Authenticity: Sustainable Benefits Beyond Performance

By Hala Khayr Yaacoub

A Crisis of Leadership

In this installment of Linking Theory + Practice, we focus on the crisis of confidence in today’s economic regimes, governments, businesses, and corporate leaders. Many people are in a state of total distrust. This is strongly exhibited in the large number of Americans favoring the major-party presidential candidate they distrust less, rather than the one they trust more. It is equally apparent in the strong division in the United Kingdom, where people are divided on Brexit. The French are engaged in a seemingly never-ending wave of strikes in various sectors of protest against the labor law reforms set by their government, not to mention the Fédération Internationale de Football Association and Panama Papers scandals. The list of disparaging encounters goes on in all parts of the world.

Ideally, governments and businesses alike should function according to the rule of law, with responsibility, transparency, receptiveness to the needs of stakeholders, and with the active engagement of the public on serious matters. Yet all too often, people get the opposite: exploitation, war, and dearth of public services (Sachs, 2015). Thus, we are in definite need of good governance and a new breed of leaders to guide us through the exciting and risky times of the 21st century. We have good reason to believe that those leaders should be first and foremost authentic. Authentic leadership has clearly been called upon to improve the ethical bearing of today’s leadership. Over and above, authentic leadership can encompass many theories of positive leadership, including servant, charismatic, transformational, and spiritual leadership, among others (Avolio & Gardner, 2005).

An Authentic Solution

In the article *A meta-analytic review of authentic and transformational leadership: A test for redundancy*, authors George Banks of the University of North Carolina, Kelly McCauley of West Texas A&M University, William Gardner of Texas Tech University, and Courtney Guler of the University of North Carolina explored the potential redundancy of authentic leadership in comparison to transformational leadership, and tested the relative contribution of these two leadership constructs when predicting key work outcomes. They simply wanted to test whether authentic leadership is “old wine in new bottles” (Spell, 2001).

The authors posit that authentic leadership ignites positive attitudinal and behavioral outcomes, which in turn both piggyback on each other in a virtuous cycle of positivity. The authors...
capitalized on previous research showing that when leaders are aware of their values and act upon them, high levels of performance result which trigger greater satisfaction with the leader and thus superior levels of job satisfaction. On another front, authentic leaders are sense of self, the positive psychological capital of the leader, and the relational transparency with the followers. “The explicit focus on the psychological health and well-being of both the leader and the followers that accrues from the attainment of authenticity represents a unique feature of authentic leadership theory that is not present within the transformational leadership literature.” The research also pinpointed many similarities between authentic leadership and transformational leadership. For one thing, authentic leadership seemed to serve as a “root construct” for transformational leadership and other forms of positive leadership. Both theories shared the same underlying processes of self-awareness and positive modeling among others. Both theories had positive impacts on follower, group, and organizational performance. In fact, the strong and positive correlation between authentic leadership and transformational leadership depicted in this aforementioned study indicates a possibility of empirical redundancy.

However, the study hinted with caution to the fact that while transformational leadership is outcome-related with an individual-level focus; authentic leadership is outcome-related with a collective focus. While transformational leadership results in task performance, leader effectiveness, follower job satisfaction, and follower satisfaction with the leader, authentic leadership is associated more with organizational citizenship behaviors and organizational performance. The central focus of authentic leadership is on empowering both leaders and followers to remain aligned to their values and goals, thus leading to contagious citizenship behaviors that are directed toward supporting collective interests.

“This focus on not only one’s self-interests but also the interests of the collective may explain why AL is more strongly associated with elevated levels of group and organizational performance.” If “performance beyond expectations” is attributed to transformational leadership (Bass, 1985), then “benefits beyond performance” can be ascribed to authentic leadership.

Many see authentic leadership as rooted in positive psychology and itself a root construct for many forms of positive leadership. However, the sources, references, overlaps, and predictors of authenticity are less of a concern to practitioners who are more attentive to reaching positive personal and work outcomes for the individual, the work group, and the organization. Given its moral standing, authentic leadership is brought to the forefront to deal with the crisis of confidence in today’s systems and leaders.

**Implications**

- Authenticity in leaders can be developed rather than having it as an innate trait for a fortunate few. Seeking authenticity is possible, and is a matter of knowledge, will, and moti-
votion (Freeman and Auster, 2011). That said, the reality of contemporary life makes it easier for many to drift away from their personal values, since these become rather opaque and difficult to realize.

- Authentic leaders venture into an inward journey to digest their experiences, learning from their ascriptive, biographical, and societal life challenges to explore their values and beliefs. They are armed with strong self-awareness sought through unwavering self-exploration. Their values are formed through transformative life experiences.
- Authentic leaders do not shop for great ideas or imitate celebrity CEOs who do not walk their talk.
- Authentic leaders are constantly aware of the importance of staying grounded. They are supported by a value system that they disclose and act upon daily.
- Authentic leaders balance their desires for external validation and their focus on fulfilling intrinsic motivations. They avoid being caught up in the pressures of the social pecking order which can pull them away from their core values.
- Authentic leaders exercise relational transparency, exhibit caring associations with significant others, and empower people to lead regardless of their institutional level. They seek advice, constructive feedback, and support from teams in times of uncertainty. Their authenticity in this sense might be contagious and engaging for the group in bountiful ways.
- Authentic leadership can result in both tangible and intangible benefits, and lead not only to elevated individual performance, but also to benefits of a collective nature that stretches beyond performance.

Exercising relational transparency with followers, caring for their needs, exhibiting unwavering, sincere behaviors, and making balanced judgments are the hallmarks of moral and authentic leaders, the labor of which brings a whole set of relational and attitudinal benefits to the individuals and groups at the organization making positivity a healthy contagion and a force of change in corrupted and uncertain situations.

References


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