



The journey to authenticity: solicitations for authentic leadership

Il viaggio verso l'autenticità: sollecitazioni per una leadership autentica

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the construct of authentic leadership from a conceptual analysis involving contributions from the management literature and studies in education. It is our belief that such an approach will help us raise moral and ethical questions leading to a better understanding of the needs facing the world today. The journey towards authenticity and towards the ability to be “true to oneself” is certainly the most fascinating and demanding challenge involving leaders and followers in an infinite way (in the sense of unfinished) leading to change in the direction of a higher and noble moral purpose.

Lo scopo di questo articolo è quello di investigare il costrutto della leadership autentica da un'analisi concettuale che coinvolge contributi dalla letteratura manageriale e degli studi educativi. Sosteniamo che questo approccio aiuterà a sollevare interrogativi morali ed etici che portano ad una migliore comprensione dei bisogni del mondo odierno. Il percorso verso l'autenticità e verso la capacità di essere veri a se stessi è certamente la sfida più affascinante e impegnativa che coinvolge leaders e followers in un infinito viaggio (nel senso di non finito) in direzione di un più alto e nobile fine morale.

KEYWORDS

Authenticity, Authentic Leadership, Management; Authentic Learning; Values.

Autenticità; Leadership Autentica ; Management; Apprendimento Autentico; Valori.

* Giambattista Bufalino : 1) Introduction; 2) Authenticity: conceptual considerations. Christopher Bezzina: 3) Leadership and teaching; 4) The journey to being authentic; 5) Conclusion.

Introduction

In an era characterized by financial uncertainty, terrorism, growing poverty, the flight of immigrants from Africa into Europe, an overwhelming number of scandals, amongst other things, educational leaders are faced with more daunting decision-making difficulties than ever before. There is a recognized call for leadership models that are able to interpret in a better way the needs of today's world, in the direction of a strong appeal to moral and ethical standards. Public and private organizations are experiencing a growing complexity related to an increasingly fierce market competition. While a society based on an *intense individualism* (Somerville, 2004) leads to a sense of isolation and disengagement, every person discovers their deeper meaning of living only within a community, developing a strong feeling of belonging and creating values and shared meanings. Every person needs a community to exist. Therefore, we think that such challenges should start from an anthropocentric view in which, as asserted by Bill George, "we need authentic leaders who lead with purpose, values and integrity" (George, 2003, p. 9).

The study of leadership is not merely attributable to the individual traits of the leader but is considered and represented in different models such as dyadic, distributed, relational, strategic, comprehensive, and as a complex dynamic involving followers, peers, the context and culture in general (Yukl, 2002; Avolio, 2007). Given the new challenges posed by the environment the sustainability and the applicability of well-known leadership theories are being challenged (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Researchers and scholars invite a redirection of research efforts towards the understanding of actions that position the leader-follower relationship at the center of any investigation; in fact, as noted by Hoerr, "leadership is about relationship" (2005, p. 7). This is further reinforced by Spillane (2007) who promotes a concept of leadership as a "product of the interactions of school leaders, followers and context, rather than a result of the knowledge and skills of leaders" (2007, p. 144).

Harris's reflections (2003) about the leader-follower dynamic, shows a focus on the ways in which leaders and followers generate ideas and seek to reflect on the many situations they encounter and engage in, building and creating meanings as life unfolds.

In this context the value of integrity is of vital importance for the leaders. In different studies undertaken over the last decade in a variety of cultures and situations, leaders were asked to identify which factors and characteristics were important for effective leadership. The analysis of such studies led to identify values such as honesty, integrity, trust, care and compassion (Brown & Townsend, 1997; Mcewen & Salters 1997). The search for authenticity, integrity and trust among the members of the institutions is seen as crucial (Bhindi & Duignam, 1997; Harris, 2008; Lashway 2006; Rubin, 2007). Within the context of the considerations originated by the different leadership models in the literature, an emerging construct assumes a prominent position. This involves a number of action and reflection fronts, such as the political, the economic and educational (Bhindi & Duignam, 1997).

The proliferation of professional writings on authentic leadership has generated over time different conceptions about its meaning. The concept of authenticity and authentic leadership has been investigated extensively within the management literature (Gardner & Schermerhorn, 2004; George, Sims, McLean, & Mayer 2007; Luthans & Avolio, 2003) and in various disciplines, such as humanistic psychology (Maslow, 1971; Rogers, 1959), the psychology of development (Er-

ickson, 1995) and existentialist philosophy (Heidegger, 2002; Sartre, 1943). In fact, as pointed out by Kernis and Goldan, “the contemporary psychological views of authenticity owe a great debt to the work of philosophy” (2011, p. 284).

