Authentic Leadership: The Challenge of Becoming

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Abstract

Authentic leadership is crucial for organizational success, yet many leaders struggle to be authentic. This study explored the challenges to authentic leadership through the lens of Biblical examples and leadership theories. Its purpose was to understand these barriers and provide recommendations for developing authentic leaders. The analysis was informed by two key frameworks: authentic leadership theory and LMX theory. A qualitative document analysis methodology was employed to examine the biblical story of Peter's leadership in Galatians. The findings revealed that Peter, despite his good intentions, faced significant challenges in acting according to his values under social pressure. This highlights the common temptation leaders face to conform rather than act authentically. The study identified self-awareness, integrity, and moral courage as essential qualities for authentic leadership. To equip leaders to stay true to their values, training programs should focus on building self-knowledge, fostering integrity, and developing resilience. Authentic leadership, when modeled through integrity, inspires trust and organizational commitment. Based on these findings, the study recommends two key strategies: coaching to enhance self-awareness and scenario planning to practice values-based decision-making in challenging situations.

Keywords: *Authentic Leadership, Challenge of Becoming*

1.0 Introduction

Leadership according to Mundahl (2013) is more about the path we take in guiding ourselves than it is about leading other people. When it comes to authentic leadership, Sonya Parker quotes, '*Live your life for you, not for anyone else. Don't let the fear of being judged, rejected, or disliked stop you from being yourself*.' This is probably easier said than done, with the constant need for affirmation and recognition in society today, coupled with the pressure to perform. According to Mundahl (2013), when one begins to live a profoundly real life, leadership comes to them rather than the other way around, as the leadership is evident to others, and the path one creates will serve as a light for others. Kouzes and Posner (2015), assert that credibility is the cornerstone of leadership after more than three decades of study into the intricacies of the interaction between leaders and followers. Consequently, if followers are not confident in their leaders, they will not follow them voluntarily. According to Calderon-Mafud and Pando-Moreno (2018), authentic leadership is regarded as a calling to serve and be of service to others while taking advantage of one's powerful position. They contend that an authentic leader is someone who is extremely conscious of their beliefs and values, as well as their personality and how they are perceived by others. This paper discusses the authentic leadership construct, its meaning, and applications with a focus on the example of Peter and his struggle with authenticity as a leader and his confrontation with Paul as recorded in the Book of Galatians.

1.1 Authentic Leadership Defined

Authentic leadership is a style of conduct that draws from and supports both good emotional abilities and a healthy ethical environment. This is done to assist individuals in becoming more self-aware, internalizing morality, processing information in a balanced manner, and being more truthful with one another (Walumbwa et al. 2008). Authentic leadership in organizations is described by Luthans and Avolio (2003; as cited in Kleynhans et al., 2021): *as a process that builds on both positive psychological capabilities and a fully advanced organizational environment, resulting in increased self-awareness and self-regulated supportive actions on the part of leaders and followers, thereby cultivating positive self-development* (p. 243). There are four components that make up authentic leadership, and they are the relational transparency of the leader, an individual's moral stance, balanced processing, and leaders' self-awareness (Gardner et al., 2005; as cited in Kleynhans et al., 2021). Walumbwa et al. (2008) first defined five dimensions that comprise self-awareness, relational transparency, cognitive flexibility, self-control, and a high moral compass, all components of authentic leadership. Authenticity has been defined as the ownership of one's individual experiences, whether they be ideas, feelings, essentials, wants, inclinations, or convictions, procedures depicted by the majority of writers as a person becoming acquainted with him or herself (Harter, 2002). It is about being real.

Authentic leaders according to Avolio et al. (2004:4; as cited in Fusco et al., 2015), are those who are conscious of their own values, moral perspective, competence, and abilities and are viewed by others as having awareness about who they are and what they think. According to Angana (2021), maintaining actual authenticity and trustworthiness appears to be a difficult undertaking for many leaders, let alone those who lead organizations. This is due to the constant selfless actions required to uphold the credibility of a leader's character, skill, and calmness (Klenke, 2007; as cited in Angana, 2021). According to Kouzes and Posner (2005), credibility is the cornerstone upon which

leaders and followers can establish ambitious goals for the future; without it, expectations will perish and connections will disintegrate (p.16). Selfish leaders with only self-interest in mind will not have people willingly follow them. People are drawn to leaders who put the needs of others before their own (Kouzes & Posner, 2005). Kouzes and Posner (2005) opine that if one cannot lead by example, one should not lead at all. As such, true leaders put their words into action and do not expect people to carry responsibilities that they would not take on themselves; Credible leaders adhere to the same standards and high expectations they demand of their followers (p.135).

