



Only human: Exploring the nature of weakness in authentic leadership



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ABSTRACT

While the construct of authentic leadership includes the nondefensive recognition of weaknesses as well as strengths, scholars rarely hypothesize the role weaknesses play in strengthening authenticity and the effectiveness of authentic leaders. We begin by exploring possible unintended consequences of an overly positive strength based view of authentic leadership. We then propose that there are weaknesses associated with cognitive abilities, motivation, social cognition and group dynamics that spring from the need to belong that are part and parcel of human nature such that their integration into one's sense of authenticity not only enhances the authentic leadership attributes of self-awareness, balanced processing, moral identity and relational transparency but also benefits those who are led. We end with suggestions for future research on these attributes supplementing existing measures of authentic leadership with the use of implicit measures, promising assessment instruments and idiographic techniques.

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Introduction

The zeitgeist of the past decade has been characterized by a loss of trust in corporate and political leadership and a concomitant desire for a more simple, transparent and trustworthy leadership style. While the construct of authentic leadership has been present for almost 20 years (Terry, 1993), its more recent popularity has grown as a response to increasing anxiety associated with societal changes such as September 11th, and downturns in the US economy, as well as a widespread desire to identify public and corporate leaders who will bring integrity to their work, operate in a transparent manner, espouse courage and optimism in the face of challenge, and are guided by an unfailing moral compass (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; May, Chan, Hodges, & Avolio, 2003). In the academic realm, authentic leadership jibes well with positive psychology's and positive organizational behavior's emphases on developing strengths, virtues and acting in a way that is congruent with one's internal values (Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, 2009). Authenticity is a concept that embodies a hopeful alternative to fear and helplessness in the workplace (Cranton & Carusetta, 2004).

While the definition of authentic leadership has evolved over the last few years, Walumbwa and his colleagues' current definition of authentic leadership emphasizes a transparently connected relationship between leaders and followers, encompassing a high level of self-awareness with internalized beliefs and moral values. Specifically, they write that it is a "pattern of leader behavior that draws upon and promotes both positive psychological capabilities 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" (Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing, & Peterson, 2008, p. 94).

Authentic leaders are those who know and act upon their true values, beliefs, integrity and strengths (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Avolio, Griffith, Wernsing, & Walumbwa, 2010; Walumbwa et al., 2008). Authentic leadership is a relevant concept that satisfies a

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current public need for accountability, integrity, courage and transparency because of its focus on leaders' own transparency, internal principles and a moral compass in the face of nefarious, shifting and possibly ethically ambiguous business practices.

As the construct matures, research on authentic leaders shows promising outcomes. These leaders are more committed to their organizations (Walumbwa et al., 2008), show greater citizenship behavior (Walumbwa, Wang, Wang, Schaubroeck, & Avolio, 2010; Walumbwa et al., 2008), and employee engagement (Walumbwa et al., 2010), while their followers report greater trust (Wong & Cummings, 2009) and satisfaction with their supervisor's performance (Walumbwa et al., 2008).

Authentic leaders are not necessarily transformational leaders. They are not likely to motivate through inspirational vision or intellectual stimulation and, while follower development will be important to authentic leaders, they are not likely to focus on developing leaders among their subordinates (Walumbwa et al., 2008). Nor is authenticity always required for effective leadership. Managers who are malleable toward enacting the role of leader (e.g. high self-monitors; Snyder & Gangestad, 1986) rather than leading from a sense of self can succeed. Caldwell and O'Reilly (1982) found that these high self-monitoring leaders were especially successful in boundary spanning roles, using contextual cues to manage across groups whose norms may be so different that the groups cannot initially work directly with each other. Additionally high self-monitors are better at managing the impressions others have of them (Schlenker & Pontari, 2000). Warech, Smither, Reilly, Millsap, and Reilly (1998) showed a positive relationship between leaders' use of self-monitoring techniques and supervisor ratings of their interpersonal effectiveness. Nevertheless, leaders who are malleable in their interactions with others are less likely to be seen as trustworthy and in return are less likely to engender loyalty, respect and emotional commitment from their followers (Bedian & Day, 2004).

