

Authentic Leadership in Drastic Times

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Abstract: This case study focused on leadership in drastic times is addressed to stakeholders in the Middle East and North African area. Challenging times, unique stressors, and radical change may be seen as calling for a renewed focus on authentic leadership. This case study questions whether leadership is perceived as authentic and whether leaders perceive themselves as authentic. As a practitioner researcher, I find that exploring the role of authentic leader in business management is relevant in post modernity worldwide; however, conducting research on authentic leadership is especially vital given the dynamic and negative downward spiral of economic, demographic, geographic, and political factors in the Middle East and North Africa region across the past decade. As a research study, the aim of this paper is twofold: (1) whether followers perceive their leader as authentic; (2) whether leaders perceive themselves as authentic. 90 participants, as members in business units composed of 15, were assigned a business project across ten weeks. The project required that all members participate in collaborative and individualistic time-defined tasks. Data was gathered using a brief survey and short interview once the project was submitted. It was found that followers perceive their leaders as authentic in the Middle East and North African Region (MENA). Moreover, it was found that leaders “know themselves” and act in accordance with their inner thoughts. These findings may be related to the social and economic culture of the surrounding nations and as such the topic of authentic leadership requires further research.

Key words: radical change; self awareness; relational transparency; positive psychological capacities; authenticity; Middle East and North Africa culture

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1. Introduction

Contemporary business leadership is being re-scripted, and the play-write and choreographer are lead actors who seemingly follow their own creed in the Middle East and North African Area. Creative business leaders are thinking out-side the box, redesigning leadership, followership, and the work environment.

This case study questions whether business leadership is perceived of as authentic and whether leaders perceive themselves as authentic where the authentic self is seen as “existing wholly by the laws of its own being” (Erikson, 1995, p. 124). Authentic leaders are deeply aware of how they think and behave and are perceived by others as being aware of their own and others values/moral perspective, knowledge and strengths; aware of the context in which they operate; and who are confident, hopeful, optimistic, resilient, and of high moral character

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(Avolio, Luthans, & Walumbwa, 2004).

2. Literature Review

Research shows that business leaders actively present selves, deftly changing their persona — their mask (Goffman, 1959) — within communities of stakeholders. Switching from one self to another, business leaders adopt new semantics, modes of oral and nonverbal communication to influence and persuade. However, research also shows that inside the business organization, there is a genre of leadership that embraces authenticity where “authentic power is service”, where “It is not so much about speaking, but rather speaking with the whole of our lives” (Pope Francis, in Lowney, 2013, pp. 1, 41) twenty-four hours a day/seven days a week, in order to efficiently and effectively lead followers towards achieving superior organizational goals, customer service, and enduring value for shareholders in a mobile marketplace.

This related construct of authentic leadership in business organizations may be seen as a process drawing from positive psychological capacities and a highly developed organizational context (Luthans & Avolio, 2003, p. 243) where the net result is greater self-awareness, self-regulated positive behavior of leader and follower, positive self-development, and a self-based model of authentic leader and follower development.

Contemporary research shows that inside the business workplace, technologically savvy business leaders tend to understand that leadership is not a popularity contest but having the courage of your conviction (Ahuja, 2007, p. 49; Fawcett, 2007, p. 83). Great leaders create organizational environments — a cultural engine, an organizational culture or a “sweet spot” — that unlock potential and lift the human spirit to defy corruption (Edmonds, 2014; Stallard, Dewing-Hmmes, & Pankau, 2006; Covey, 2004, p. 279).

Current research on leadership reflects different genres of business leaders (Yukl & Mahsud, 2010). Studies posit that leadership is not some fixed prior ability that determines how business leaders perform in life but rather it is the level of their personal engagement (Sternberg, 2005). Unique DNA structure and personal context nurture and develop leaders because “genes” require input from the environment to evolve (Gee, 2013; Gottlieb, 1995; Deci & Ryan, 1995; Binet, 1975). Problem solving and research development, among other business related dialectic inquiries, engage both the leader and follower in collaborative dialogue that builds and nurtures each through creative and critical thinking. Studies show that leaders introduce new concepts and practices into the business management work-place, motivating followers to approach jobs and organizations differently: to do “old things in new ways and new things in new ways” (Prensky, 2012, p. 1) not only because technology has been integrated into the work place but also because leaders have developed a genre of thinking — a growth mind set (Dweck, 2006) that enables leaders and/or followers to learn and develop inside the work context.

Present day research posits that when business leaders introduce change, especially radically different tools or procedures, they tend to face resistance: human potential is immense but the inherent risks in making sweeping task-related decisions tend to create unease because many avoid uncertainty (Sharman, 2007; Minkov & Hofstede, 2011; Hofstede, 2001). Research holds that culture has soft-wired us to accept mediocrity and human stupidity (Gee, 2013; Covey, Link, & Merrill, 2012).

