

Connecting Authentic Educational Leaders and Their Followers

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Abstract: The success of organizations, including those of an educational nature, is inextricably intertwined with their leadership. The economic and financial woes which plagued the world in recent years have triggered the need for a new generation of leaders. There are various leadership models and styles which may be adopted, including authentic leadership. This may be considered as an emerging leadership model which, however, is quickly gathering momentum. It is a style of leadership which can contribute significantly to the success of an organization, leading to improved work-engagement and performance. One of the reasons for this is that it offers a connection between the leader and the followers, that is, those who are being led. It is not easy to define authentic leadership; very often it is defined as promoting a positive ethical climate, fostering self-awareness, an internalised moral perspective, balanced processing, and relational transparency (Walumbwa *et al.*, 2008). This paper explores and summarizes the main characteristics and traits of authentic leaders, provides a short critique, as well as recommends how authentic leadership can be put into practice.

Keywords: authentic leadership, leadership, organizational success

As a result of the collapse in the financial markets and the economic woes we experienced a few years ago, there is a growing concern amongst the general public at the way organizations, including educational institutions, are being managed and led. It seems that at challenging times, leadership actually becomes even more difficult.¹ These concerns have fuelled a drive for an alternative form of

1 B.J. Avolio and W.L. Gardner, 'Authentic leadership development: Getting to the root of positive forms of leadership', *The Leadership Quarterly*, Vol. 16 (2005), 316.

leadership that is more ‘value-driven, ethical, credible, compassionate, and people-centred’.²

The main factors that contributed towards these troubles were leaders focusing more on their self rather than on their service; the prioritization of profits over the public good; the forging of superficial relationships; and putting too much emphasis on efficiency without giving due consideration to the human cost.³

The role and importance of the leader within an organization cannot be undervalued since we often ‘equate the success of an organization with the capabilities and character of the leader at the helm’.⁴ This applies equally well to educational institutions as, ‘in most countries, it is the principal who is regarded as the key educational leader and the one person in a school who has the most opportunity to exercise leadership’. Organizations have a responsibility to provide space and opportunities for employees to grow and develop as prospective leaders.

‘Today’s leader, as that of tomorrow, has to display enthusiasm, passion and inspiration to get others to high levels of performance’.⁵ Such leadership is considered as ‘a personal thing’⁶ which ‘comprises three important dimensions – one’s heart, head, and hand.’⁷ Leadership of this type becomes a ‘quest to do the right thing’ by ‘people who are committed to a cause and strongly believe in what they are doing and where they are going’.⁸

One of the main challenges for educational leaders is to make the best use of the managerial skills in an ethical and moral way so that schools are run effectively and efficiently. This puts further pressure on the attributes of leaders who need to hold principles, values, and objectives which they can communicate in order to motivate and inspire others. In view of this, there is a growing need for a new generation of leaders who

2 R. Smith, N. Bhindi, J. Hansen, D. Riley, and J. Rall, ‘Questioning the notion of “authentic” leadership in education: The perspectives of “followers”’, Paper presented at the *Changing Climates: Education for Sustainable Futures*, Brisbane (2008), 2.

3 Ibid., 3.

4 R.C. Wallace, D.E. Engel, and J.E. Mooney, *The learning school: a guide to vision-based leadership* (Thousand Oaks, Ca, 1997), 79.

5 C. Bezzina, ‘The making of secondary school principals: some perspectives from the island of Malta’, *International Studies in Educational Administration*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (2002), 3.

6 T.J. Sergiovanni, *The Principalship: A reflective practice perspective* (USA, 2001), 343.

7 Ibid., 343.

8 Bezzina, 4.

hold such qualities and may be described as authentic leaders. This new generation are crucial to good leadership⁹ and may be considered as key to ‘the success factor of today’s progressive organizations’.¹⁰

In this context, this paper aims to first explore how authentic leadership is defined; it will then identify the main traits of such leaders that connect them with their followers; and finally it will recommend ways how such connections may be put into practice. The term ‘follower’ here is used as a collective term to describe those who are being led.

What constitutes authentic leadership?

