

Successful Leaders: Are they authentic or do they adopt personae?

**Research Summary
& Key Findings**

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Contents

	<i>Page</i>
1. Abstract	2
2. Introduction	2
3. Literature review	2
4. Statement of research question	4
5. Method	4
6. Findings	5
7. Discussion and conclusion	6

1. Abstract

Authentic leadership is currently being advocated by some academics and practitioners as generating greater success and well-being for organisations, leaders and followers than other approaches to leadership. Through qualitative interviews this research seeks to determine whether middle managers in organisations are able to lead authentically or whether they are required to lead through a persona designed to demonstrate the behaviour required by their company and the impact these approaches have on the success and well-being of the leader. The results suggest that authenticity is a complex leadership construct that differs in its nature across managers. Authenticity is experienced when leaders are able to demonstrate their preferred approach to leadership and/or regulate their behaviour by their own preferred means. Authenticity does appear to lead to greater success and well-being but only when it is aligned to the needs of the organisation.

2. Introduction

Researchers have created a great deal of valuable knowledge on leader traits and behaviours, follower characteristics, leader-follower relationships, and situational contingencies as well as other related topics. Whilst this knowledge is valuable for researchers, it is being argued that its translation into guidance for practitioners often leads managers to create personae at work as they adopt the new leadership behaviours and potentially leads to managers losing touch with their real selves. There is a growing interest from both researchers and practitioners in a new construct called 'authentic leadership' that advocates that leaders need to be in touch with their real selves in order to be successful. The creators of this construct contend that there is currently an ethical meltdown in leadership and cite major corporate failures such as Worldcom, Enron, and Arthur Andersen. They argue that this decrease in ethical leadership coupled with societal challenges, such as terrorism and environmental concerns, necessitates the need for leadership that is both authentic and positive. Bill George (former Chairman and CEO of Medtronic) has defined authentic leadership as "being yourself; being the person you were created to be" rather than "developing the image or persona of a leader".

The researchers and practitioners who have created the construct of authentic leadership frequently cite as case studies Nelson Mandela, Mother Theresa, and Mahatma Gandhi. Whilst these people may provide good examples of authentic leadership, their experience of leading is far removed from the type of leadership the vast majority of managers' experience within today's large organisations. Do these managers have the opportunity to be authentic? If not, do they create a work persona in order to demonstrate the required leadership behaviour? Which approach (persona or authenticity) do managers within a large organisation find leads to success? The goal of this research is to provide some insight into answering these questions. A second major goal is to further understand the impact that both authentic and persona behaviour has on a manager.

3. Literature Review

The literature review in this paper is presented in two stages. Firstly, a historical perspective will examine the key early leadership studies through to the present to determine their influence on leadership education and development. Secondly, papers exploring the construct of authentic leadership will be reviewed to establish the basis for this research.

3.1. Historical Perspective of Leadership

The search for leadership traits was influenced by Great Man Theory, which assumed that leaders are born rather than developed and that they possess certain innate qualities that enable them to lead. However, the difficulty in categorising and validating characteristics led to widespread criticism of this approach.

Unable to make progress with the trait approach researchers turned their attention to leadership style and behaviour. The researchers identified two dimensions of leadership behaviour:

1. *employee-centred behaviour*: focusing on relationships and employee needs.
2. *job-centred behaviour*: focusing on getting the job done.

The criticisms of the leadership style and behaviour gave rise to situational and contingency theories of leadership. These theories represent a shift away from 'the one best way to lead' to an approach that is responsive to the context. Theorists argued that a leader should diagnose the context and decide which behaviour will fit in relation to the forces of the manager (personality, values, preferences and beliefs) and the forces of the subordinates (needs, knowledge, and expectations). The contingency and situational approaches to leadership have been criticised on the basis that they do not inspire confidence and trust in followers. It is argued that people find it difficult to accept the resulting fickle behaviour and instead prefer honesty and consistency from their leader.

An approach to leadership that seeks to gain the commitment of followers is 'transformational leadership'. This built on the distinction between the transactional leader (treats relationships with followers in terms of an exchange) and the transformational leader (treats relationships with followers in terms of motivation and commitment). They state that transformational leadership occurs when leaders stimulate others to see new perspectives; articulate the vision of the organisation; develop others to higher levels of ability; and motivate others to put organisational interests before self interests.

