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**Leadership Special Issue: Do we need Authentic Leadership? Interrogating authenticity in a new world order**

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Abstract

Claimed it as the ‘root construct’ (Avolio and Gardner, 2005) for other forms of ‘aspirational’ leadership with underpinnings in positive psychology, and explicitly positioned as a response to the ‘ethical corporate meltdown’ (May et al, 2003: 247) said to have resulted from previous forms of leadership, Authentic Leadership (AL) has struggled to live up to its acknowledged functionalist and instrumentalist aims. At the same time, it has proved resistant to important philosophical challenges seeking to problematize the nature of the ‘true self’ and draw attention to the complexities of enacting authenticity in the daily practice of leadership. These ambitious claims and unaddressed issues are at the heart of this special issue’s enquiry as to whether AL is fit for purpose as a driver of leadership theory and practice in the current world order, and its call for more critical attention to be paid to the notion of authenticity in leadership. The contributions to this special issue blend traditional, empirical papers with invited ‘Leading Questions’ thought pieces to offer a fundamental interrogation of authenticity at the same time as achieving a balance of perspectives.

**Leadership Special Issue: Do we need Authentic Leadership? Interrogating authenticity in a new world order**

The development of authentic leadership (AL) was explicitly positioned as a response to a troubled world and a loss of faith in previous forms of leadership, said to have resulted in an ‘ethical corporate meltdown’ (May et al, 2003: 247). Given this intended positioning, this Special Issue poses the question:

*Is Authentic Leadership fit for purpose as a driver of leadership theory and practice in the current world order, or should we be looking elsewhere to fulfil our leadership aspirations?*

The AL construct grew out of attempts to determine what factors ‘influence ethical decision-making processes and behaviours of leaders … and why they choose to deceive their followers, shareholders and the general public?’ (May et al, 2003: 247). The close-knit coterie of largely US authors who developed the construct claimed it as the ‘root construct’ (Avolio and Gardner, 2005) for other forms of leadership with aspirational underpinnings in positive psychology – in particular, spiritual, ethical and servant leadership. The acknowledged functionalist and instrumentalist aims of authentic leadership have made it resistant to important philosophical challenges from existentialist and phenomenological (Algera and Lips-Wiersma, 2012; Lawler and Ashman, 2012), psychoanalytic (Ford and Harding, 2011; Costas and Taheri, 2012) and other traditions (Ladkin and Taylor, 2010), which problematized the nature of the construct in the face of more complex, political and contested understandings of authenticity. More recently, Antonakis (2017) drew attention to the ‘loaded’ definition of authenticity – that is, a definition that includes the outcomes it is seeking to deliver in a way that is positively and morally valenced - that stems from the ideological agenda surrounding AL, and the tautologies and circular theorizing that result. These unaddressed issues and ambitious claims are at the heart of our concerns for the value of AL as a repository for our leadership aspirations.

Also of concern is the widespread promulgation (and acceptance) of the four-component ALQ psychometric instrument (Walumbwa et al, 2008), despite concerns as to whether such a reductionist survey tool could comprehensively capture the complexities of what it means to be authentic in enacting leadership. The perceived robustness (Neider and Schriesheim, 2011; Cooper, Scandura and Schriesheim, 2005) of the construct has also suffered as a result of the retraction of a number of quantitative papers on methodological grounds. Qualitative, constructionist critiques of the AL construct, mostly from European authors, have been largely ignored by mainstream scholars, with the result that practitioner perception has continued to see authentic leadership as both unproblematic and aspirational. The result has been to arguably reduce authenticity from a potential ‘central organizing principle’ (Driscoll and Wiebe, 2007: 334) of leadership studies to a mere ‘technique’ (Algera and Lips-Wiersma, 2012: 120). Opting for ease of implementation and/or application within leadership development programmes, rather than ontological and empirical robustness, authentic leadership seems to have lost the power to meet its own normative goal of delineating a style of leadership capable of producing measurable organisational outcomes.