Dictionaries define the word ‘authentic’ as ‘having a known origin’, ‘being what it claims to be’, and ‘genuine’, amongst other similar versions. However, it is not easy to give a simple and straightforward definition of what constitutes an authentic leader, as the concept incorporates various attributes. In spite of this, one can detect when something is authentic or not.¹¹

‘Authentic leadership is a relatively new and evolving model that emerged in the late 1990s and early 2000s from within transformational leadership.’¹² The ‘literature related to authenticity has its conceptual roots in philosophy, humanistic psychology, and positive psychology’.¹³ The concept of ‘authenticity’ was already referred to by Chester Barnard in 1938¹⁴ and historically, it can be traced to ancient Greece, based on the concept to ‘know thyself’ and ‘thy true self’.

Although relatively new as a leadership style, it is quickly gaining the interest of both researchers and practitioners in the field because it can potentially have an impact that extends to all members of an

9 L. Lombard, K. April, and K. Peters, ‘Sustainability and authentic leadership: stumbling blocks and enablers’, *Crown Research in Education*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (2012), 74–84, 2.

10 V. Dimovski, E. Marko, S. Penger, M. Maric, and C. Matej, *Developing a new measure of authentic leadership* (2017) 1, https://editorialexpress.com/cgi-bin/conference/download.cgi?db_name=EBR2011&paper_id=37; <https://editorialexpress.com/cgi-> (accessed 20 August 2017) 1.

11 Ibid., 1.

12 T.J. Jourian, ‘Trans*Forming Authentic Leadership: A Conceptual Framework’, *Journal of Critical Thought and Praxis*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (2014), 1.

13 Lombard, April, and Peters, 2.

14 A. Kliuchnikov, ‘Leader’s authenticity influence on followers’ organizational commitment’, *Emerging Leadership Journal*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (2011), 70.

organization.¹⁵ Authenticity can be looked at from different perspectives. In the literature, one can identify three main types of definitions for authentic leadership based on an intrapersonal perspective; on an interpersonal perspective; or on a developmental perspective. These three perspectives are not mutually exclusive and there are links and overlaps between them.

The intrapersonal perspective views authentic leaders as natural, original, and not a copy.¹⁶ Their authenticity is based on owning one's personal experiences such as thoughts, emotions, preferences, and beliefs, and acts in accordance with the inner thoughts and feelings.¹⁷ In effect, their authenticity carries the meaning and depth of the person.¹⁸

The interpersonal perspective views authentic leadership as relational created by leaders and followers together. It involves a reciprocal process whereby both leader and follower affect and influence each other.

The developmental perspective looks at authentic leadership as a sort of journey spread over time, involving a process of nurturing and growth. The authentic leader develops over a lifetime, very often, the quest for authenticity being triggered off by major life events.

One of the most referred to definitions, based on the latter perspective is that given by Walumbwa *et al.* which views authentic leadership as 'a pattern of leader behaviour 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'.¹⁹

According to Dimovski *et al.*, 'authentic leaders act in accordance with deep personal values and convictions, to build credibility and win the respect and trust of followers by encouraging diverse viewpoints and building networks of collaborative relationships with followers,

15 V. Dimovski, F. Marko, S. Penger, M. Maric, and C. Matej, *Developing a new measure of authentic leadership* (2017),1, https://editorialexpress.com/cgi-bin/conference/download.cgi?db_name=EBR2011&paper_id=37 (accessed 20 August 2017).

16 B. Shamir and G. Eilam, 'What's your story? A life-stories approach to authentic leadership development', *The Leadership Quarterly*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (2005), 397.

17 Avolio and Gardner, 320.

18 Dimovski, Marko, Penger, Maric, and Matej, 2

19 F.O. Walumbwa, B.J. Avolio, W.L. Gardner, T.S. Wernsing, and S.J. Peterson, 'Authentic leadership: Developing and validation of a theory-based measure', *Journal of Management*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (2008), 94.

and thereby lead in a manner that followers recognize as authentic'.²⁰ This definition builds on the work of Walumbwa *et al.* but goes further to highlight the connection between the leader and the followers. To be considered as authentic, a leader must embrace all these characteristics *in totum*.

