudes, behaviors and work performance. Thus, authentic followership is an important element of the construct of authentic leadership theory. Essentially, authentic followership is important because it confirms the leader's authenticity (Datta, 2015). Yukl (2011) suggests that the effectiveness of a leader is related to the followers' reaction to the leader. Datta (2015) outlines several questions related to followership:

1. How well does the leader satisfy their needs and expectations?
2. Do followers like, respect and admire the leader?
3. Do followers trust the leader and perceive him or her to have high integrity?
4. Are followers strongly committed to carrying out the leader's requests, or will they resist, ignore and subvert them? (p. 65).

The extent of one's authenticity may be measured by an existing instrument labeled the Authentic Leadership Questionnaire (or ALQ) (Wong, Laschinger & Cummings, 2010). This evidence-based tool was developed by Avolio et al. (2007) and confirmatory factor analyses conducted by Walumbwa et al. (2008) validated the instrument. While this tool is widely used in the literature, it focuses primarily on measuring the level of authenticity rather than developing the leader's authenticity.

In summary, the literature suggests that leaders have the ability to develop authenticity. Next, the idea of “making” or developing an authentic leader is further examined around the core elements of the theory.

## **Authenticity and Life Story**

Self-awareness has been established as a critical component of authentic leadership (Avolio et al., 2009; Avolio, 2010; Gardner et al., 2011; Datta, 2015; Tibbs, 2016; Sagnak & Kuruoz, 2017). Building self-awareness requires a person to have a clear understanding of their personal values, background, identity, emotions and motives (Alok & Israel, 2012). The life story has been established as one of the most important elements of authentic leadership. Although this concept incorporates various traits, skills, behaviors and styles, the common unifying theme among authentic leaders is that their leadership practices are shaped by their various experiences that occur throughout the course of their lives, especially critical events that may be positive or negative in nature. Avolio et al. (2009) present studies that offer evidence that life experiences have influence on leadership capabilities and characteristics. Critical life events are the personal experiences that shape leaders’ attitudes, behaviors and can foster their personal and professional growth and/or decline. George, Sims, McLean & Mayer (2007) assert that the journey to authentic leadership begins with understanding one’s life story and from it finding the inspiration they need to make an impact in the world.

## **Authenticity and Triggers**

Along with self-awareness of one’s life story, an authentic leader must also be self-regulated (Avolio et al., 2009; Avolio, 2010; Gardner et al, 2011; Datta, 2015; Tibbs, 2016; Sagnak & Kuruoz, 2017). Developing authentic leaders assumes a moral center and an understanding of critical life events (Avolio, 2010) and also examines the unplanned moments or triggers in a person’s life. Several authors provide evidence that triggers in a person’s life can lead towards authenticity. Avolio (2010) believes these triggers can be both negative and positive moments in a person’s life. “Traditionally in the leadership literature, most authors focused on major life events that were negative, such as dramatic losses, life-threatening diseases that the leader had survived...our position did not negate this possibility; we simply felt that in other instances leadership development could be, let’s say, less painful” (Avolio, 2010). These positive and negative triggers provide further evidence that authentic leaders are made by the experiences in their lives. These trigger moments may not be large events; they may be a combination of numerous smaller events. “Leadership development might actually occur in moments, not hours, days, weeks, or months” (Avolio, 2010). These moments help build a person’s self-awareness that leads to self-regulation.

## **Authenticity and Personal Characteristics**

Understanding these personal characteristics, values and motives provides the ability to relate to others and control emotions and more specifically, to balance and develop transparent and strong relationships. These self-aware leaders then lead organizations in environments that are inclusive and caring and help develop others to discover these self-awareness characteristics (Alok & Israel, 2012). The humanness of a person also helps define them as an authentic leader. Chang & Diddams (2009) assert that authentic leaders develop a pattern of transparent

relationships through their strengths and weaknesses. Characteristics such as uncertainty, fear, anxiety and frustration are areas that provide growth to a leader (Chang & Diddams, 2009). These characteristics, like triggers, develop the leader into a person who can more easily relate to their followers (Chang & Diddams, 2009). In this way, the authentic leader begins to develop and strengthen transparent relationships.