Against this background, the call for papers for this Special Issue highlighted the need for more critical attention to be paid to the notion of authenticity in leadership, to build momentum behind emerging scholarship on this theme. We drew attention to attempts to develop a more nuanced understanding of what it means to be authentic as a leader, grounded in rich, qualitative data, such as Kempster, Iszatt-White and Brown’s (2019) repositioning of authenticity as ‘fidelity to purpose’ and Gardiner’s (2015) Arendtian analysis of the ways in which authenticity unfolds within specific relational contexts. Nyberg and Sveningsson’s (2014) questioning of the assumption that an authentic leader’s ‘true self’ is morally good critiques whether leader authenticity leads to good outcomes either personally or organizationally, whilst Shaw (2010) critiques the invocation of narrative theory as an exploratory mechanism in the search for authenticity and the authentic self, and its tendency to replicate existing paradigms rather than discover new possibilities. Work by Nicholson and Carroll (2013) has sought to reconceive authenticity as a social virtue in order to reframe what is meant by the authentic self and the relationship of this self to others. Pertinently for this call, they go on to ask what this means for the purpose of authenticity and for its role in leadership and leadership development. Notwithstanding its American roots, this agenda for a thorough regrounding and (re)understanding of authentic leadership is now being been canvassed on both sides of the Atlantic (Iszatt-White and Kempster, 2019; Storberg-Walker and Gardiner, 2017).

In drawing together the contributions to this special issue, we sought to offer a fundamental interrogation of authenticity while, at the same time, achieving a balance of perspectives. The blending of traditional, empirical papers with invited thought pieces under the format of ‘Leading Questions’ has, we believe, enabled us to achieve this aim. The open submissions, received in response to our call for papers, utilise diverse methodological approaches and frameworks (discourse analysis; phenomenology; conversational analysis; embodied labour) and capture the rich cultural and gender diversity we were hoping to see. Encompassing both business and political leadership, the social construction of authenticity and of the ‘self in relationship’ was strongly represented, as was the fundamental critique of mainstream ideas of the self. The invited Leading Questions pieces bring additional piquancy through the added freedom of the shorter, more deliberately provocative contributions. Taken together, there is a narrative thread running through the different articles that offers an opening out of the AL terrain as well as the fundamental interrogation of authenticity we were hoping to see. In alignment with the idea of interrogating authenticity which underpinned the original call, the exposition of this narrative thread below is framed around a number of key questions.

*What is the problem with authenticity in leadership?* For us, this is a perennial question in relation to the AL construct, with past attempts to answer it struggling to gain traction in the literature and in practice. Donna Ladkin’s piece on ‘*Problematizing Authentic Leadership: How the Experience of Minoritized People Highlights the Impossibility of Leading from One’s “True Self”*’, uses the case of minoritized individuals attempting to lead authentically to highlight the barriers that anyone leading from their ‘true self’ will encounter, thus offering a new angle on this perennial issue. She uses notions of ‘double consciousness’ and ‘intersectionality’ to problematize the issue of which ‘self’ should be foregrounded and how their social/contextual location shapes who turns up as ‘leader’.

*So how might those actually leading make sense of authenticity?* This is a natural rejoinder to the previous question, and one which Kim Bradley-Cole and Richard Cronin ably address in their article ‘*The Good and not the Bad or Ugly: Phenomenologically exploring how leaders themselves recognise and explain authenticity in other leaders*’ In it, they move away from the notion of being true to the self as the basis of authenticity through two personal, constructivist studies exploring what constructs leaders associate with the AL label when applied to others. Whilst identifying variations between their case study data and existing discursive conceptualizations of authentic leadership, they make the case that, for all its flaws, AL is worthy of retention as a distinct leadership theory.