How authentic leaders connect with their followers

Previously, reference was made to the importance of the leaders in organizations because they do make a difference. For example, teachers want leaders who understand their difficulties at the workplace. That is teachers, do not want any kind of leader, but one who understands what they are going through and supports them accordingly.

Authentic leaders potentially do not only have these attributes which are sought after by followers, but in addition, according Dimovski *et al.*, they can become role models for them, such that their traits cascade downwards within an organization so they become part of the organizational culture.²¹ Hence authenticity does not only remain in the domain of the leader but becomes diffused throughout the organization.

In view of the aims of this paper, an extensive literature review was carried out to elicit the main attributes put forward by researchers in the field to show how authentic leaders connect with their followers. These attributes were grouped under the following six headings:

By being positive

Very often, authentic leaders tend to adopt an overall positive approach in their leadership style.²² Undoubtedly, one of the main advantages of this positive style of leadership is that it reinforces the trust of, and enhances the connection between, the followers and their leader. Authenticity in fact may be considered as the 'root construct to any positive leadership'.²³

20 V. Dimovski, F. Marko, M. Maric, M. Uhan, M. Jovanovic, and M. Janezic, 'Authentic leadership to the future', *Skola Biznisa*, Vol. 1 (2012), 4.

21 Dimovski, Marko, Maric, Uhan, Jovanovic, and Janezic, 4.

22 M. Cerne, M. Jaklic., and M. Skerlavaj, 'Authentic leadership, creativity, and innovation: A multilevel perspective', *Leadership*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (2013), 64.

23 Kliuchnikov, 71.

By being true to themselves

Authentic leaders are aware of their own beliefs, personal emotions, and motives and, according to Jourian, they should base their leadership on them.²⁴ ‘Knowing one-self also includes knowing and acknowledging weaknesses.’²⁵

Because of these traits, authentic leaders are in a better position to share their own values, motives, and goals with their followers.²⁶ Followers can perceive these traits in their leader and connect with them through a process known as ‘positive modelling’. This is confirmed by Avolio and Gardner who found that ‘through increased self-awareness, self-regulation, and positive modelling, authentic leaders foster the development of authenticity in followers’.²⁷

By being moral and ethical

When leaders are entrusted with power, they also assume special ethical and moral obligations²⁸ to serve their followers. This applies even more so in the caring professions, such as in education.

Authentic leaders primarily focus on doing what is right and worthwhile, and base their actions and behaviours on their internalised morals and values.²⁹ Such leaders achieve their authenticity by ‘balancing values and actions’.³⁰

In spite of the difficulties involved in decision making, for Avolio and Gardner the moral convictions of leaders remain the prime motivators rather than status, honour or other personal benefits.³¹ The fact that they are driven by doing what is right has the additional benefit of keeping their personal and self-aggrandizement in check.³²

This grounding in moral and ethical standards, can lead to the ‘transformation of oneself and others to a higher moral and ethical

24 Jourian, 1.

25 Lombard, April, and Peters, 3.

26 Cerne, Jaklic, and Skerlavaj, 65.

27 Avolio and Gardner, 326.

28 D.W. Wilson, ‘Applied virtue ethics: a philosophical perspective on authentic school leadership’, Paper submitted for The Annual PESGB Conference, New College, Oxford, 2008, 2.

29 Jourian, 15.

30 Lombard, April, and Peters, 3.

31 Avolio and Gardner, 321.

32 B.M. Bass and P. Steidlmeier, ‘Ethics, character and authentic transformational leadership behaviour’, *The Leadership Quarterly*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (1999), 211.

purpose'.³³ In other words, it is not only the leader who is ethical and moral, but also the followers.

By taking a balanced approach

Decision-making is a regular and important role for any leader, irrespective of the leadership style adopted. The difference between the various styles is how one arrives at a decision. Authentic leaders are capable of looking at the various sides of an issue and to analyse the information available before deciding,³⁴ a process which is referred to as balanced processing. Furthermore, they do so while taking into consideration their own biases.³⁵

Hence, although authentic leaders still lead from their own personal point of view, very often even making use of life stories to strengthen their arguments, they are able to consider multiple sides and perspectives of an issue and to assess information in a relatively balanced manner.³⁶

By being transparent

As previously indicated, authentic leaders are guided in their role by their personal values and convictions nonetheless, they are still aware of their followers' needs and expectations. This is referred to as relational transparency. The connection between leaders and followers is always strong to the extent that Hannah *et al.*³⁷, describe authentic leaders as highly altruistic.