1.2 Peter's Struggles with Authenticity as a Leader

Apostle Paul begins writing the book of Galatians with a synopsis of his journey into his calling as an Apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ. He presents himself as an authentic leader, leaving nothing to chance while stressing that what he was stating was true before God and not a lie (Chapter 1:20; NIV). He also speaks of known being known by the Judean church except by the fact that he formerly persecuted believers and was now preaching the faith that he had once tried to destroy. Apostle Paul was strong, fully committed to Christ, and believed in preaching the true gospel (v.9). It is against this backdrop, that Apostle Paul in Chapter 2 of Galatians, encounters Peter in his struggle with authenticity as a leader and confronts him, as he did not know any other way, apart from fully living the true life in Christ. Of note is that Peter had walked with Jesus as one of the twelve disciples, encountered Him while on earth, and seen miracles that Jesus did, prayed with Him, as well as saw practically how to live like Christ, from the Lord Jesus Himself, yet he still struggled with authenticity. Apostle Paul encounters Christ much later on the road to Damascus while on his journey to persecute believers (Acts 9:3-6; NIV), and was converted, yet Peter as a mature believer who had sat under Jesus' teachings and experienced His miraculous power, was still struggling with authenticity, this not being the first record, as earlier while Christ begun the crucifixion journey in Matthew 25, Peter had denied Jesus three times (Matthew 26:69-75; NIV).

Apostle Paul confronts Peter in Galatians 2:11-14 (NIV) due to his hypocrisy and the fear of being judged. He openly rebuked him for not acting in line with the truth of the gospel as he would eat with the Gentiles when other believers were not watching, and pretend not to know them in the presence of the believers. Apostle Paul abhorred this behavior, reminding Peter that justification was not by works of the law but by faith in Christ Jesus. This account brings out certain noteworthy aspects with regard to authentic leadership. Firstly, how one presents themselves as a leader determines the follower's perception of them. According to Kouzes and Posner (2015), credibility stems from establishing a reputation as someone who can be relied on and who speaks and acts with integrity. Avolio and Walumbwa (2013) state that genuine leaders are seen as being honest and truthful in their interactions with followers and exhibiting high degrees of consistency between their words and actions. If a leader is authentic, their followers can expect them to be open and honest about who they are and what they stand for, and for them to be reliable and consistent in carrying out their commitment (Avolio & Walumbwa, 2013). In other words, authentic leaders have integrity, they do not preach water and drink wine, and they can be relied upon to keep their word.

Secondly, the aspect of trust in authentic leadership comes out. Apostle Paul highlights that he had been entrusted with the gospel, that the need to preach only the truth (Galatians 2:7; NIV). There is a strong correlation between trust in the leader and the effectiveness of organizational transformation projects (Søresen & Hasle, 2009; as cited in Kleynhans et al., 2021). This is

particularly true in situations in which there is a lot of ambiguity about the future of the business. Notably, leaders' self-perceived authentic leadership is less likely to contribute to beneficial outcomes than leaders' clearly shown authentic behavior to others (Laguna et al., 2019). Thirdly, authentic leaders not only motivate people who surround them but also give them the confidence to take charge (George & Sims, 2007). According to George and Sims (2007), genuine leadership is defined as "bringing people together around a common objective and empowering them to take charge and lead authentically in order to generate value for all stakeholders." This is clearly demonstrated by Apostle Paul as an authentic leader, who takes Titus and Barnabas along on his journey (Galatians 2:1; NIV).

Authentic leaders are characterized by high levels of self-esteem and a strong feeling of worth, making them less likely to succumb to peer pressure and subsequently more likely to achieve successful results in the workplace (Kinsler, 2014; as cited in Winston, 2021;5). Winston (2021) adds that real leaders have a beneficial effect on followers by instilling hope, trust, and optimism, all of which are related to the positive welfare of followers. Apostle Paul demonstrates these qualities of an authentic leader, but is it always possible to be authentic at all times? Peter struggles with authenticity in this instance in Galatians 2 as he was afraid of being judged wrongly, he was more concerned about what others thought of him and not really what was right to do. Avolio et al. (2004) contend that authentic leaders affect their followers' behaviors and attitudes by instilling a feeling of personal and social identity, modeling behaviors, and establishing high moral ideals and norms.

1.3 Authentic Leadership Theory

Authentic leadership theory is built on the foundation of a leader's self-awareness as a key component. The core principle of authentic leadership theory is that authenticity, which is exemplified by one's capacity to stay loyal to one's principles and beliefs, should be highly respected and emulated by followers so that followers would connect with and trust authentic leaders more (George & Sims, 2007; Avolio & Walumbwa, 2006; Avolio et al., 2004; Gardner et al., 2005a). Leader self-awareness (LSA) is part of the four main tenets of the theory of authentic leadership (Gardner et al., 2005), which defines self-awareness as the capacity to identify one's own processes of significance and the ways in which these processes shape one's perception of oneself and the world (Wernsing, 2018). Self-awareness also involves demonstrating knowledge of one's own merits and flaws, as well as the complex nature of the self, and includes learning about oneself through interaction with others and being aware of one's own influence on others around them (Walumbwa et al., 2008: 95; as cited in Wernsing, 2018). The awareness of one's own understanding, skills, experiences, standards, thoughts, feelings, and motivations is known as self-awareness (Gardner et al. 2005; Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Wernsing (2018) contends that paying to one's internal states as well as being sensitive to one's surroundings and their reciprocal effect is necessary to become more aware of each element of the self, and how it affects others and is influenced by others.