Instead authentic leaders promote trust among their followers because their deep self-knowledge of both their strengths and weaknesses creates a nondefensiveness that allows for them to be consistent across situations and transparent with their followers regarding the reasons for their actions (Kernis, 2003; May et al., 2003; Walumbwa et al., 2008). This nondefensiveness allows for leaders to be both self-determined (Deci & Ryan, 1985) and at the same time become, what Tangney (2000) has labeled, "unserved". They are motivated to minimize personal goals, focusing instead on understanding those they serve and, more importantly, exercising influence on behalf of others (Howell, 1988).

The genesis of authentic leadership has been heavily influenced by Kernis (2003) who, in exploring the nature of optimal self-esteem, wrote that authenticity "can be characterized as reflecting the unobstructed operation of one's true, or core self in one's daily enterprise" (p. 13). One of the most important principles of Kernis's notion of authenticity is that reality is shaped and defined by each individual. As such, "individuals are free to choose their own reality, but they must have trust in it and recognize that it is not the only reality" (Kernis, p. 15). Authenticity then, as Kernis originally defined it, is a self-referent process which allows for great leeway in defining the characteristics of an authentic self-identity. Shamir and Eilam (2005) took a similar stance in not defining specific attributes to authenticity, noting instead that authentic leaders have high self-concept clarity, self-referent personal goals and behavior that is self-expressive. Nevertheless Kernis's conception of authenticity, which is the basis for much of what is written about authentic leadership, is based on a concordant self-identity with genuine, true and stable high self-esteem.

This positive orientation coupled with constructs from positive psychology and positive organizational behavior underlies much of the theory building around authentic leadership (Avolio et al., 2009; Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May, & Walumbwa, 2005). Avolio and Gardner (2005) stressed that authentic leadership is a "root construct" that provides the basis for other forms of positive leadership such as transformational, or servant leadership. Gardner et al. (2005) and later Walumbwa et al. (2008) go on to identify specific self-referent attributes of authentic leaders such as confidence, optimism, hope and resilience, strong moral character, high standards and values, advanced cognitive and emotional development, and optimal self-esteem.

Even as authentic leadership scholarship moves beyond the original goals of authenticity to explicate specific positive self-referent attributes, both groups of scholars have been more reticent to explore more deeply the nature of human flaws in authenticity. For example, Kernis (2003) noted that people with genuine high self-esteem "like, value, and accept themselves, imperfections and all" (p. 3) but writes little more about the nature of these imperfections. Similarly, multiple scholars using the Gardner et al. model have noted the importance of acknowledging weaknesses as well as strengths in a balanced and non-defensive approach to self-knowledge (e.g. Ilies, Morgeson, & Nahrgang, 2005; Luthans, Norman, & Hughes, 2006). Yet much of the writings on authentic leadership are nevertheless grounded in a developmental process which privileges the positive side of the equation: identify, broaden, build and act on individual strengths (Fredrickson, 2001), with little to no mention of what exactly are the nature of these weaknesses and how should leaders experience them beyond their acknowledgment to obviate defensiveness. If weaknesses are indeed important to the nature of authenticity then it is worthwhile to explore how they may influence leading others. Geoff and Jones (2006) have argued that leaders with a strong sense of purpose will inevitably display weaknesses in their leadership because they care enough about their work to risk censure from co-workers and step aside to create opportunities for others to fill in their voids. The purpose of this paper is to identify possible unintended consequences of an authentic leadership model with a top heavy reliance on positive attributes and suggest how leaders may experience certain weaknesses as authentic to increase their leadership effectiveness. We end each section with propositions for future research on the benefits of incorporating weaknesses into authentic leadership.

Unintended consequences of a strength based view of authentic leadership

While a key attribute of authentic leadership is a balanced approach to processing information about one's self, the focus on strengths provides no guidance on how to process negative self-referenced information. This positive focus alone may actually weaken leadership effectiveness by increasing defensiveness and lessening motivation toward development as leaders become

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