Furthermore, authentic leaders are open and honest in their communication and relationship with others³⁸ which makes them more approachable, transparent, and trust worthy. As a result, followers acquire a more central role within the organization.

By motivating and empowering

The main concern of an authentic leader is to serve and empower people rather than on power, prestige, or fulfilment of personal ego.³⁹ For the

33 Smith, Bhindi, Hansen, Riley, and Rall, 7.

34 Kliuchnikov, 72.

35 Jourian, 2.

36 Avolio and Gardner, 318.

37 ST. Hannah, B. Lester, and G.R. Vogelgesang, 'Moral leadership: Explicating the moral component of authentic leadership', in Gardner, Avolio, and Walumbwa (eds.), 50.

38 Jourian, 2.

39 B. George, 'Becoming an authentic leader', *Innovative Leader*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (2004), 592.

benefit of any organization, leaders need to identify the talents and strengths of employees and to position them so that they make best use of them.⁴⁰ They do not attempt to transform their followers according to their desires but rather act towards positive thinking and building self-confidence.⁴¹ In this sense, empowerment of followers is conceptualized as a psychological state that encompasses four cognitions: competence, impact, meaningfulness, and self-determination.⁴²

Authentic leaders are able to ‘resonate with and respond to, setting a tone within an organization so people are able to find greater meaning and satisfaction in what they are doing’.⁴³ In this way, an emotional bond is formed between employees and the organization which, according to Kliuchnikov,⁴⁴ leads to a higher degree of commitment.

Shortcomings of the authentic leadership approach

Although without any doubt, the authentic leadership approach has many advantages, like all other models of leadership, it also has its shortcomings. The following are the main concerns and criticism that is levelled towards this model which should be taken into consideration when adopting or evaluating such a leadership approach.

Difficult to define

As previously indicated, it is not easy to give a simple and straightforward definition of authentic leadership. In fact, ‘a definition of authentic leadership has proved elusive and what is meant by it may not be clear’.⁴⁵

Authenticity may actually mean different things to different people in different circumstances.⁴⁶ What may appear as genuine to someone, may not be so to another.

40 L.M. Schwartz, ‘Encouraging Ethical & Authentic Leadership: An interview with Nance Lucas’, *Spirituality in Higher Education Newsletter*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (2008), 2.

41 Cerne, Jaklic, and Skerlava, 67.

42 F.O. Walumbwa, P. Wang, H. Wang, J. Schaubroeck, and B.J. Avolio, ‘Psychological processes linking authentic leadership to follower behaviours’, *The Leadership Quarterly*, Vol. 21 (2010), 905.

43 Schwartz, 5.

44 Kliuchnikov, 4. 473.

45 Smith, Bhindi, Hansen, Riley, and Rall, 6.

46 J. Mitchell (ed.), *Authentic, sustainable leadership in VET* (New South Wales, 2008), 6.

Viewed as idealistic

For some, the term ‘authentic leadership’ is problematic in itself as it conjures a divisive idea between this type of leadership and all others which are considered as non-authentic. While reviewing the literature, one may get the feeling that this type of leadership is pictured as too ideal, as if it is ‘the’ leadership style to adopt. Without ignoring the many benefits and advantages that it has, one should be aware that it too has its limitations.

Too much emphasis on self-awareness

A lot of emphasis is given to self-awareness in this leadership style which is very often depicted as a given construct. ‘Self-awareness, much like identity, cannot be a fixed construct, but is rather fluid, evolving, and socially constructed.’⁴⁷ This lack of context or identity when discussing self-awareness may be viewed as a weakness of authentic leadership theory.⁴⁸ Authentic leaders are open about who they are to others, and this makes them vulnerable with respect to the challenges they faced or are currently facing.