In 2000 a link was found between leadership style and organisation performance is mediated by organisational culture. It was found that both supportive and participative leadership styles are strong predictors of competitive and innovative cultures, which are then in turn strong predictors of positive organisational performance. They also found a negative indirect link between instrumental leadership and performance (empirically supporting anecdotal evidence that transactional leadership is not consistent with superior performance). These findings support an approach that can be termed 'strategic leadership' which advocates that leadership style can be used strategically to influence the development of a culture that is consistent with the organisation's strategy. The assumption behind this approach is that successful organisations gain a sustainable advantage through aligning key aspects of their operation with the needs of their customers in a more efficient or effective way than their customers.

3.2. Authentic Leadership

A review of the available literature on authentic leadership has highlighted the components that most researchers and academics cite as comprising an authentic leader. These components are self awareness, self regulation and development, positive psychological capital, and a positive moral perspective. This section reviews the ongoing critical debate for each component. Additionally, this section reviews the result of authentic leadership in terms of impact on the leader by drawing on the literature of emotional labour.

3.2.1. Authentic Self Awareness

From a study of the current research in this area we conclude that the 'self' is dynamic and subjectively created through reflecting on experience. Our experience of our own self is therefore autobiographical. Authenticity is realised when the person experiences their behaviour as being concordant with their subjective view of self or future desired self.

3.2.2. Self Regulation and Development

Behaving authentically is often defined as acting in accord with one's values, preferences, and needs as opposed to acting merely to please others or to attain rewards or avoid punishments through acting falsely. However, within organisations it may not always be possible for a leader to behave authentically due to external regulations. The research has identified that authentic leadership is, therefore, dependent on the degree of alignment between the leader and their organisation. Once the leader has identified with the values underlying the regulations imposed by their organisation he or she must regulate their behaviour to be consistent with these values and their own in order to be authentic. This means that authentic behaviour results from an awareness of one's own needs and motives and an unbiased assessment of information. Consequently, the leader must have the ability to perceive events accurately rather than defensively distorting or censoring them from awareness.

3.2.3. Positive Psychological Capital

Researchers have identified that authentic leaders have the psychological capacities of confidence, optimism, hope and resiliency. They state that these capacities heighten the self-awareness and self-regulating behaviours required for the demonstration of authentic leadership.

3.2.4. Positive Moral Perspective

Literature on transformational leadership often describes a moral or ethical component of the construct. It is argued that authentic leaders inherently have a high moral standards and capacities to judge moral dilemmas. In general the critics of the moral component being included argue that it dilutes the construct.

3.2.5. Impact on the Leader

Emotional Labour literature suggests that the more strongly one identifies with the role, the greater the positive impact the inauthentic behaviour will have on their well-being.

4. Statement of Research Question

To be a successful leader in an organisation should a middle manager lead according to his or her own authentic self or should he/she lead through adopting a persona that enables the exhibition of behaviours required by the organisation?

5. Method

5.1. Organisational Context, Participants and Ethical Considerations

This research was carried out within a UK telecommunications company. A HR representative within the company selected thirty middle managers at random. The researcher sent each of the managers the information sheets and invited the participants to partake in the research. Ten of the managers took up the invitation and volunteered to become participants. The random selection led to variation across the participant population in terms of role, gender, age, and length of experience. The common factor across all the participants was that they all had experience of leading people.

5.2. Method of Data Collection

The data was collected through the use of semi-structured interviews. The standard questions were developed by identifying the areas that have not been addressed by the current literature on authentic and persona leadership. A list of thirty questions was produced, which was reduced to a list of seven main questions with additional follow-up questions. This was achieved through a process of combining, focusing and eliminating. Each interview was recorded and transcripts produced following the interview.