None the less, studies also show that inside the workplace, many business leaders have integrated digital literacy into their toolkit of leadership (Wheelan & Hunger, 2015) and personally designed technology architecture aware of the mismatch of linear processes and control of the modern model of management to the logic of participatory media. As a result, the integrated technology encourages horizontal collaboration and

dialogue travelling across the hierarchy, short circuiting established power dynamics and traditional lines of communication so that the net outcome is an agile responsive organization, capitalizing on social media's transformational power to sustain the organization in the marketplace through work-force dynamics.

Even though the technologically-linked architecture ensures the flow of knowledge and skills, without trustworthiness in the workplace, communication is bounded. Trust in leadership is vital for employee performance. Oxford English Dictionary defines trust as confidence in or reliance on some quality or attribute of a person or thing, or the truth of a statement. Researchers hold that the willingness to be vulnerable or the willingness to rely on another that is based on the characteristics of the other person is central to an understanding of trust (Schoorman, Mayer, & Davis, 2007, p. 347; Doney, Cannon, & Mullen, 1998; Rousseau et al., 1998). Therefore, perceiving trustworthiness in business leaders can be understood as an important element in personal engagement, building relationships, and in the knowledge exchange process. Leadership theory links trustworthiness to authenticity (Gardner, Avolio, & Walumbwa, 2005; Avolio, Luthans, & Walumbwa, 2004).

Authentic leadership may be seen as the highest end of leadership (Avolio, 2005, p. 194). Though authentic leaders have been described as being their own person (George, 2003, p. 12), the literature review shows that there is no universally accepted definition of the authentic leadership (Turner & Mavin, 2007). An operational definition of authentic leadership posits it as a pattern of leader behavior that draws on and promotes positive psychological capacities and a positive ethical climate to foster greater self-awareness, an internalized moral perspective, balanced processing of information, and relational transparency within the leader and follower (Walumbwa et al., 2008, p. 94).

One of the fundamental components of the authentic leadership construct is self-awareness. Researchers agree that self-awareness is the starting point of authentic leadership (Gardner et al., 2005) because it means that leaders know what is important to them (May et al., 2003). Whether it is values, identity, emotions, or goals, leaders gradually become more aware of what motivates them. Authenticity is a developmental process: as a leader grows in self-awareness in the business environment, leaders actually grow to better understand their values and how these values shape work. Their values constitute a leader's true self and are more static than dynamic (Sparrowe, 2005; Deci & Ryan, 1995).

Studies have shown that leaders, who are authentic leaders, are self-aware fully functioning because they live their own creed. They live based on who they are not who others want them to be, and they own their thoughts, emotions, needs, wants, preferences, beliefs, and processes that are part of their work life. Conceptualizations of authentic leadership show that it is a multi-dimensional construct which involves traits, behaviors, contexts, and attributions (Cooper, Scandura, & Schriesheim, 2005). Leaders' self-awareness helps each day in making work-related decisions that are balanced. Other research holds that authentic leaders are self-confident in their work context and life context. They are at home in their social context because, aware of their personal weaknesses and strengths, they have fashioned how they behave as business people (Harter, 2002, p. 382; Erickson, 1995, p. 124).

3. Case Study

This section covers the purpose of the study, the research questions, the participants, the procedures used in the study, the research design, and the analysis of data gathered.

3.1 Purpose

This case study focuses on whether business leadership is true to itself in the Middle East and North African Area (MENA). The study sets up to evaluate perceptions of business leaders in the workplace within the organizational context.

3.2 Research Questions

As a research study, the aim of this paper is twofold:

- Research Question One: In the work context, do followers perceive their leader as authentic?
- Research Question Two: In the work context, do business unit leaders perceive themselves as authentic?

3.3 Participants

The sample is composed of 90 participants: 18 are female and 72 are male. The participants are adults and work mainly in local companies.

3.4 Procedure

The participants were assigned a ten-week project by the division-leader. The division leader acted as the project-administrator. The 90 participants were divided into six business-units with 15 participants in each unit. The six business-units were to operate autonomously. Headed by a unit-leader, the participants were to work collaboratively inside the six business-unit and develop five activities online across the ten-weeks.

- Before the project began, at the beginning of week one, the participants met with the division-leader. After formally introducing herself, the division leader welcomed the 90 participants to the project. She called on them to contact her for any help they might need. Then, she divided the 90 participants into six business-units composed of 15 participants, one of whom was the business-unit-leader. The division-leader then went on to explain what the project was about and the nature of the work procedures in the five activities. Moreover, the division leader informed the participants that open-communication was encouraged and required between the participants and between the participants and the business-unit-leader at least twice with respect to each activity. The business-unit-leaders were to interact with the unit participants virtually through WhatsApp or face-to-face.

