

Authentic leadership in education: a cross-country phenomenon – or, leaders in their own mind?

Research Project Team

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Abstract

Authentic leadership is emerging as an alternative perspective on leadership in different organisational settings including education (Bhindi & Duignan, 1997). The presenters will draw upon the extant research and commentary on *authentic leadership* and its relevance to leaders engaged in human service organisations, especially education. Missing/unacknowledged dimensions of the current leadership literature will also be identified with respect to authenticity. By analyzing a blend of survey data and focus groups findings the researcher intend to map teacher perceptions of authentic leaders. Specifically, they want to determine the dynamics needed to promote authentic rather than contrived collegiality. It is contended that authentic leaders will empower communities of learners through the creation of vibrant, safe, fulfilling schools.

Introduction

In the past decade there has been an intense concern about the way organizations are managed and led. Such consternation is partly due to greater public scrutiny and probity about the direction, management, and structures of organizations. It is also substantially due to the collapse of integrity and a feeling of betrayal by organizational leaders. There is an entrenched public perception that the leadership rhetoric does not match workplace reality and therefore a great deal of cynicism and disdain about organizational leaders prevails. This cynicism is fuelled by perceptions of ‘Self’ before ‘service’, profits before public good, deceitful practices and cover-ups, insincerity and superficiality in relationships and obsession with efficiency and outcomes without regard to human cost.

For example, in the USA demands have been made for greater leadership probity and accountability in the wake of the collapse of Enron (May, Chan, Hodges & Avolio, 2003; Currall & Epstein, 2003), while in Australia the Australian Wheat Board (Royal Commission, Cole Inquiry, 2006) and HIH scandals (HIH Royal Commission, 2003) have ignited similar public concern and outcry. This prevailing context of cynicism and perplexity about falling leadership standards coupled with the increasing complexity of the workplace has impelled the search and call for alternative leadership paradigms that are more values-driven, ethical, credible, compassionate, and people-centred (see also Sinclair, 2007).

Responses to the Crises of Cynicism and Crisis of Confidence

An alternative leadership paradigm that has gained momentum is Authentic Leadership. Proponents of Authentic Leadership argue for higher standards of leadership behaviour and call for greater congruence between what leaders profess and what they do.

In Australia, Bhindi and Duignan (1997) called for greater authenticity in leadership to counterbalance and contend with the toxic influence of rampant corporate managerialism and the increasing dehumanizing, political expediency, the apparent subterfuge and hypocrisy people experience in their workplaces and private lives (see also Duignan and Bhindi, 1997). The leitmotif of their paradigm centres on ethical behaviour and spirituality. Later, Duignan and his colleagues (2003) investigated ethical behaviour of leaders in service organizations while Bhindi, Gerber and Riley (2002) explored how leaders conceptualise and manifest spirituality in their leadership behaviour and practice. In North America philosophers such as Taylor (1991), Terry (1993) and Starratt (2004) argued for authenticity in leadership, canvassing philosophical and ethical understandings of authenticity and leadership.

In recent years a variety of perspectives on authenticity and authentic leadership and pointers for more robust research in this area has emanated from scholars at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and other U.S. academics. For example, Bass and Steidlmeier (1999) adopt a moral stance of authenticity arguing that transformational leadership is authentic whereas transactional leadership is unauthentic. However, Price (2003) is critical of this stance arguing that ‘it fails to ground a sufficient response to ethical concerns about transformational leadership’ (p.67). Price’s counter-argument is that ‘leaders sometimes behave immorally precisely because they are blinded by their own values’. Harvey, Martinko and Gardner (2006) drawing on the attribution research argue that this perspective can help ‘organizational leaders become aware of their own attribution styles and biases’ and could help them adjust and become more authentic. In a systematic critique on the prevalent self-discovery, self-regulating perspectives on authenticity led by Avolio, Gardner, Walumbwa, Luthands and May (2004), Sparrowe (2005) argues that ‘the true self is not discovered absent of others, but is constituted in relation to others’ (p.421). He argues that ‘emphasis on authenticity as ‘to thine own self be true’ will be complemented by authenticity disclosed in the regard one holds for others’, holding that a narrative perspective would allow more enriching research on authenticity.

In the motivational ‘self help’ literature Cooper and Sawaf (1997) regard authenticity as an ‘energy field’ which derives from within a person and conveys stronger meanings to those who engage with them. They suggest that people are capable of increasing their authentic presence and prescribe certain ways of doing so. Similarly, Goffee and Jones (2005) propose three significant ways in which leaders can establish and sustain their authenticity while McGraw (2001) regards authenticity as discovery and restoration of the true ‘Self’, and Carol Adreinne (2006) laments the ongoing ‘syndrome of inauthenticity’. With reference to education, Begley (2006) proposes three prerequisites to authentic leadership in schools: self-knowledge, a capacity for moral reasoning, and sensitivity to the orientation of others.

Taking an entirely different perspective Pittinsky and Tyson (2005) argue that to date much of the research, critique, philosophical exposition and commentaries, useful as they might be on authentic leadership are normative, polemic, ‘homilies’ or prescriptions for self-improvements and are almost entirely leadership centred. We concur with their assessment:

...the research on authenticity has not, to date, examined leader authenticity from the perspectives of followers. Because the authenticity literature relies predominantly, if not exclusively, on normative arguments, we know little from empirical perspectives about the perceptions of leaders’ authenticity among followers. In particular, what cues or markers are used by followers to determine whether a leader is, in fact, authentic?

