FEATURE

"Walking the Talk" Alone: Leading and Following Authentically in an Inauthentic World

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ABSTRACT

The evolving literature on authentic leadership rests on an implicit assumption that leaders and followers who strive to promote authentic relationships in organizational settings can achieve them. However, organizations are rife with potential barriers to authenticity, including ego defense mechanisms, interaction partners who are either unwilling or unable to attain authenticity, and organizational contexts and cultures that apply pressures to compromise one's core values or true emotions. Under such circumstances, authentic behavior may be naïve, risky, and even counterproductive. As such, many leaders faced with such pressures may fail to act with character and integrity. To explore these barriers, this paper reviews a diverse body of literature to identify potential boundary conditions for authentic leadership and followership that are operative at the intrapersonal, dyadic, group, and organizational levels. We conclude by suggesting avenues for future research to explore the circumstances that constrain leader and follower efforts to promote authentic relationships.

Much discussion has arisen over the past fifteen years about a new perspective on leadership, called authentic leadership, which enables both the leader and follower to develop a relationship whereby they can be true to the self (Gardner, Cogliser, Davis, & Dickens, 2011; George, 2003; George & Sims, 2007). But what happens if the other party in the relationship is unwilling or unable to be truly authentic? Or, what happens to leaders and followers who strive for authenticity, but work in a climate where pressures to compromise their core values or true emotions make authentic behavior risky or ineffective? Are there relationships and environments where the quest for authenticity is simply naïve? Or, worse yet, counterproductive? While much scholarly attention has been devoted to the study of authentic leadership in recent years (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Avolio, Griffith, Wernsing, & Walumbwa,

2010; Banks, McCauley, Gardner, & Guler, 2016; Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May, & Walumbwa, 2005; Gardner, Avolio, & Walumbwa, 2005; Gardner et al., 2011; Gill, Gardner, Claeys, & Vangronsvelt, 2018; Karam, Gardner, Gullifor, Tribble, & Li, 2017; Sidani & Rowe, 2018; Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing, & Peterson, 2008), these are questions that remain unanswered.

One of the basic properties of good theory is that it identifies the boundary conditions under which the theory is valid, as well as the limits to the theory (Bacharach, 1989). As the study of authentic leadership matures, it is important to more thoroughly explicate the boundaries of the theory (Gardner et al., 2011). Toward that end, this paper seeks to identify promising directions for theory building and testing that explore potential limits to authenticity within organizational settings. That is, what are the circumstances, if any, within which the ability of a leader and/or follower to form an authentic leader-follower relationship are severely constrained by the shortcomings of the other party or the context within which both parties interact?

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To identify promising directions for examining these questions, we will consider potential barriers to authenticity at the individual (e.g., fragile self-esteem), dyadic (e.g., abusive supervision), collective (e.g., ethical climate), and contextual (e.g., hypercompetitive industries) levels. Because our purpose is to initiate a dialogue about, as opposed to an exhaustive examination of, potential boundary conditions, we focus initially on a limited set of barriers at the individual, dyadic, collective, and contextual levels for illustrative purposes, while briefly identifying other barriers at each of these levels as additional avenues for future research. However, before we consider these barriers to authenticity, we lay the groundwork by providing an overview of authentic leadership theory. We conclude with an agenda for future research and recommendations for overcoming the barriers to workplace authenticity and authentic leadership.

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Authentic Leadership Theory and Development: Core Assumptions and Principles

Authentic leadership can be thought of as an approach to leadership that allows both the leader and follower to be true to the self and truthful with others (Hannes Leroy, 2012; personal communication). That is, the leader exhibits a genuine form of leadership that reflects personal values and builds on his or her strengths, while encouraging followers to do likewise. More formally, authentic leadership has been defined as "a pattern of leader behavior that draws upon and promotes both positive psychological capacities and a positive ethical climate, to foster greater self-awareness, an internalized moral perspective, balanced processing of information, and relational transparency on the part of leaders working with followers, fostering positive self-development" (Walumbwa et al., 2008, p. 94).

