Demystifying Authentic Leadership

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Abstract

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Authenticity is frequently cited as the key leadership competency. But what is authentic leadership? How does one lead authentically, and why should we be trying to do so? The Humphrey Group believes that practicing authentic leadership involves bringing the concepts of authenticity and leadership together in a way that helps us balance our sense of self with what others need from us. Both a feeling of authenticity on the part of the leader and an experience of authenticity by their followers are necessary for authentic leadership to exist, and neither is sufficient on its own. **Practicing authentic leadership is not an easy process but one that has the potential to yield personal and organizational rewards, including greater engagement, feelings of connection, creativity, and individual performance.**

The concept of Authentic Leadership has become increasingly prominent in western business literature since the turn of the century. But what is it?

The interconnectedness of the globalized business world and increased awareness of and demand for corporate social responsibility have created higher standards for trust and transparency in both public and private sector organizations. In turn, employees are also demanding more of their employers than ever before. A sense of purpose, a strong emotional connection to work and colleagues, and a values-driven mission are quickly shifting from nice-to-haves to must-haves for organizations to attract and retain top talent. In this context, public intellectuals like Daniel Goleman, Brené Brown, Adam Grant, and Simon Sinek have popularized a new set of leadership competencies that foreground fundamentally human skills like emotional intelligence[1], vulnerability[2], the ability to connect with others[3], and cultivating a sense of purpose[4]. Mainstream interest in these competencies is surging as the global economy transforms at an exponential pace, and the digital transformation of virtually every sector of business and industry continues to raise a relentless stream of ethical questions about the limits and nature of privacy and the role corporations should/must play in protecting it[5]. Leaders today are responsible for answering these and other questions that push the limits of what corporations have been responsible for in the past. It is no wonder, then, that organizations are increasingly focused on values, corporate social responsibility commitments, and ethical mission statements as core strategies. Authenticity is often posited as crucial to the success of such efforts at both the level of the organization and the individual. The thinking goes that leaders at all levels must walk the talk in order to build trust with their customers and their employees. Yet little consensus has emerged about what authentic leadership really means, what it looks like in practice, and how (or if) it can be developed.

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Why Authentic Leadership? Why Now?

> " If the focus of transformational leadership is driving performance, the focus of authentic leadership is creating engagement. "

Bill George is often credited with popularizing the concept of authentic leadership in the business world with his 2003 book Authentic Leadership and subsequent MBA course, Authentic Leadership Development, at Harvard Business School. George's definition is based on his own experiences as CEO of Medtronic, the world's largest medical device company, and a lifetime in business, and is similar to the academic definition: he posits that authentic leaders are genuine, moral people who lead in a way that is true to their values[6]. He contrasts authentic leadership with charismatic leadership, arguing that it is simply more natural for leaders to look inward and lead from a place of self-awareness than to look outward and attempt to emulate someone else's leadership presence or practice[7]. George's definition resonates with the findings of several empirical studies on the practice of authentic leadership which have suggested that authentic leaders garner more followers[8]; that they both experience and create greater happiness in the workplace[9]; and that they feel more connected to their work and in turn create feelings of connection in their followers[10]. Other studies have shown that managers who adopt authentic leadership styles can increase employees' creativity and individual performance[11]. These outcomes matter—particularly in the face of fierce competition to attract and retain talent.

Great feelings of happiness and well-being

More followers

More engagement

Increased feelings of connection

Increased creativity and individual performance

> " At The Humphrey Group, we believe that the practice of authentic leadership requires a delicate balance between authenticity and audience-centeredness. "

Authentic Leadership is best understood then as a style of leadership similar to transformational leadership—but with a unique set of characteristics and desired outcomes that are particularly relevant to our current moment. Arguably the most studied leadership theory of the last 30 years, transformational leadership is defined by its focus on vision, audience-centeredness, and inspiration as drivers of performance. Because authentic leadership share many of these aims, much work has been done to distinguish what is unique about authentic leadership, articulate what is unique

about it, and explain why it is such a compelling idea[12]. A meta-analysis of the early studies published on authentic leadership suggests that as a construct, authentic leadership makes explicit many ideas within transformational leadership theory. The last point is particularly important in distinguishing authentic leadership as a unique style and practice: the ethical dimension is not explicitly present in definitions of transformational leadership but is core to the emerging definition of authentic leadership in academic research[14].

> Authentic leadership theory foregrounds the importance of acting in accordance with one's values, being aware of one's motivations, and balancing these with the goals of the collective in an ethical way[13].

Why Does All This Theory Matter to the Practice Of Authentic Leadership?

Understanding what authentic leadership really is remains crucial for leaders who wish to realize its positive effects. Authentic Leadership in practice is not as simple as just "being yourself." While it may be tempting to interpret authentic leadership in this way, leaders who use this simplistic understanding as an excuse to say and do whatever feels right in the moment risk overlooking the political savvy and audience-centric thinking that is necessary in successful business interactions.

At The Humphrey Group, we believe that the practice of authentic leadership requires a delicate balance between authenticity and audience-centeredness.

The most recent studies on authentic leadership have pointed out that while most attempts to define authentic leadership to date have focused on the leader, the follower is an equally important part of the equation[15].

Practicing authentic leadership requires a comprehensive understanding of two distinct concepts: authenticity and leadership. Neither authenticity nor leadership can be properly understood by looking at the self alone: both concepts necessarily involve other people. Authenticity is about being true to one's unique character—but not when we are alone in a room. Rather, authenticity is a state of being that is created in the relationship between the self and the other; it only exists when we are interacting with others and our commitment to our values is challenged. We cannot cultivate authenticity without taking into consideration other people, how they perceive us, and how we perceive ourselves when we interact with them.

When authenticity is connected to leadership, its relational aspect is foregrounded further—there is no leadership without followership, after all.

Leadership is about inspiring others— not only when they enthusiastically agree with us but also when perspectives differ and a balance must be struck in order to move forward.

Authentic leadership, therefore, is the practice of cultivating a deep understanding of yourself and those you wish to inspire, so that you can lead in a way that is genuine. It is created in the relationship between the leader and the follower.

"Both a feeling of authenticity on the part of the leader and a perception of authenticity by their followers are necessary for authentic leadership to exist, and neither is sufficient on its own. Understanding this is crucial to the practice of authentic leadership."

Few would disagree that leadership of any kind requires a deep understanding of oneself. This is even truer of authentic leadership. Those who wish to lead authentically must make their values and beliefs central to the way they behave, embrace who they are and be willing to show this to others. They must balance this ability to lead from a place of deep self awareness, with an understanding of what the audience needs. This is not an easy process but one that has the potential to yield great personal and organizational rewards.

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