The extent of authenticity

There exists a real dilemma whether authentic leaders are genuinely authentic or whether they are just perceived so by their followers.⁴⁹ It could be that the perceived traits do not necessarily correspond with the natural temperament of the individual and therefore cannot be considered as authentic.⁵⁰ Hence, authenticity may not be viewed as ‘a personal innate quality, but as a characteristic attributed to leaders by others’.⁵¹

There can be a difference between what is perceived by followers and the reality, of whether the leader is authentic or not. But leadership cannot be defined ‘by the traits other people had used to define their

47 S.R. Jones, Y.C. Kim, and K.C. Skendall, ‘(Re-)framing authenticity: Considering multiple social identities using auto ethnographic and intersectional approaches’, *The Journal of Higher Education*, Vol. 83, No. 5 (2012), 711.

48 Jourian, 2.

49 Cerne, Jaklic, and Skerlavaj, 65.

50 George, 592.

51 N. Endrissat, W.R. Muller, and S. Kaudela-Baum, ‘Enroute to an empirically-based understanding of authentic leadership’, *European Management Journal*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (2007), 208.

leadership'.⁵² In this context, 'it is necessary to distinguish between the leader's own perception of the leaders' characteristics and the perception of the leaders' characteristics by their followers'.⁵³ That is, it is essential to distinguish clearly between what is perceived as being authentic and what is really authentic.

Degree of transparency

The issue of relational transparency can sometimes be tricky. There are certain issues or decisions, which for the benefit of the organization, cannot be divulged or there may not be enough time to inform everyone about the reasons. In reality, for practical and very often commercial reasons, the leader cannot always be completely transparent.

Getting real: grounding authentic leadership in practice

Authenticity should not be viewed as an ideal state, completely detached from reality and difficult to practise. Authenticity boils down to the leaders being true to themselves and to 'walk their talk', in so doing setting an example for others to follow. The following are a number of practical recommendations which may be adopted by those who would like to embrace this style of leadership.

Adopting an overall positive approach

Not everything is good and positive in life. In every organization there will be instances when things go wrong, certain employees may have challenging traits, and external factors may impinge negatively on performance. Irrespective of the scenario, an authentic leader should focus more on the positive achievements of followers and of the organization as a whole rather than on flaws and negative aspects. For example, in the event that, over the years, a school starts noticing that fewer students are applying to join, rather than dwelling on the negative side of the issue, the head would focus more on the fact that the school has a history of success, that a good number of students still choose the school, and should make use of the strengths of the staff to attract more students.

52 S. Villani, *Are you sure you're the principal?: On being an authentic leader* (CA, 1999), 2.

53 Cerne, Jaklic, and Skerlavaj, 66.

Building trust

People in general prefer leaders whom they can trust as it gives them a better sense of security. Leaders cannot take it for granted that they have the trust of their followers. In fact, trust is not something that leaders gain automatically in their role but is rather earned and nurtured with time, as leaders and followers go through various experiences together. The leader works to earn trust and the followers reciprocate accordingly.

People connect with others mainly through their heart. One of the best ways for a leader to gain the trust of followers is by interacting with them, acquainting and connecting with them on a personal level. These occasions offer followers the opportunity to get to know their leaders better and to listen directly to them talking about their visions, their exciting plans for the future, as well as their concerns. Such interactions are particularly important during difficult times, when followers look up at their leaders to charter the best way forward.

Working on self-awareness

Self-awareness is a process whereby the leader makes choices or takes decisions in full cognizance of his or her personal values, beliefs, strengths, and weaknesses. The leader can therefore be open about oneself and consequently is in a better position to help others overcome their challenges.

Although leaders gain their authenticity by being true to themselves, they do not have a licence to act, say, and do whatever they want in a spontaneous manner as the following example illustrates. During a brainstorming session with a group of teachers trying to identify the reasons for student absenteeism, one of the teachers suggests what appears to be an irrelevant reason. Even if it is actually an inappropriate reason, and the tendency for the leader, in order to be authentic, is to say so instantly, however it would be better for the leader to control his emotions and ask the teacher to elaborate on the suggestion put forward in a better way. In this way, the leader would still be authentic because he is trying to understand the follower even though the reason seems very doubtful. Furthermore, this approach will encourage others to be more forthcoming to share their own ideas and suggestions because they know they will be treated with respect.