(Pittinsky & Tyson, 2005)

Definition

There are numerous definitions of ‘leadership’ and increasing discourse on the meaning of ‘authenticity’ but a definition of ‘authentic leadership’ has proven to be elusive and arguably more potent. As Pittinsky and Tyson (2005) acknowledge -‘what is meant by authentic leadership is not clear, and the constructs are not always clearly articulated.’

We consider ‘authentic leadership’ as a ‘root construct’, which draws upon kindred perspectives/traditions of leadership. For example, Bhindi and Duignan (1997) consider that authentic leadership draws upon ethical, transformational leadership, stewardship, and spirituality. They argue that leadership is authentic to the degree that it is ethical, sincere, genuine, and trustworthy in leadership action and interaction. Authentic leaders uphold honesty and integrity in their everyday dealings and constantly search for ‘True Self’ e.g. self-enhancement/self-transcendence (Schwartz, 1994) and reject actions and interactions that are deceptive, hypocritical, duplicitous and manipulative. Authentic leaders exercise stewardship through mutuality and interdependence and compassion. For such leaders, they argue, authenticity is not accidental or contrived but intentional. Authenticity is also connoted by sensibility to others. Here, authenticity is seen when one ‘acts in accord with the true self. Expressing oneself in ways that are consistent with inner thoughts and feelings’ (Harter, 2002, p.382).

It may be argued that authentic leadership involves two intermingling forces. Firstly, authentic leadership is the transformation of oneself and others to a higher moral and ethical purpose. It is earned by the leader and bestowed by followers. It is not dependent upon the position, power or authority of the leader but upon the recognised integrity and credibility of the leader overtime. It is a collective process involving leader and followers. Such leaders ‘walk the talk’ in all aspects of their responsibilities and earn the trust of others. Thus authentic leadership is about the integrity of the leader. Second, it is the uncompromising adherence to or a quest for a high moral code or ethical standard of conduct. Such a code serves as a mirror and guide to themselves for constant self-reflection in their quest for True Self and transformative learning.

We contend that followers legitimate and bear witness to the extent to which their leaders are really authentic. Unfortunately, 'because leaders are more visible than followers, most leadership research has focused upon leaders and ignored the role of followers in explaining organizational successes or failure' (Lussier & Achua, 2007, p.265).

We advance two significant reasons for undertaking such research. Firstly, that as leadership is legitimated through and by followers it is logical to map the followers' perceptions of the markers of authentic leadership. Secondly, in line with the literature and practice of distributive leadership, the relationship between leaders and followers could be better understood and enhanced if leaders had a deeper understanding of perceptions of what constitutes authenticity, as held by their followers. Such a research would extend the limited scholarship in the area of authentic leadership from the followers' perspective. Consequently, we propose to explore the concept of authentic leadership and the markers of authenticity as perceived by workplace followers and choose the school as our research setting.

This case study research comprises a series of site studies of school leaders as authentic leaders as perceived by their followers. The nature and function of schools as human service organizations, exemplify ideals of autonomy, collegiality and shared leadership, which are actively sought and vigorously defended by the teaching profession. Hence, the dominant assumptions of control based on industrial and bureaucratic models are regarded as inappropriate and need to be re-examined especially how their followers regard leaders. Also since schools are woven from the same societal fabric as other organizations they cannot remain aloof or escape the ongoing turbulence, scrutiny and discontinuous change in their midst. Nor can they ignore the shifting grounds within their own context. In other words, the implications of the 'kinetic' forces that impinge on school leadership are too strong to ignore.

These forces include:

- Increasing administrative burdens and accountabilities of site based management
- Growing public sophistication and vocalization of their opinions
- Professionalization of teachers and the primacy of teachers as leaders
- Balancing multiple often contradictory expectations, of multiple stakeholders
- Expanding knowledge base and the rise of expertise
- Stress of persistent vandalism, student behaviour management and duty of care
- Leadership burnout and the oncoming crises of succession (Bhindi, 2004).

It is clear that school leadership has become too complex and burdensome to be handled through *dictates*, manipulation and appeals to authority. There is an increasing call for school leadership to become more dynamic, open, accountable and authentic. While many school leaders claim to be authentic leaders, there is no empirical research on whether these perceptions are shared by their followers.

Research Rationale and Derivative Questions

Given the relative dearth of Australasian empirical research into the domain of ‘authenticity’ in educational leadership, this trans-Tasman study is timely because it buttresses the work being undertaken by Duignan and associates. Specifically, this study investigates first, how followers (teachers) believe that leaders have developed leadership that can be described as ‘authentic’ and second, assess dimensions of authenticity of their schools leaders.

Research Methodology¹

The proposed research methodology is *currently under construction*.

Conclusions

Authentic leadership is a conscious commitment to core, enduring values. It is nurtured and sustained by compassion, honesty and dignity in leadership behaviour and interpersonal relationship. In schools as complex workplaces, we need both authentic teachers and authentic leaders. As I have argued many times, teachers led by authentic leaders, are critical for the success of the school’s core business. When people feel valued, they feel empowered and accept responsibility and ownership for the Soul, Tone, Wellbeing and Success of the workplace. Such a workplace culture is not accidental but intentional. Only by creating a caring, concerned and compassionate environment in our schools can school leaders provide the ignition and compression for quality teaching and learning, and the necessary stretch for improvement and innovation (Bhindi, 2004).

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¹ The collaborative research is still in its conceptualisation stage, thus we have been tentative in the paper in outlining these processes here.

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