A recent review of the literature (Gardner, Cogliser, Davis & Dickens, 2011) aimed to present the current state of knowledge in the field. In 2004 and 2006, two international summits were organized by the University of Nebraska-Lincoln with the aim of promoting a dialogue among scholars and professionals and of stimulating reflections around the emerging construct of ‘authentic leadership’. The results were presented and published in a special issue of *The Leadership Quarterly* (2005).

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the construct of authentic leadership. We will undertake a conceptual analysis, with reference to contributions from management literature and educational studies. This should help us appreciate the vital contribution of an ethical and moral stance to the learning and leadership processes. We will start off with an analysis of the terminology. This is followed by a brief presentation of some of the models proposed. The final section will explore some of the qualifying characteristics of the authentic leader, discuss the peculiarities of authentic leadership within the field of education.

1. Authenticity: conceptual considerations

The origin of the term can be traced back to an authentic greek aphorism “Know thyself” inscribed on the Temple of Apollo at Delphi. The etymology of the word “authentic” comes from *Autheon-Teo*, where *Authenon* (have authority and act for themselves) indicates the possibility to live a life that reflects the true inner life of an individual, with an unmistakable personal style.

Harter (2002) and Erikson (1995) provide a clear historical examination on the subject of authenticity in the field of philosophy and psychology. A first consideration is the semantic distinction between the category of sincerity and that of authenticity: these two terms are not interchangeable. In *Sincerity and Authenticity* Lionel Trilling defines sincerity as “congruence between what is said and the real feeling experienced” (1972, p. 4). Thus sincerity refers to the extent to which the expression of their feelings and thoughts is aligned within the experience of the Self. This assertion inevitably leads us to consider an Other- other than oneself. The sincerity of each person will depend on the extent that it is considered true by others and not by the extent to which one is true to themselves (George & Sims, 2007; Northouse, 2012). For Harter (2002) to be authentic means to know yourself and act accordingly, expressing genuinely what one believes and thinks.

In the management literature, Bill George’s works (2003; 2007) have helped to support and spread the interest in authentic leadership, which is considered much more than a mere style, but (rather) a way of being, the origin and the end of the leadership itself. This resonates the work of Northouse on ethical leadership who describes ethical leadership as “a process by which a good person rightly influences others to accomplish a common good: to make the world better, fairer and more humane” (2012,p. 230).

According to George a true leader should express five qualities:

Self-awareness. No one can follow someone unless he/she does not know the direction. In the absence of a clear purpose, each leader will sail aimlessly at the mercy of their own ego, vulnerable to narcissistic impulses. To find your

purpose, you need to understand and discover the personal passion and motivations. Knowing who you are as a person, what you believe in and stand for are crucial. This will determine the vision they uphold and the paths they will pursue.

Practicing solid values. Values and character define a leader. Character refers to the qualities, disposition and values the leader upholds. Over 2,000 years ago Aristotle had described a moral person as one who demonstrated the virtues of courage, generosity, self-control, honesty, sociability, modesty, fairness, and justice. Such qualities can be developed and strengthened through practice, perseverance and commitment over time. This reinforces the argument that character is derived from one's actions. It is here that values stand out. The values are a kind of moral compass which challenge the leader and followers to seek consensus and common ground.

Leading with the heart. One of the competitive advantages within a company is when each employee develops the perception that their work is useful and it contributes to a deeper purpose. Authentic leaders possess the ability to ignite the soul of followers involving them in the mission of the organization.

Establishing long-term relationships. One of the most important features of a genuine leader is the ability to develop long-term relationships. This is because every employee feels the need to establish a personal relationship with his/her leader. In a context of care, the leader expresses respect, nurtures trust and kindles mutual responsibility. In such a context people forge relationships and that sense of community which leads to a deeper sense of connection and commitment towards work and greater loyalty to the organization.

Demonstrating self-discipline. Without self-discipline you cannot earn the respect of others. Self-regulation involves a consistency in judgement and calmness in dealing with people, situations and problems. The management of situations and challenges whilst difficult to predict, review optimal conditions and a consistently high level of self-discipline.

One of the main researchers who has tried to define authentic leadership is Kernis (2007). He regards authenticity as a psychological construct that reflects the knowing, acceptance and acting in accordance with one's own values, beliefs, preferences and emotions. Luthans and Avolio (2003) explored the characteristics of the authentic leader, describing him/her as one who is "secure, confident, optimistic, resilient, moral/ethical, future-oriented, and that gives priority to the development of employees by encouraging them to be leaders. The authentic leader is true to himself" (2003, p. 243). Subsequent studies have developed and validated the measure of 'Authentic Leadership identifying four factors that can be analyzed through the Authentic Leadership Questionnaire (Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing & Peterson, 2008). By integrating contributions from social psychology, philosophy, ethics and morality, the authors propose a model that include four factors:

Self awareness refers to the way through which a person constructs meanings of the world and to the way in which this process of building influence conceives itself over time. It also refers to the understanding of their strengths and weaknesses and the nature of the Self.