### **Authenticity Action Items**

Some researchers, such as Golding (2017), make the argument that theory is often misaligned with practice. In fact, theoretical concepts sometimes ignore practice or make false assumptions that do not translate to the workplace (Golding, 2017). To implement the theoretical concepts of authentic leadership, it is suggested that self-awareness, self-regulation, balance and transparency be reflected upon in action statements. In this way, the theory can be tested in practice. Professional development might purposefully begin to help a potential leader understand his or her characteristics and areas where he or she may lack abilities. Merriam & Brockett (2007), in their explanation of adult education as grounded in humanism, state that individuals are "free and autonomous creatures who exercise choice in determining their behavior. Humanism also emphasizes the notion of the self-a self that has the potential for growth and development, for self-actualization" (Merriam & Brockett, 2007). It is suggested, then, that an individual striving toward self-actualization would have the ability to develop as a leader. In organizational terms, a company conducts strategic planning to work toward understanding their mission and their long-term vision (Bryson, 2011). The organizational process reviews strengths and weaknesses, analyzes internal and external environment and works toward understanding where the company was and where they want to be (Bryson, 2011). In a similar way, leaders must conduct a "planning" process to help move themselves toward their goal to be an authentic leader.

This exploration of theory has sought to link various aspects of authentic leadership theory to application in practice. Table 1 summarizes the proposed links between authentic leadership theory and actionable professional development practice.

**Table 1**  
**AUTHENTIC LEADERSHIP THEORY AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN PRACTICE**

<b>Connections—Theory to Practice</b>	<b>Theoretical Concept—Authentic Leadership</b>	<b>Practice-Professional Development Activity</b>
Self-awareness as connected to life roles	Self-awareness (Avolio et al., 2009)	Life Roles (Avolio et al., 2009; George et al., 2007)
Self-regulation as connected to events & triggers	Self-regulation (Avolio et al., 2009)	Life Triggers (Avolio, 2010)
Balance as connected to recognition of weaknesses	Balanced processing (Avolio et al., 2009)	Weaknesses (Chang & Diddams, 2009)
Transparency as connected to values	Relational transparency (Avolio et al., 2009)	Values (Alok & Israel, 2012)
Personal planning as connected to action statements to put theory into practice	Leaders are made (Avolio, 2010; George, 2010)	Action Planning (Bryson, 2011)

## LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS TO PRACTICE

Linking of theory to practice is pertinent in applied settings and is useful for practitioners to add value to professional development programs. In addition, practitioners understand the necessity of action plans related to workforce development; however, the links described herein demonstrate causal relationships and further testing would help validate the connections. It is suggested that as a follow up step to this exploratory research, a comprehensive meta-analysis of the literature be conducted to quantitatively measure and aggregate the research based on the research question. In addition, Avolio (2010) suggests that the future of leadership development should consciously measure the “return on development investment (RODI)” (p. 743) as this provides a calculation to help organizations measure the investment into leadership development. Additional empirical support and measurement would help strengthen the connections. Following meta-analysis of the literature, revisions to the practice model and empirical testing of subsequent models would add value as a follow up to studies associated with the Authentic Leadership Questionnaire (ALQ) measurement tool.

Professional development activity is useful in development settings where leaders and followers are open to reflection and individual analysis. For example, the practice elements mentioned in Table 1 can be delivered as open-ended questions to oneself or in a group workshop format where participants are asked to introspectively reflect on themselves (e.g. What are your life roles? What are your trigger moments? What are your weaknesses and values? What type of actions might you take to be more authentic?) Through facilitation and the use of supporting materials such as videos from Bill George (2012) and the ALQ, the participants could also hear about examples of authentic leadership and then asked to complete a personal reflection on each of the elements presented in the table.

## CONCLUSION

Authentic leadership is especially important in today's society due to the decrease in ethical leadership exemplified in countless high-profile cases involving major corporations. Walumbwa et al. (2010) results suggest the “more leaders are seen as authentic, the more employees identify with them and feel psychologically empowered, are more engaged in their roles and demonstrate more citizenship-rated behaviors” (p. 910). Authentic leadership has not been offered as a panacea for corruption and greed but rather as a positive leadership model that emphasizes integrity, honesty, ethical and moral behavior. The theory has also been presented as having direct application in professional development of leaders within the workplace.

Leaders in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century have the daunting task of making decisions in a business, political and organizational environment of distrust and scandal. A focus on leadership and more specifically, authentic leadership will help create greater positive long-term outcomes for leaders, their followers and their organizations. Authentic leaders are not a new phenomenon, but now, more than ever, they are needed to lead with integrity, honesty, ethical and moral behavior. Leaders are needed who are true to themselves and who can then, in turn, be true to others.

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