Authentic Leadership Beyond Reification and Critique: A Jungian Perspective on Achieving the ‘Authenticity Vibe’

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Abstract

In contemporary leadership theorizing ‘authentic leadership’ has emerged as the heir apparent to transformational leadership as the ‘leadership flavour’ of our times. Perhaps as a result of current preoccupations with ethical malfeasance at the highest levels of corporate and political life (Kelly, 2014), authentic leadership could be seen to provide an antidote to the falsity apparent in all aspects of modernity, from ‘faked’ reality television programmes to airbrushed images and contrived political performances.

Two distinct trends in how authentic leadership is being pursued are apparent in the literature. Firstly, it is construed as a reified ‘recipe’ comprised of ethical, transparent and consistent behaviours on the part of those taking up the leader role (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May, & Walumbwa, 2005). Based in a positive ontological understanding this stream of research reaches its apex in the development of the ‘Authentic Leadership Questionnaire’ which purports to measure four key attributes of an authentic leader: self-awareness, relational transparency, internalized moral perspective and balanced processing (Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing, & Peterson, 2008). Through attempting to ‘pin down’ the notion of authenticity in this idealized way, we suggest the construct becomes reified (Bewes, 2002; Honneth, 2008) and as such is increasingly irrelevant and impractical: mere mortals can hardly aspire to such perfection within the messy world in which leadership relations unfold.

Alternatively authentic leadership nay-sayers attack the concept from a critical perspective, denouncing it for its unsophisticated rendering of the ‘self’ (Ford & Harding, 2011) its normative nature (Smolovic Jones & Grint, 2013) the extent to which the notion draws on fantasies (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2013; Costas & Taheri, 2012) and its unproblematized denial of less savoury aspects of an authentic self (Zander, 2013). The term is seen as evidence of another ‘fad’ in leadership theorizing, driven by ideology rather than practical concerns of every day managers and organizational leaders. Potentially ‘throwing the baby out with the bathwater’, it denies the relevance of authentic leadership as an important conceptual touchstone for our times, evidenced by the frequency with which the term is mentioned by those taking part in studies of leadership which do not explicitly mention ‘authenticity’ (Fields, 2013; Nicholson & Carroll, 2013).

In this paper, we offer a possibility for authentic leadership theorizing which extends beyond either reified or critical accounts. Through introducing Carl Jung’s notion of individuation, we propose a notion of authenticity which takes into account the self as a ‘work in progress’; one that in its most developed form integrates both positive and shadow aspects in an
emergent process of self-development. Rather than offering an end-point for such awareness however, we suggest that the lived authentic self is constantly in a dialectical process of negotiation between a multiplicity of ‘selves’. Following from this, instead of being a static quality, authenticity can be experienced between leaders and followers as a ‘vibration’, an energetic quality akin to a sense of attunement. Underpinned by this perspective, authentic leadership retains its liveliness and relevance for those engaged in leadership relations.

The paper elaborates on how such an ‘authenticity vibe’ can be created through the integration of ‘shadow’ (Johnson, 1991; Jung, 1961) aspects of the self which are often dismissed by traditional authentic leadership literature. Drawing from Jung’s work in particular we develop a model depicting four tensions, which when resolved, create the possibility of the authenticity ‘vibe’. These are:

- That between the ‘little’ and ‘big’ self;
- That between being ‘other’ or ‘self’ focused;
- That between the desire to ‘discharge’ and the wisdom to ‘discern’
- That between ‘greediness’, and ‘acting for others’ self-interests.

The way in which these four tensions interact is represented in the diagram below:

![Figure 1: Dialectical tensions in attaining the authenticity vibe](image)

The tensions are represented by ‘Hero – Jerk’ and ‘Sinner – Saint’ continua. Reified authentic leadership theory (ALT) discourse conjures up a ‘saintly self’ that is associated with all that is good, important, ethical, positive and beautiful. That which is villainous and dark is dismissed and associated with fallen Machiavellian sinners. These are the crooked guys such as Bernard Madoff, Kenneth Lay, Jeffrey Skilling, Dennis Kozlowski and Bernie
Ebbers (Collinson, 2005). In a similar way, within the reified ALT discourse authentic leaders always seem to choose ‘heroicism’ over ‘being a jerk’, when the reality is that leaders can use ‘authenticity’ as a defence for acting out in harsh or disrespectful ways (Zander, 2013). We suggest that in working with heroic as well as jerk-like proclivities, an authentic self emerges in a textured, nuanced and judicious process that falls across a hue of possibilities for enactment. In this way the lived vibration of authenticity relies on a multi-dimensional, dialectical process that occurs within a dazzling array of potentials. In other words, we propose that leaders oscillate reflexively amid dialectics ever seeking to release the authenticity vibe within the collective. Rather than being a reified endpoint, authentic leadership is a movement of ever becoming that is more akin to a journey than a destination. On this journey of individuation our shadow helps illuminate our path every bit as much as our epitome of the ideal.

In addition to these four tensions being represented, the model represents how the authenticity vibe requires honest cognizance of the field in which leadership is being enacted and its oftentimes messy compromises. This is what is meant by the ‘field of enactment’. Within a relevant theory of authentic leadership, the role context plays in determining what is experienced as authentic cannot be dismissed.

The paper concludes by reflecting on how dialectical enquiry doesn’t set out to achieve a single authentic truth but rather recognises many truths and possibilities which can be authentic at a given moment in time. In this way ‘authentic leadership’ becomes a process of recognition. There is no one channel we can dial into that has the frequency for authenticity – there are many channels, many frequencies of our self and others which are authentic. It is what we choose, how it is enacted, transmitted and the way it is experienced by others in a relational and multiplex field of various forces that forms a coherence of frequencies which we call the ‘authenticity vibe’.

Keywords: authentic leadership, authenticity, Carl Jung, individuation, shadow.

References