Transparency relational presents the authenticity of the self to others. This attitude promotes trust through the way in which the Self is declared openly which involves the sharing of information and the expression of true thoughts and desires.

Balanced processing: assesses how leaders analyze objectively the information before making a decision.

Internal moral perspective: refers to a form of internal self-regulation guided by moral standards, values and by the “pressures” from the group, organization and society.

Emphasizing a personal perspective, the authors define authentic leadership as “a process that takes strength from the positive psychological capacities and a highly developed organizational context, which results in a greater awareness and recruits positive behaviors on the part of leaders and associates fostering positive self-development “ ([Walumbwa et al. 2008, p. 92](#)). The greatest contribution provided by these authors is the fact that the operationalization of the authentic leadership model used in developing the ALQ test, is based on a review of theoretical contributions including different disciplines.

Future research trajectories will have to figure out a better definition of the construct to add evidences to the validity of the measures and the terms in which this construct is related to other categories of the same nomological context such as, wellness, spirituality, judgment, etc. Another key question concerns the meaning attributed to being authentic on the side of the follower and how that meaning depends on a subjective component, that is the cultural context in which people operate ([Phillips & Lord,1981](#); [Awamleh & Gardner, 1999](#); [Meindl, Ehrlich & Dukerich, 1985](#); [Sergiovanni, 1992](#)) . Consequently, the characteristics and specificities related to the category of authenticity may be different in different cultures, and can be conditioned by contextual variable that are in a constant state of flux.

2. Leadership and teaching

Within the educational field, [Sergiovanni](#) notes that leadership and management can be considered essentially as a moral craft ([Sergiovanni, 1992](#)) , indicating the need for educational leaders to bring together three important dimensions: mind, heart and hand.

The conception of the teacher as leader has been the subject of growing interest within the educational literature over past few years. Teachers as leaders are considered as agents of change ([Henderson & Barron, 1995](#)); as providing peer assistance to improve teaching and learning ([DuFour, DuFour, Eaker & Many, 2010](#); [Waters et al.2009](#)). In the literature, the essential role of the leader in successful schools and his/her influence in the process of school improvement has been investigated extensively ([Hallinger, 2003](#); [Huber, 2003](#)) and the essential role they play in cultivating shared leadership well recognized ([Day & Sammons, 2013](#); [Wilhelm 2013](#);))

Good leaders change organizations, great leaders change the people who are the heart of any organization and especially of a school community, which is a community of minds ([Sergiovanni, 1994](#)) . And through the change of people you can develop an environment that facilitates learning.

Leadership is what teachers implement in their classrooms when they transmit the passion for teaching a subject, when leading group discussions, encouraging peer-tutoring, planning and motivating the learning process, clarifying the objectives and encouraging individual effort, showing appreciation towards the students. Cornesky, author of *The Quality Professor*, points out that “leadership is the most important ingredient for the determination of the quality of each organization, including the classroom. This faculty, covering learning or showing love for learning and, at the same time showing respect for students as learners, will extend their possibilities and their interest in what they have seen modelled by learning from their coach. The result is the “empowerment and expansion of knowledge “ (1993, p. 41). So leadership increasingly refers to something personal and situational.

Within such a context the area of teacher leadership becomes a critical issue. It highlights the importance that school leaders need to work alongside and with their teachers. In such a context the point raised by Fullan of change agency (2001) takes on central stage. Within this context the leader as an authentic person stands out.

3. The journey to being authentic

It is often forgotten that young people have a rich and varied personal life. Neither the school nor the teacher could “own” them and consider them as programmed automatons. Each of us has the right to live their own destiny, the right to create a life for themselves in relation to our community, and even more specifically, to something that can be negotiated, constructed and improvised within our community. Taylor provides the clearest philosophical analysis of this ethic: There is “a certain way of being human that is my way. I am invited to live my life in my own way and not in imitation of someone else” (Starrat, p. 28).

The process of becoming real, becoming authentic and true to oneself, is definitely the deepest and most challenging experience of all moral activities. While you are looking for authentic learning opportunities, often students have unauthentic experiences of learning ([Bird, Wang, Watson & Murray, 2009](#)). This unauthentic experience is characterized by an impersonal treatment of information, by a disconnection between the learner and the content of what is studied, from the storage of facts that do not allow human and spiritual growth. The authentic educators should allow their students to transform continuously (build-deconstruct-reconstruct) their understanding of themselves to relocate within the possibilities and challenges of existence.