- Every two weeks, the business-unit-leader would initiate communication in the unit concerning the activity being conducted on WhatsApp.

- Within those two weeks, the business-unit-leader would engage in discourse with the participants in the unit concerning the activity through WhatsApp or face-to-face.

- Within those two weeks, participants, who belonged to different business-units, would engage in discourse themselves and with the leader concerning the activity through WhatsApp or face-to-face.

- Every two weeks, the division-leader would conclude the discussion on the activity and submit the completed activity online to the division-leader.

- At the end of the tenth week, the six division leaders submitted the project to the division-leader online.
- During the tenth week, the participants were to fill out the survey
- During the eleventh week, the participants were to be interviewed.

3.5 The Research Design and Analysis of Data

The research was conducted as an exploratory case study. The case study included qualitative and quantitative research methods that enabled reporting of descriptive data on perception of the business leader's authenticity. A survey and interviews were used to gather data on the one area that was probed.

3.6 Discussion

The results show that leadership authenticity, which as used in this case study refers to having and living

personal experiences, be they thoughts, emotions, needs or wants, was perceived of utmost importance by the participants.

With respect to Research Question One, which asks whether in the work-context followers perceive their leader as authentic, the results show that the participants found their leader to be an authentic leader. Using the 5 point Likert scale, the majority of the participants held their leader to be authentic (33% found the leader proactively authentic while 65% found the leader authentic. 2% found leader neither consistently authentic nor unauthentic). Results drawn from the survey and brief interviews (see Method above) show that even though the participants perceived their unit leader as authentic, the strength of their perception of authenticity was gauged by how their business unit leader reflected authenticity amongst the business unit in terms of leadership personality and leadership behavior as was shown in other research conducted in the United States (Gardner et al., 2005).

The business unit participants, 84 millennials, were socialized, live, and work in a region that is politically fragile and socio-economically unstable, yet the participants perceived their business unit leader as serving them while concomitantly being true to themselves — having and living personal experiences fully, such as thoughts, emotions, needs, or wants in the work context or elsewhere. For many participants in the six business units, their perception of authenticity was directly related to how the leaders fulfilled the organizational role. Some of the participants spoke about how the leader “broke ice” the first time in the meeting hall where all convened and found common ground to establish the formal tone of work performance, an important starting point in building virtual work relationships as has been noted by other researchers (De Sole, 2007; DeRosa et al, 2004). Many participants said, “The leader/She is educated; knows what kind of help I need.” Others remarked, “The leader/He helps me with technical skills.” Some stated, “Our team leader trained me to do it right.” It seems that when the participants needed to overcome performance problems, develop skills, and/or increase productivity, they perceived that the business unit leader was available as a coach/mentor. The leaders’ accessibility as an experienced professional has been found to be an important indicator of authenticity (Scandura & Williams, 2004; Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Moreover, the results show that the participants immediately perceived their business unit leaders acting as co-creators, sharing thoughts to arrive at efficient/effective managerial solutions. One participant remarked “S/he asks me questions” and “S/he discusses task-related problems to find an optimal solution.” Other participants repetitively stated, “My team leader is objective: she sticks to facts,” while another said, “S/he is educated and looks at things differently.” The results show that problem-solving and decision-making engaged both the business unit leader and followers in collaborative self-organized dialogue using the technologically linked architecture. In addition, the results show that the iterative-thinking enriched the leader and the followers’ work practice since it repeatedly and progressively improved each successive inquiry in order to build better workplace-practice and co-creation for knowledge-building. As other researchers have found, networking with others to study relevant information and make balanced decisions seems to have been perceived as authentic leadership practice (Walumbwa et al., 2008; Yukl, 2002).

Furthermore, based on the results, the six business unit leaders were seen as authentic because they also worked to improve commitment to build a positive working culture (Avolio, 2005). One of the participants said, “The leader knew my name.” This remark shows that even though relatively pressed for time within a 10 week time interval, the leader made the point to remember each participant’s inside the unit and relate to them on a one-to-one basis. Another remarked, “The leader is easy going, sort of friendly,” while others said, “He forgave me when I messed up.” Another participant stated, “She makes me feel safe even when I am running short on time

because she listens to what I am saying....She takes her time.” These remarks again seem to reflect that the leader reached out to serve in a multitude of ways by engaging in active listening and addressing the emotion and problem behind what the participants shared in order to find meaningful solutions as was noted by other researchers (Greenberg, 2010; Sparrow, 2005; George, 2003).