5.3. Method of Data Analysis

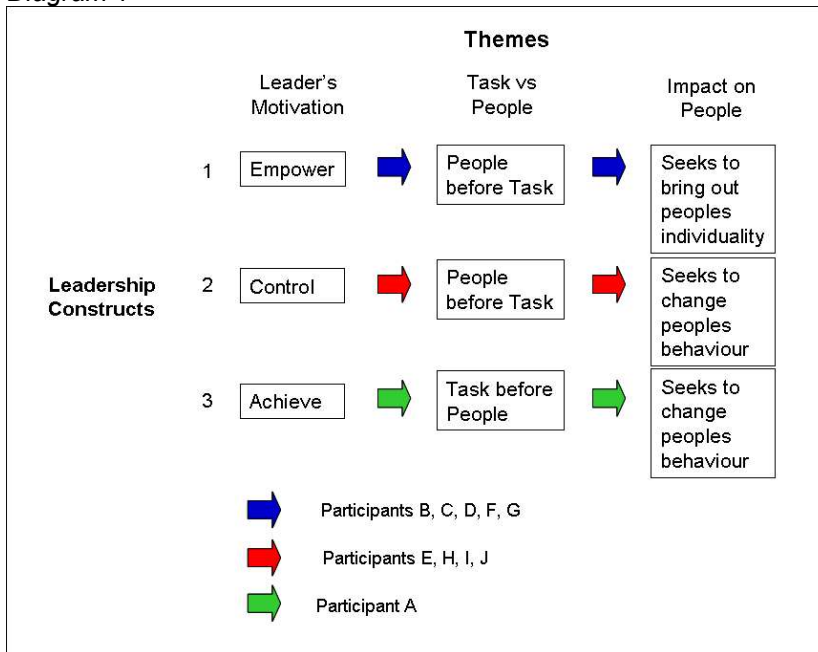
Template Analysis was the method selected to analyse the data. The development of the template represented both the analysis and interpretation of the data. The data transcripts were read once to gain an appreciation of some of the common themes and then again to capture these themes and produce the first template. This template was applied to three of the transcripts and subsequently revised. Once the researcher was confident that the key themes had emerged across the participant population a flow diagram was produced to represent an interpretation of the experience of each individual participant. The purpose of the flow diagrams was to identify the relationship between the key themes as experienced by each participant. Through the combination of the flow diagrams conceptual models were produced to represent the researcher's interpretation of both the key themes and the relationships between these themes as experienced by the participants.

6. Findings

6.1. Leadership Construct

An interpretation of the data has highlighted that the managers expressed patterns of leadership experience that the researcher termed 'core work leadership constructs'. The patterns are presented in diagram 1 and comprise the relationships between three of the themes identified through the template analysis.

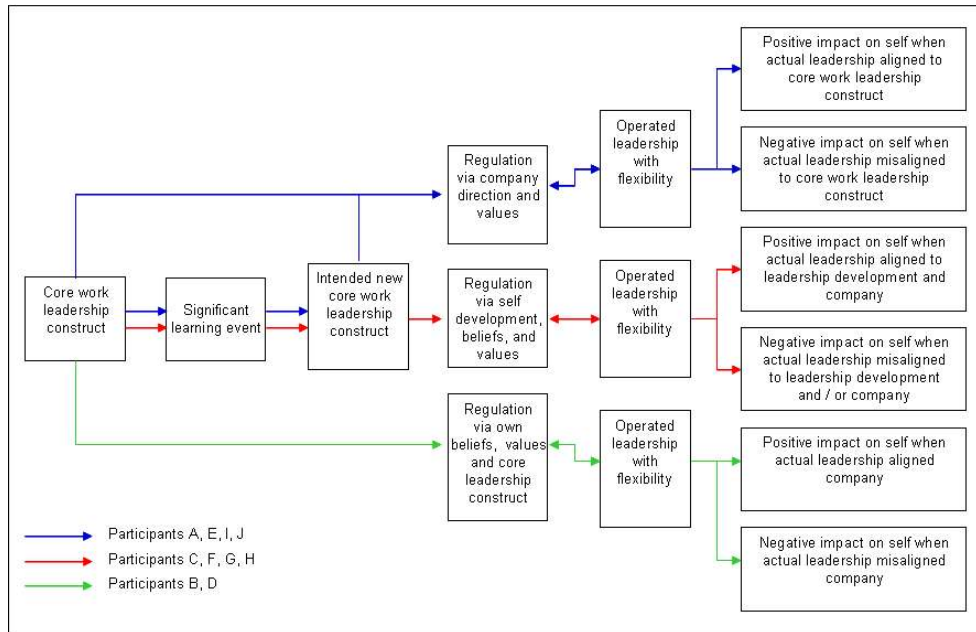
Diagram 1



6.2. Conceptual Model

Diagram 2 presents an interpretation of the relationships between the common themes identified by this research.