The study on authentic leadership within the educational context is a relatively new area of research. Some scholars have investigated how school leaders lead schools, which leadership styles are adopted, as well as the school climate and the impact of these factors on student learning ([Begley, 2001](#); [Branson, 2007](#); [Lambert, 2002](#); [Marzano, 2005](#)). Paul Begley (2003; 2004; 2006) sees authentic leadership as a “function of self-knowledge, sensitivity to the orientations of others, and a technical sophistication that leads to a synergy of leadership action” (58, p. 5).

For Starrat (2007) each leader is responsible as a human being, as an administrator and as a citizen: liable for students, teachers or others involved in the school community. Starrat (2005) places the reflection on the authenticity of the leader within a perspective of learning, providing three fundamental principles.

Firstly, authentic leadership cannot be merely conceptualized in terms of in-

terpersonal morality. To do this, you need to ignore that leadership is exercised within an institutional context, which is certainly not neutral in terms of structures and processed. The second point is that leadership does not refer merely to managerial skills, strategies or techniques. If we focus too much on these we could ignore the true meaning of learning. The third point is that leadership should not be just focused on adults without considering the authenticity of students' learning and the related teaching strategies, resource allocation and reporting. In short, authenticity cannot be developed separately from the school context and social environment. Therefore, we have to consider the cultural aspect that students and teachers bring together in each institutional setting.

It can be argued that leadership can be developed in a dual directional axis involving leaders and followers. This process, involving a dyadic relationship, implies a transformation of oneself and the other in the direction of a higher and ethical and moral purpose. This process does not depend on the authority or on the leader's power but on the recognition of his/her integrity and credibility. To walk the talk expresses fully the leader's responsibility to gaining the confidence of the follower, and it demonstrates a real commitment to live what you preach and profess. Seen in this light, leadership regards the integrity and consistency of the leader. Secondly, it is consistently looking for a high moral code that guides the action and guides the reflection of the leader on the search for good. As noted above, authentic leadership is at the center of any discussion of ethics and morals and decides what is right, what is significant and what is useful (Walker & Shuangye, 2007). Such leadership elevates the actions of the leader above the mere pragmatic contingency. If decisions with a significant impact on morale are taken by people who occupy leadership positions, the question becomes more complex because they are expected to also behave as agents of change. The quest for moral knowledge involves much more than your personal beliefs system, but it involves an act of responsibility towards the other.

Echoing Begley's comments (2004), Walker and Shuangye (2007) argue that authenticity is not something that can ever really be achieved but it can be developed piece by piece through an interactive process of meaningful learning among students, teachers and the school community. Authentic leadership is not something that emerges from a clarification or adherence to a personal set of beliefs, but rather it can be considered as a continuous interaction between how a person understands himself within the meaning of a given educational context. It also takes into account what can best be done to improve the lives of students and learning within that context.

From a cultural perspective, Begley (2004) describes leadership as something that firstly starts with 'self-awareness and then develops through a sensitivity to other people's ideas. Very often ethical positions are presented as abstract concepts with respect to the peculiarities of the cultural context. An ethic disattached from the context leads to interpretations that can cause confusion and disorientation especially in those who hold positions of responsibility and whose decisions have an impact on the values of the community. The example given by Begley can be significant: in diverse societies, headgear worn is something more than a simple garment, a dagger is seen as a religious symbol rather than a weapon. Following human nature, you are more likely to consider favorably the preferences and traditions that belong to your culture, beliefs, and customs, rather than engaging in social inclusion of minorities, leading in extreme cases to preserve one's own interests at the expense of the freedom of others.

Conclusion

The authenticity in leadership requires a radical change in the way we conceive much of the traditional way of thinking about leadership itself. The educational leaders are challenged to be ethical and moral in a world of tensions, paradoxes and dilemmas (Duignan & Collins 2003) . “A musician must make music, an artist must paint, a poet must write, if he wants to be at peace with himself. What a man can be, must be. It must be true to its nature “ (Maslow, 1971, p. 22).

This assumption reflects the premise around which all the literature and scientific reflections on the theme of authenticity revolve: authentic leaders have to guide the groups, organizations and schools in order to honour their own values and beliefs not hiding weaknesses and not considering fragility as a taboo. Being true to oneself is the principle that every leader should consider important. In an educational setting it can be considered as an interpretative prism to guide decision making. A path towards authenticity is in-infinite (in the sense of unfinished) with regards to the change that involves the person who continually wonders about what is good and right in a context characterized by continuous movement that is strongly linked to learning : learning which does not happen spontaneously but must be pursued with conviction.

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