There is nothing supernatural or out of the ordinary about authentic leaders. As human beings, they go through all normal emotions, sometimes being sad and angry, at other times joyful, and prone to erring and making mistakes, but they always lead with their mind and heart in a way that is true to themselves.

Authentic leaders are ready to admit making mistakes and to learn from them. This important strength has a direct influence on their followers who find it easier to be open and admit their own faults and mistakes because they feel safe that their leader will understand them.

Ethical and moral decisions

When someone mentions ‘ethical’ and ‘moral’ issues, our thoughts have a tendency to soar, but for an authentic leader these words are grounded in their daily routine. An authentic leader does not change his ways according to circumstances but upholds these values at all times.

In an educational context where the realities are prone to shift due to various factors including changes in the social and cultural fabric of society, leaders need to make use of their moral compass to guide them in their decisions, especially when faced with ethical dilemmas. These dilemmas should not arise because of the need to choose between what is ‘right’ and ‘wrong’, but to choose between two ‘rights’.

For example, in the event of scarce financial resources, a dilemma can arise to choose to which of two science departments funds should be allocated if both request to upgrade their facilities.

This adherence to high ethical standards and moral code of conduct in decisions and actions taken by leaders has a direct bearing on followers as it contributes further to their trust and commitment.

Towards balanced processing

The ability for balanced processing may be considered another important strength of authentic leaders. The leader has to listen and evaluate the views of others. In particular, the authentic leader should seek out the views of those who are willing to express divergent views in a genuine way. The leader has to consider the feedback received, sifting and evaluating it carefully before coming to a decision for the common good. Furthermore, all this has to be done without bias which goes against human nature.

This process of listening to followers has to be a genuine process and should never be rendered into a simple lip-service exercise. If this happens, followers easily read through it and this erodes their trust. It is of great advantage to followers because they know that their points of view are heeded and given value. As a result, followers are more likely to accept, take ownership, and comply with decisions taken.

Enhancing relational transparency

An authentic leader should strive to build a healthy and open relationship with followers. The leader has to be transparent with followers, listen to their needs, while providing them with the relevant reasons and explanations for decisions or actions taken. For example, if an organization had to take a drastic decision of cutting down paid overtime for a period of time, it would be best if the reason for such a decision is clearly explained to employees. They would still feel the brunt of the decision and most probably would find it difficult to accept such a decision; however, knowing the real reason avoids unnecessary speculation and unrest.

The leader should not only share results, outcomes, and targets achieved, but more importantly the process in achieving them. An authentic leader is also expected not just to provide answers to the questions or concerns of followers, but also to be honest when no answers are forthcoming. This is another way how leaders build the trust of their followers.

Empowering and motivating

Because of their openness, their attention to building trust and their readiness to listen to followers, authentic leaders are well-positioned to empower people to do what they are best at doing. This can be done by creating structures within an organization to allow for devolution of power, so that decisions may be taken at all levels, whilst choosing suitable employees to assume responsibilities. Leadership therefore becomes an act of empowering people, resulting in increased job satisfaction and productivity.

Conclusion

There are many leadership models that can be adopted, each one with its pros and cons. The leadership style adopted within any organization, not least an educational one, has a strong bearing on how that organization functions and progresses.

An authentic leadership style should yield positive results if developed properly and authenticity does not become an end to itself.⁵⁴ It is a leadership model that has the potential to ‘create a sense of meaning that gets the best out of people, drawing forth imagination and creativity’.⁵⁵

As an emerging leadership style, it is rapidly gaining attention from both academics and practitioners. Evaluation and refinement of this model can only contribute towards developing it into a more robust style of connecting people at work together.

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54 A. Sinclair *Leadership for the disillusioned. Moving beyond myths and heroes to leading that liberates* (Australia, 2007), 138.

55 M. Kets de Vries, *The Leader on the Couch. A clinical approach to changing people and organisations* (Cornwall, 2006), 378.