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Authentic leadership: development of a new three pillar model

Fiona Beddoes-Jones and Stephen Swailes

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Abstract

Purpose – *This paper aims to summarise a new model of authentic leadership derived from research with senior leaders in the UK.*

Design/methodology/approach – *The model was developed and tested using three independent samples: 140 business leaders, 54 senior military officers with 390 independent raters and 303 business leaders.*

Findings – *A 15-item, self-report, three-component measure of authentic leadership was obtained from testing across samples. The three components measure an individual's capacity for self-awareness, self-regulation and ethical behaviour.*

Originality/value – *The paper contributes to the authentic leadership literature through the creation of a short authentic leadership scale that could be used in leadership research and which simplifies and unifies previous conceptualisations of authentic leadership. The three-pillar model offers guidance to HR practitioners looking to design leadership development interventions.*

Keywords *Organisation development, Leadership*

Paper type *Research paper*

Authentic leadership

Corporate ethical malpractice and concern about improper executive behaviour regularly make the media headlines. Public trust in business leaders is low (CIPD, 2012; Ipsos Mori, 2011), and the inadequacies of classic models of leadership have been exposed. Perhaps stimulated by these background changes, interest in a new kind of leadership has emerged – “authentic leadership” (Avolio *et al.*, 2004; Gardner *et al.*, 2005a; George, 2003). Authentic leadership encompasses personal beliefs and values and how they are aligned and lived in one's everyday leadership experience (Avolio and Gardner, 2005; Cooper *et al.*, 2005; Luthans and Avolio, 2003). However, whilst the literature surrounding it is ever-increasing, the concept and construct of authentic leadership is fragmented, complicated by different perspectives and compounded by a lack of empirical research, particularly in the UK (Gardner *et al.*, 2011).

The most well-known and widely researched model of authentic leadership (Walumbwa *et al.*, 2008) has recently attracted criticism concerning its published empirical data. The present paper contributes to the work on authentic leadership by offering an alternative model developed from research with British organisations. Critically, the model was developed and tested using “real” leaders rather than students, which has been the case in some other studies. Participants in this study worked in business contexts or were senior serving officers in one of the armed forces. We suggest, therefore, that the resulting model has greater validity and relevance to leadership situations than other comparative research in the field derived from student populations with little or no real-world leadership experience.

The modern roots of authentic leadership go back over 30 years (Henderson and Hoy, 1983) but interest grew after 9/11. Eagly (2005, p. 460), for instance, argues that “People seek leaders who can restore confidence in basic institutions and enhance their confidence that they can collectively achieve a better, more secure world”. Authentic leadership can be seen as “A root construct”, which underlies *all* positive forms of leadership and its development (Avolio and Gardner, 2005, p. 315; May *et al.*, 2003). It has also been suggested that authentic leadership is “A leadership multiplier” through which the interventions made by authentic leaders are received more favourably by their followers such that their outcomes are more influential (Chan *et al.*, 2005). This works by boosting proximal level outcomes such as trust, humility, optimism and the quality of relationships. For wider reading on authentic leadership and its operating mechanisms, see Gardner *et al.* (2005a, 2005b), Ilies *et al.* (2005) and Shamir and Eilam (2005).

Research methods and results

A classic work psychology approach was followed. Following an extensive literature review, a new, four-factor theoretical model of authentic leadership was developed based on Novicevic *et al.*'s (2006) conceptualisation which differentiated between the psychological components of self-awareness and subsequent self-regulation and the philosophical components of ethical virtue and subsequent ethical action. A self-report survey using Likert scale response formats and containing 150 statements (items) was constructed to reflect the four hypothesised dimensions. This was reviewed by an expert panel comprising experienced leadership development specialists and organisational psychologists. This stage led to the removal of some items and the addition of others, resulting in a final item bank of 100 items, 25 per dimension.

A pilot study was conducted with 140 experienced business leaders who were members of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development or the UK Institute of Directors. About 60 per cent of the pilot sample was female, and all respondents had at least 10 years' leadership experience. As a result of various psychometric tests, a three-factor model emerged with factors representing self-awareness, self-regulation and ethics.