The preceding definition reflects well the essential components of authentic leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, et al., 2005). To be true to the self, one must know the self; hence, self-awareness provides a foundation for authentic leadership and authentic followership. An internalized moral perspective involves a conviction to remain true to one's personal moral values, rather than succumbing to external pressures or incentives to compromise those values. Note that this component is consistent with the concept of character, which Wright and Quick (2011, p. 976) defined as "those interpenetrable and habitual qualities within individuals, and applicable to organizations that both constrain and lead them to desire and pursue personal and societal good." Balanced processing refers to an ability and willingness to accept both positive and negative information about the self in a non-defensive fashion as one processes feedback from others. Relational transparency involves being open and forthcoming in conveying self-relevant information to close others. In addition to these core components, authentic leadership is posited to stem from and promote positive psychological capacities (e.g., confidence, optimism, hope, resilience; Luthans, Avolio, Avey, & Norman, 2007; Luthans & Youssef-Morgan, 2015; Rego, Sousa, Marques, & Cunha, 2012; Wang, Sui, Luthans, Wang, & Wu, 2014) and a positive ethical climate (Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, et al., 2005). However, just as high levels of these factors facilitate authentic leader-follower relationships, it follows that low levels serve as barriers to such relationships.

We consider the role that such barriers play at the individual, dyadic, collective, and contextual levels below.

Barriers to Authentic Leader-Follower Relationships: Individual-Level Barriers

If self-awareness serves as a requirement for authentic leadership and followership, it follows that the absence of self-awareness represents one of the biggest obstacles to the formation of authentic leader-follower relationships. Potential insight into such intrapersonal boundaries to authentic functioning is provided by theory and research on optimal secure versus fragile self-esteem and its implications for authentic functioning (Kernis, 2003). Because persons who have optimal high self-esteem are secure about their personal identities, they are accepting of both their strengths and weaknesses, and better able to achieve authenticity by remaining true to the self. Specifically, because persons with optimal high self-esteem know and accept themselves (self-awareness), they are not threatened by negative self-relevant information (balanced processing), and able to form close and open relationships with others with whom they self-disclose both their strengths and weaknesses (relational transparency), while remaining true to their core values in their conduct (internalized moral perspective).

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While persons with fragile high self-esteem may profess to have high positive self-evaluations, their self-esteem crumbles when they are confronted with ego-threatening information. Hence, negative feedback often results in the evocation of ego defense mechanisms that produce biased information processing and non-transparent relationships with others (Kernis, 2003). Thus, our ego, and the psychological mechanisms we have learned to protect it, represents the greatest intrapersonal barrier to authenticity. The threat of the ego to authentic leadership is captured well be this quote from Andrew Cohen: "The thought of being a leader may seem like an appealing idea to the ego, but the reality of what being an authentic leader implies scares the ego to death."

At the extreme, pathological levels of ego defense mechanisms may contribute to the emergence of narcissistic leadership (Kets de Vries & Miller, 1985; Padilla, Hogan, & Kaiser, 2007; Petrenko, Aime, Ridge, & Hill, 2016; Resick, Whitman, Wengarden, & Hiller, 2009) – a form of leadership that appears to be the antithesis to authentic and character-based leadership (Wright & Quick, 2011). Narcissism is "a personality trait encompassing grandiosity, arrogance, self-absorption, entitlement, fragile self-esteem, and hostility", while "narcissistic leaders have grandiose belief systems and leadership styles, and are generally motivated by their needs for power and admiration rather than empathetic concern for the constituents and institutions they lead" (Rosenthal, 2006, p. 617). While narcissistic leaders often give the appearance of supreme confidence, at their core they possess low and fragile self-esteem that is easily threatened by information that contradicts their illusions of grandeur. Hence, the psychological demons that haunt narcissistic persons operate to blind them to reality, particularly when it comes to developing awareness about their personal shortcomings. Because narcissism represents a severe psychological disorder that, even with clinical treatment and years of therapy (Horwitz, 2000), remains relatively resistant to change,

it represents an enormous barrier to authenticity that inhibits efforts to promote self- and leader development through coaching and other processes (Kets de Vries & Miller, 1985). Although narcissism and narcissistic leadership are extreme cases, they illustrate well the barriers to authenticity that arise from the ego, and the psychological processes humans use to defend it.

The preceding discussion illustrates the kinds of barriers to authentic functioning in the workplace that can arise at the intrapersonal level. Additional insights into such barriers may be provided by complementary areas of study, including theory and research on: 1) secure versus insecure attachment styles (Gillath, Sesku, Shaver, & Chun, 2010; Hinojosa, McCauley, Randolph-Seng, & Gardner, 2014); and 2) Machiavellian personalities (Christie & Geis, 1970; Sendjaya, Pekerti, Härtel, Hirst, & Butarbutar, 2016). Common to these perspectives is the recognition that intrapersonal processes that inhibit self-awareness may make it impossible for leaders and followers to achieve the types of balanced processing, relational transparency, and internalized moral viewpoint requisite for authentic relationships.

Indeed, because illusions of grandeur prevent narcissistic persons from developing a realistic assessment of their own strengths and limitations, those with whom they interact have difficulty giving them honest feedback about their capabilities and the merits of their ideas.