Diagram 2



7. Discussion and Conclusion

The leadership practitioner Bill George (2003) defined authentic leadership as “being yourself; being the person you were created to be”. The findings of this research suggest that this definition is too simplistic. It has been found that people do not have just one ‘self’ as many of the participants described both a work self and a home self. In terms of the leadership behaviour demonstrated by the work self, this appears to be influenced by what the researcher has termed as a ‘core work leadership construct’. The formation of this leadership construct appears to be complex as it has become evident that includes a number of aspects including the motivation of the leader, the intent of the leadership, and the influence of leadership experience.

This research found that the ‘core work leadership construct’ was not a constant and was consciously developed throughout the participants careers. Whilst the participants frequently expressed the nature of their ‘core work leadership construct’ they were also keen to express their ability to be flexible. It also raises the question as to when does flexible authenticity become a persona?

This research found that some leaders choose their behaviour in relation to their own personality, values, preferences and beliefs as well as to the needs of their subordinates. However, it was also found that some leaders regulate their behaviour in relation to their desired future self. This suggests that these leaders have an internal locus of control and supports the view that authenticity is realised when the person experiences their behaviour as being concordant with their subjective view of self or future desired self. It was also found, however, that some participants had an external locus of control as they regulated their behaviour by adopting the company’s direction and values. This supports the view that authenticity within an organisation

can only be achieved when the leader has incorporated the value of their externally regulated behaviour into his or her sense of self.

This study found that those with an external locus of control endeavoured to adapt themselves to the demands of their work by incorporating the company values, whilst those with an internal locus of control endeavoured to adapt their work through finding roles that were aligned to their sense of current self or future self. It can be argued that if leaders are able to regulate their behaviour by their preferred means of control (internal or external) then they will feel authentic. This research also found that the participants' locus of control influenced the intention of their leadership. Those with an external locus of control tended to try to change their followers' behaviour in line with company requirements, whilst those with an internal locus of control tended to try to bring out the individuality of their followers. This suggests either authentic consistency in values, an unconscious bias in their intent of their leadership, or a lack of awareness as to the locus of control of their followers.

Whilst it can be argued that the participants with an external locus of control are authentic when they change their leadership behaviour to incorporate the values of their company they, nonetheless, still described success in terms of their own core work leadership construct. They also expressed a higher level of well-being when the external regulation matched their internal values and beliefs and therefore were able to actualise their core work leadership construct. When the external regulation did not enable them to lead in way that was consistent to their core work leadership construct they reported lower levels of well-being. The participants with an internal locus of control also described success in terms of their own core work leadership construct. Whilst these participants did not report incorporating the company's values their well-being was enhanced when their actualised core work leadership construct aligned with the needs of their company. These participants reported lower levels of well-being when the actualisation of their core work leadership construct did not meet the requirements of their company. These findings suggest that authenticity is not necessarily a predictor of well-being in itself. For well-being to be enhanced there needs to be an alignment between authentic leadership the needs of the company.

From this research it can be concluded that the terms persona and authentic leadership are simplistic and cannot be easily defined as they are experienced in different ways by different leaders. Authentic leadership can include behaviour aligned to current sense of self, future desired self, and/or the incorporation of the company requirements. However, the term authenticity can be applied to the means by which leaders regulate their behaviour whether it is internal or external. People will feel authentic when they are able to use their preferred means of regulating their behaviour. A leader tends to believe that he / she is successful when they are able to lead according to their own core work leadership construct and this behaviour leads to the desired outcome. However, their well-being will only be enhanced when there is alignment between their core work leadership construct and the needs of their company. Misalignment tends to have a negative impact on well-being.

These findings have highlighted three main implications for companies, leaders, and leadership development practitioners;

1. For leadership success and leader well-being to be enhanced attention should be given to the alignment of leaders' own core work leadership constructs and the roles they are asked to perform. To achieve this, leaders and their employers should be given a means to become aware of the leaders' core work leadership construct and its associated biases.
2. When a company advocates a leadership approach that is to be consistent across the organisation as a means of implementing a strategy there needs to be awareness that some leaders will authentically adopt the required behaviours whilst others will seek roles that match their core work leadership construct.

3. To change leadership behaviour attention should be given to influencing the development of each leader's core work leadership construct. This typically happens early in a leader's career and is the result of learning from a role model or a significant challenge.