For the main study, the 100-item, four-factor model was retested. As leaders tend to consistently over-estimate their own performance (Atkins and Wood, 2002), a 360° design was used with 54 senior serving military officers. This sample was 80 per cent male with an age range of 30-51 and a mean age of 40. Length of service ranged from 8-31 years with a mean of 19 years. Each officer had a minimum of two raters and a maximum of ten drawn from peers, subordinates, superiors and civilian personnel. The same three-factor model emerged from this study suggesting that, as two fundamentally different samples were used, the dimensions of the authentic leadership construct are statistically robust. After item deletion for the purposes of clarity and parsimony (as is normal in this type of research), each factor was finally represented by five items, as shown in Appendix with the final 15 items loading cleanly onto three distinct factors. To further develop the three-factor model, confirmatory factor analysis was carried out on a third sample of 303 UK business leaders, 58 per cent male and with at least five years' leadership experience.

“Failures in modern leadership could be underpinned by leaders lacking in one or more of the three pillars and the cognitive, emotional and behavioural traits which sit within them.”

Leadership failure

The three-factor model which emerged from the study, *The 3 Pillars of Authentic Leadership*, is illustrated in Figure 1. Figure 1 suggests that authentic leadership is a *relational* model, which sits on a bedrock of *trust*.

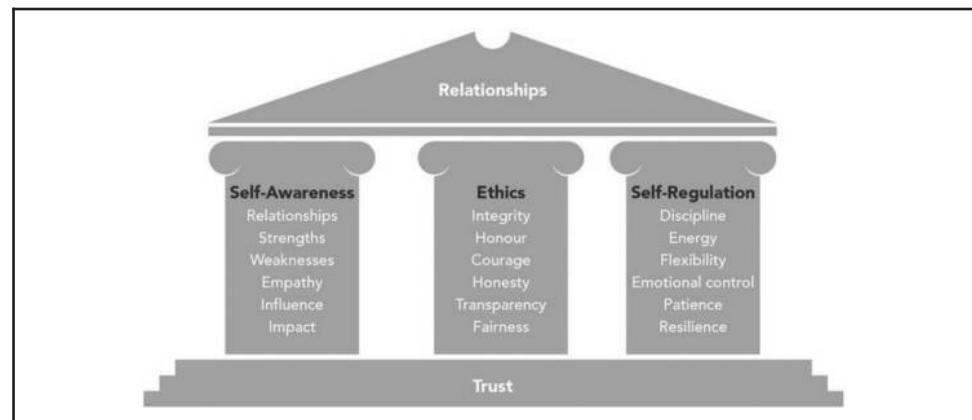
From the model, as self-awareness, self-regulation and ethics are pre-requisites for authentic leadership success, and if authentic leadership is both a root construct and a leadership multiplier, then these three pillars could be underpinning constructs for *all* positive forms of leadership. Whilst much modern leadership failure is perceived to be ethical in nature, the implication of this new and rather radical hypothesis is that, potentially, failures in modern leadership could be underpinned by leaders lacking in one or more of the three pillars and the cognitive, emotional and behavioural traits which sit within them. This hypothesis, which remains to be tested, makes intuitive sense when we consider the many public examples of modern leader failure and derailment.

Implications for leadership development

Leadership development, which implies a process of change, can occur naturally over time in the workplace, or it can be accelerated, organised and facilitated developmental interventions such as coaching, mentoring and programmes designed around the needs of individuals or groups such as talent pools of high-potential future leaders. Leadership development programmes imply processes of carefully considered temporal inputs and suggest stable changes in knowledge and skills on the part of the leader that will remain consistent and congruent over time. They further imply that the resultant increases in skills or knowledge happen at a faster rate than would have occurred naturally without such interventions. Finally, programmes assume that such developmental interventions lead to more effective performance outcomes on the part of the leader.