Moreover, the results show that the business unit leaders were seen as authentic because they reflected integrity and trusted the business unit. A few of the participants said they became “communicative” and “productive” because their business unit leaders “worked hard” to develop a positive constructive work culture. Many participants noted, “I have faith in him.” Some said, “He is honest. He delivers his promise.” Others said “Yeah, She is authentic because I trust her.” The results show that the six business unit leaders built trusting relationships as was seen by other studies (Sharkie, 2009; Dirkis & Ferrin, 2002) though in this case study the levels of integrity were differentiated.

With respect to Research Question Two which asked whether in the work context business unit leaders perceived themselves as authentic, the results drawn from the survey and interviews show that the six participants perceived themselves as authentic: two classified themselves as authentic leaders all the time while four classified themselves as authentic leaders most of the times.

The business-unit-leaders who classified themselves as *authentic leaders all the time* made the following claims:

- “I know who I am and my values guide me at work”,
- “I work really hard to reach my goals and the unit’s”,
- “I work with my team”; ‘I work for my team”,
- “I encourage my team all the time”.

On the other hand, the other business-unit-leaders classified themselves as *authentic leaders most of the time* made different claims:

- “I know myself”,
- “I know my values”,
- “I value my team”,
- “I do my best to help the team understand what they are supposed to do”,
- “I do my best to motivate them based on what they’ve done”,
- “Sometimes I work with the team to reach our goals”.

The quotes show that the business leaders’ “preferences, beliefs, and processes that captured them and implied that they behave in their own nature expressing themselves in ways consistent with inner thoughts and feelings” (Avolio & Gardner, 2005, p. 317) proved their authenticity.

The case study results show that the six leaders practiced the Greek motto, to thine own self be true in their everyday work behavior. Research studies state that self-awareness is the starting point of authentic leadership (Gardner et. al, 2005). The leaders’ self-awareness and self-direction meant that the six business unit leaders knew what was important to them and with that in mind, they adopted a growth mind-set, positively influencing and guiding across ten weeks using a popular social medium, whatsapp, as the technologically-linked architecture to ensure that 15 members completed five activities at set deadlines to submit the project to the division leader.

However, the case study results noted above also show that the six leaders were in the mode of “service”, some more than others in their behavior and personality. The results, in general, showed self-confident leaders, those who consistently maintained their own values and those who constructively worked to positively develop

those around them by taking small meaningful steps with them, co creatively (see examples noted earlier). The leaders helped their followers cope with the assigned tasks and be resilient, as one affirmed “to bounce back” even when the followers had made mistakes and were uncertain. One leader said “I dirtied myself” because he abided by what he believed needed to be done and worked side-by-side with “manual labor”. The participants said leaders were legitimized and became authentic “by doing what they say they will do”. Moreover, the results show that the business leaders used “their voice wisely to serve others, building on the leader’s legitimacy with followers who valued their leader” (Ilies, Morgenson, & Nahrgang, 2005; Gardner, Avolio, & Walumbwa, 2005, p. 389).

From the discussion above, the results showed that the followers perceived the business unit leaders as authentic because each business leader existed wholly by the laws of ones’ being (Erickson, 1995, p. 124) and by the creed of service. Comfortable in the MENA social context using relational transparency across the ten-week period, the leaders formed productive business units. The meaning the six leaders assigned themselves may have been influenced by how the followers appraised them.

4. Conclusion

The results of this exploratory case study on a genre of leadership where “authentic power is service” (Pope Francis in Lowney, 2013, p. 41), showed that in the Middle East and North African Area perceptions of authenticity are seen as the highest end of leadership. Authenticity was perceived by followers because of their business leaders’ ability, integrity and firm commitment to service irrespective of organizational resources and context whereas authenticity was perceived by the leaders themselves because of their self-awareness, self-direction, co-creativity, and service mindset.

4.1 Limitations

A number of limitations were met in this case study. The first limitation met was that the sample was relatively small. The second limitation faced was that the time period was too short to measure a leader’s authenticity which is “the positive psychological capacities and a highly developed organizational context to foster greater self-awareness and self-regulated positive behavior” (Gardner, Avolio, & Walumbwa, 2005, pp. xxii). Another limitation faced in the study was lability. Each participant’s perception on the business unit leader’s authenticity was measured in two instances: the survey and the interview. These measurements do not allow for the manifestation of lability which means that it is probable that states of perceived authenticity will vary with time. The limitations found in the research conducted may also have stemmed from the sample since it was convenience and limited because of similar nationality, field of specialization, and uneven gender distribution (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006).

4.2 Recommendation

The strong relationship found between leadership and perceived authenticity is an outcome that ought to be further studied especially in the MENA where the external environment is unstable and the participants are millennial, generally perceived as self-serving 24/7. These findings may be related to the social and economic culture of the surrounding nations and, as such, requires additional research. Such behavior is noteworthy in the MENA and may be related to the social and economic culture of the surrounding nations. As such the topic of authentic leadership requires further research especially for potential stakeholders intending to invest in the region.

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