Authentic leaders, in accordance with authentic leadership theory, can promote innovation by inspiring their people to take risks and use their imaginations (Avolio et al., 2004; as cited in Laguna et al., 2019). Therefore, Laguna et al. (2019) opine that such leaders build personal capital in their employees, who then may be more willing to put their ideas to use and find different pathways for solving problems. Leaders who are self-aware understand and know their limits and

are able to build their followers without feeling threatened by their success. Authentic leadership theory accentuates who the leader is or should be rather than what the leader does; the emphasis here is on the self rather than one's function (Einola & Alvesson, 2021). According to Zhang et al. (2012), the modern idea of authentic leadership transcends conventional leadership theories that attribute leadership to particular agents in interpersonal relationships. Another theory that is closely related to authentic leadership is the Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory, which states that leaders who can have strong LMX interactions also have a higher likely to foster innovation in their teams (Winston, 2021). Likewise, a feeling of psychological safety and people thriving are similarly linked to authentic leadership and high levels of LMX interactions. These elements also support personal creativity (Xu et al., 2017; as cited in Winston, 2021).

1.4 The Struggle with Authenticity

According to Kinsler (2014; as cited in Winston, 2021), authentic leaders possess the following characteristics: they are self-aware and know their own strengths and weaknesses and can make decisions based on facts; they can communicate openly with others and act in accordance with their own morals and principles; they can control their impulses and keep themselves in check; they have high ethical standards and a genuine concern for the well-being of those around them. In a society full of scandals, corruption, contradictory demands, and a declining economy is it possible to live an authentic life and be an authentic leader, or is it, as in the case of Peter, a constant struggle to be authentic, to attain the mark, or to exceed the expectations? Managers and others who are very eager to follow the suggested formula may suffer negative effects from being "too authentic," or their narcissistic inclinations may be strengthened by an unrelenting emphasis on "self," according to Einola and Alvesson (2021). According to Zhang et al. (2012), leaders may behave in ways that are inconsistent with their original beliefs but seem genuine in the given situation. Inauthenticity in social interactions can result from a lack of self- and relational authenticity consistency. Furthermore, according to Gardiner (2011), a society that fails to acknowledge the various ways that socioeconomic disparity affects people's lives lacks transparency and honesty. Authentic leaders continue to evolve, grow, and mature over the course of their lives (Eriksen, 2009; as cited in Newcomb, 2021). According to Newcomb (2021), numerous life events have an impact on a person's behavior in both their individual and professional lives. These events in a person's life help form their worldview and give rise to a narrative process through which the person gains insight into who they are and how they develop, adapt, or otherwise transform in relation to their personal and career identities (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; as cited in Newcomb, 2021). Gardner et al. (2005) claim that authentic leaders can produce this leadership transformational impact because they exhibit trust-building behaviors and make it simple and confident for followers to deduce authenticity from their activities. As such, followers invest less time and effort in attempting to predict the upcoming steps of leaders who are authentic to themselves because they are consistent.

1.5 Conclusion

In conclusion, authentic leadership is critical for organizational success, yet leaders often struggle to act authentically, as exemplified by Peter in the Bible. Several key barriers hinder authentic leadership. First, leaders face social pressure and the temptation to conform rather than act according to their values, as Peter did when he altered his behavior to avoid judgment. Second, self-awareness is critical, yet leaders often lack insight into their own motives, strengths,

weaknesses, and impact on others. Peter's struggles may indicate a lack of self-awareness that hindered his consistent action. Developing authentic leadership requires cultivating self-knowledge, integrity, and moral courage. Self-awareness allows leaders to align their actions with their internal values and understand their impact on followers. Integrity means adhering to moral principles despite pressure, building trust. Moral courage empowers leaders to speak and act according to their values, even with personal risk. Training programs should focus on fostering these qualities through self-reflection, coaching, and scenario planning. When leaders model integrity and stay true to ethical values, they inspire similar behavior in followers. Authentic modeling establishes higher standards and commitment to shared values, leading to credibility, trust in the leader, and belief in the mission. Conversely, perceived hypocrisy undermines morale and organizational culture. Authentic leadership, grounded in strong values, brings out the best in people. Despite the challenges, striving for self-awareness and consistency with internal moral standards is essential for ethical and effective leadership.

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