*Then should we look for authenticity in interaction rather than the self?* Magnus Larsson, Jonathan Clifton and Stephanie Schnurr, in their article entitled ‘*The fallacy of discrete authentic leader behaviours: Locating authentic leadership in interaction*’, suggest that we should indeed look for authenticity in interaction. They employ conversation analysis to explore the nature of the empirical phenomenon that is called AL, and where this can be ontologically located. They conclude that AL is best understood as a collective and collaborative achievement. Authentic leadership behaviours can neither be attributed simply to the leader, nor can the leader’s actions alone be said to lead to follower outcomes.

*Which leads us to consider how contextual issues reframe interactional and essentialist notions of authenticity?* If the framing of authenticity is interactions, then it can also be said to be contextual. Andrea Whittle’s discourse analytic article - ‘*What happened to the authentic man?’: Towards an ambiguity-centred perspective on authentic leadership*’ – uses a case study of Jeremy Corbyn to offer insight into media notions of authenticity in politics, and how context can shape notions of authenticity such that authenticity itself can be seen as problematic. Through a five-year retrospective analysis of how Corbyn has been portrayed in the British Press, Whittle delineates the ambivalent nature of authenticity discourse in political leadership and identifies three competing discourses: authenticity as a political asset, political inauthenticity, and political authenticity as a leadership problem.

*We must next ask whether the individual components within authentic leadership are problematic?* The problematization of authenticity from a contextual perspective is echoed by Marian Iszatt-White, Valerie Stead and Carole Elliott’s article – *‘Impossible or just irrelevant? Unravelling the ‘authentic leadership’ paradox through the lens of emotional labour’* – in their critique of one of the core components of the AL construct. Using emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) as a lens through which to view relational transparency, they suggest the existence of a fundamental paradox arising from leaders’ apparent ability to feel authentic even as they manage their emotions as a routine tool of accomplishing their leadership role. Through highlighting this disconnect, they raise profound questions concerning authenticity as a phenomenon, how it is discursively constructed and its relationship to inauthenticity. A socially constructed understanding of authenticity in leadership, they conclude, must perforce have inauthenticity at its heart.

*Should we simply separate authenticity from leadership?* This deliberately provocative question brings us back to a key concern of our call, namely whether authenticity is a suitable home for our leadership aspirations. Mats Alvesson and Katya Einola, in their piece entitled ‘*The perils of authentic leadership theory’*, strongly embrace this potential divorce when they argue that AL is perilous as well as wrong - because it undermines academic work, delegitimizes university institutions, and causes identity issues for over-eager organizational leaders. Their provocative conclusion is that we should keep leadership and authenticity separate as both interests and themes of study.

*So where do we go from here in search of a deeper wisdom of the self?* In addressing this question, our final piece, brings us full circle, and from the provocative to the evocative. Chellie Spiller’s ‘*I AM: Indigenous consciousness for authenticity and leadership*’ draws on the ancient, indigenous thread of ‘I AM” consciousness to take the inquiry into authenticity in leadership in a new (old) direction and to move from the measurable self to the immeasurable expansiveness and mystery of our own becoming. Embracing beautiful prose and haunting free-form poetry from indigenous Māori, African and Irish traditions, Chellie offers us different ways of knowing the self as a route to reframing our notions of what it means to be authentic in leadership and elsewhere. An uplifting and hopeful end, we felt, to our journey of authentic discovery.

We are delighted to share these rich and varied contributions as a valuable response to our call for more critical attention to be paid to the notion of authenticity in leadership and the AL construct in particular. Inevitably, there were issues we would have liked to have seen addressed which were not. More discussion of the philosophical underpinnings of authenticity and the conflation of authenticity with morality/ethics are two such issues. We are also aware of the Euro-centric slant to our final selection of contributors and the prevalence of a relatively small body of source literature as the starting point for the arguments presented. No doubt there are other ‘weaknesses’ that we could mention or that readers will perceive, but these should not be allowed to detract from the undoubted power of the articles in this Special Issue to shed critical light on the shortcomings of the AL construct and to open up potential for a more broad-based understanding of authenticity in leadership.

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