Authenticity

Authenticity occurs when an individual aligns personal values with action. Authenticity is an emerging field of study that has largely grown out of the demand for increased ethics in leadership as a result of the many corporate scandals of the early 21st century.

Conceptual Overview

In management science, authenticity is manifested through authentic leadership. Authentic leaders operate from a moral and ethical base, have a positive emotional orientation and high level of self-awareness, and are consistent in words and actions. Authentic leaders have authentic relationships with followers and are focused on follower development. Authentic leadership transcends the individual leader and, through positive modeling and empowerment, results in employees who are enthusiastic about and committed to their role in the organization.

Authenticity is predominantly rooted in the humanistic and positive psychology literature, and is particularly related to ethics, morality, the self, and identity theory. The historical roots include Mead's conceptualization of *self*, Maslow's notion of the *self-actualized* person, and positive forms of leadership, such as servant, charismatic, transformational, and spiritual. To understand authenticity and authentic leadership, a review of the main authenticity scientists is required and presented below.

Erickson's 1995 theoretical work on the relevance of authenticity for individuals and society is grounded in identity theory. She maintains that an individual's authenticity is highly influenced by society and culture, but that the degree to which an individual is authentic rests purely with the self. She proposes that authenticity is a commitment to *self-values* and that an individual's sense of *relative authenticity* is the degree to which an individual accomplishes the goals or commitments one has for the self. The self (including the authentic self) is espoused as complex, changing, and often inconsistent.

George brought the concept of authentic leadership to the mainstream in 2003. His book focuses primarily on authentic leadership examples at Medtronic, where he was Chairman and CEO. George claims that authentic leadership is the most effective type of leadership and that emulating past leaders is not effective. He proposes five dimensions of authentic leadership: purpose, values, heart, relationships, and self-discipline.

May and colleagues discuss the moral components and decision-making processes inherent in authentic leadership. This theoretical work is based on decisionmaking literature, positive psychology, and Luthans's conceptualization of positive organizational behavior. Chan and colleagues present a model of how the moral aspect of authentic leadership is developed, which is built around three main authentic leader attributes: (1) authentic decision making; (2) authentic behavior; and (3) authentic leadership development.

Avolio and colleagues present a framework to explain the relationship of authentic leadership to follower attributes. The authors define authentic leaders as individuals high in authenticity who know themselves and their beliefs, and who act upon both while maintaining *transparency* in their relationships. They propose that an authentic leader's hope, trust, and positive emotions manifest in followers through personal and social identification, and hence, followers develop certain work-related attitudes and behaviors, such as commitment

and job performance.

Critical Commentary and Future Directions

While authenticity has existed since before the Greeks said "to thine own self be true," the concept of authentic leadership is in its infancy and lacks definitional agreement. Furthermore, researchers still need to overcome multitudes of hurdles to empirically validate the construct. For example, identity theorists would hypothesize that the self is always changing, inconsistent, and influenced by the environment. How can an instrument account for these fluctuations? Additionally, researchers must decide the factors required for validation. Are the followers, the individual leader, the situation, or various organizational performance metrics the most salient? What role do the environment and/or culture play? In addition, can authentic leadership exist if the company is not performing well?

Authenticity researchers rarely delve beyond the individual level or across cultures. Future research may be focused on the authenticity of groups and organizations, and the possibility of authenticity flowing upward or downward through the organization. This would also necessitate a study of how individuals, groups, and organizations learn authenticity, or if authenticity can be learned. Future research may also consider how different cultures (i.e., collectivist versus individualist) view authenticity and how this knowledge might help leaders increase their effectiveness across cultures.

While authenticity and authentic leadership is most prevalent in not-for-profit and religious organizations, its popularity as an effective and inspiring method of leadership is beginning to transcend those boundaries. However, if authentic leadership is to endure, it will surely need more empirical testing and a stronger link to performance and results.

—*Michelle DeLauer*

Further Readings

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