Development of authentic leadership requires attention to specific areas. Luthans and Avolio (2003 p. 243) point to the importance of processes that focus on “greater self-awareness and self-regulated positive behaviours on the part of leaders and associates, fostering positive self-development [...] optimal self-esteem and psychological well-being [...] (and) to model and promote the development of these states in others”. Gardner *et al.* (2005b) propose an experiential approach whereby leaders become perceived as being authentic over time via their consistency regarding their core beliefs and values which are actively modelled to their followers. They include the dimension of follower development, viewing authentic followership as not only an integral component but also as a natural consequence of authentic leadership development. By far, the most popular approach to authentic leadership development appears to be a life stories approach. The practitioner George (2007, p. 23) asks:

Figure 1 The three pillars of authentic leadership



“The authentic leadership model on its own is not enough as leaders need to understand their own personal philosophy of leadership.”

Do you know what your life and your leadership are all about, and when you are being true to yourself? True North is the internal compass that guides you successfully through life. It represents who you are as a human being at your deepest level [. . .] your truth is derived from your life story, and only you can determine what it should be [. . .]. When you are aligned with who you are, you find coherence between your life story and your leadership.

Shamir and Eilam (2005, p. 412) suggest that “Authentic leaders find their ‘voice’ by acting in the world, receiving feedback and reflecting on the consequences of their actions. [. . .] development therefore includes reflecting on the past, acting in the present and reflecting on present action”. In this actively reflective process, they suggest that a life stories approach has four components:

1. the development of a leader identity as a central and critical part of an individual’s self-concept;
2. the development of self-knowledge which includes clarity regarding one’s beliefs and values;
3. the development of personal goals which are consistent with one’s passions and self-concept; and
4. a lack of leadership dissonance, i.e. consistency between one’s leadership behaviours and one’s leadership beliefs.

Like Sparrowe (2005), they argue that it is the leader’s life story narrative, which, when known, provides the major source of personal information around which followers base their judgements around the leader’s authenticity suggesting that self-disclosure and honesty are critical factors within a leader’s development in the eyes of others. Shamir *et al.* (2005) suggest that leadership development as described by leaders’ life story narratives centres around four themes, all of which, they suggest, are equally valid as a basis for authentic leadership development. They are: a “natural” leadership development process, development from struggle or hardship, leadership development from a purpose or cause and development as an active learning process.

For organisations then, what is the most appropriate approach for authentic leader development? It would seem that a programme of facilitated active reflection, shared with peers and built around the three pillars of authentic leadership identified by the research summarised here, is a way forward. However, there are caveats. The authentic leadership model on its own is not enough, as leaders need to understand their own personal philosophy of leadership and how that relates to the wider leadership literature (Cunliffe, 2009) to be truly effective. As an aspirational model, it is quite possible, even likely, that some managers and leaders could reject authentic leadership. After all, if an organisation is encouraging authenticity, it must logically allow its leaders to be authentic in their own ways. Furthermore, being an *authentic* leader is not just about being oneself, as any dictator might claim to be, authentic leadership in political and business contexts require adherence to the three pillars of self-awareness, self-regulation and ethics.

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Appendix 1. Authentic leadership factors and underlying scale items

- *Factor 1 – Self-awareness:* As a leader, I [. . .] always put myself “in other people’s shoes” and look at things from their perspective, am aware of my own feelings, beliefs and motives, use what happens to me as an opportunity to learn more about myself, stay in touch with my feelings so I am aware of how they are affecting me and am aware of how my moods and actions affect other people.
- *Factor 2 – Self-regulation:* As a leader, I [. . .] display self-discipline, keep my ego in check, do not suffer from mood swings, remain approachable even when facing significant challenges and consistently act as a role model for others.
- *Factor 3 – Ethics:* As a leader, I [. . .] discuss difficult ethical issues with others; view ethics as an active choice rather than as a compromise; remain ethically steadfast in the face of dissent from others; am clear about my core values, those values I am not prepared to negotiate on; and believe that my role as a leader includes an ethical responsibility to others.

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