Dyadic-Level Barriers

Beyond the intrapersonal barriers to authenticity that arise for narcissistic individuals, daunting challenges emerge for those who seek to form authentic relationships with such persons (Kets de Vries & Miller, 1985; Ouimet, 2010; Rosenthal, 2006). Indeed, because illusions of grandeur prevent narcissistic persons from developing a realistic assessment of their own strengths and limitations, those with whom they interact have difficulty giving them honest feedback about their capabilities and the merits of their ideas. Moreover, because narcissistic leaders are driven by a strong need for power and glory, and lack the ability to empathize with others, they frequently use others as pawns for achieving personal goals. Under these circumstances, a subordinate or superior who seeks to interact with the self-deluded narcissist in an open and honest fashion runs the risk of being manipulated and mistreated.

In light of the documented interpersonal challenges that are associated with narcissistic leadership (Ouimet, 2010; Rosenthal, 2006), a number of questions arise. Can one lead or follow authentically when one's interaction partner is a narcissist who is incapable of achieving personal and relational authenticity? Indeed, is it wise for a leader or follower to engage in relational transparency with a partner who may use personal self-disclosures regarding one's goals, abilities, and limitations for personal gain? More specifically, is it naïve to assume that one can behave authentically when interacting with an inherently inauthentic, and potentially dangerous, dyadic partner? Or, is it possible to remain true to one's self and demonstrate character through open dialogue whereby the narcissistic partner is confronted about his or her hidden motives and self-delusions?

Preliminary answers to these questions may be provided by the rich literature devoted to narcissism and narcissistic leadership (Chatterjee & Hambrick, 2007; Horwitz, 2000; Kets de Vries & Miller, 1985; O'Reilly III, Doerr, & Chatman, 2018; Oesterle, Elosge, &

Elosge, 2016; Ouimet, 2010; Petrenko et al., 2016; Reina, Zhang, & Peterson, 2014; Rosenthal, 2006; Zhang, Ou, Tsui, & Wang, 2017). Unfortunately, this literature is not overly encouraging for proponents of authentic and character-based leadership. For instance, Petrenko, Aime, Ridge, and Hill (2016) explored the relationship between CEO narcissism and corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices, positing that more narcissists initiate CSR activities in response to a personal need for attention and image reinforcement, rather than an underlying commitment to CSR causes. As expected, CEO narcissism had positive effects on the levels and profile of CSR initiatives. However, the commitment of the CEO to particular CSR practices tended to be short-lived, as they moved from initiative to initiative for the apparent purpose of garnering attention, without sticking with any one initiative long enough to yield sustainable benefits for stakeholders.

More research is needed to explore these potential effects of narcissistic leadership on the authenticity of followers and colleagues.

This profile of CSR activity churning was also negatively related to firm performance, as the expenses for firms lead by narcissistic CEOs who pursued sequential and high-profile but short-lived CSR activities, were much higher than those of firm's with less narcissistic CEOs who demonstrated long-term commitments to a focused set of CSR practices. Moreover, these findings suggest that narcissistic CEOs impacted the ethical conduct of their associates, as the entire firm was swept up by the flurry of CSR activity to pursue high-profile but superficial and temporary CSR causes. Reading between the lines, we suspect that members of such firms who seek to achieve authenticity and act with character, may be challenged to do so when confronted with a narcissistic and impetuous CEO on a quest for personal glory. Dare they show the moral courage to confront the CEO and ask who the latest high-profile CSR endeavor is intended to serve – the purported stakeholders or the CEO's ego? For many interested in self-preservation, the answer will be "no"; for others who do voice their values, their tenure with the firm may be short. More research is needed to explore these potential effects of narcissistic leadership on the authenticity of followers and colleagues.

Other relevant content areas that may provide insight into dyadic barriers to authentic leader-follower relationships include: 1) dysfunctional social exchange processes (Liden, Sparrowe, & Wayne, 1997); 2) abusive supervision (Tepper, 2007; Zhang & Bednall, 2016); 3) destructive leadership (Collins & Jackson, 2015; Einarsen, Aasland, & Skogstad, 2007; Eubanks & Mumford, 2010); 4) workplace bullying (Collins & Jackson, 2015; Eubanks & Mumford, 2010; Ferris, Zinko, Brouer, Buckley, & Harvey, 2007); and 5) incivility in the workplace (Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Cortina, 2008).

Collective-Level Barriers

Beyond the potential intrapersonal and dyadic barriers to authentic leadership and followership described above, obstacles at the collective level warrant exploration. Primary among these is the ethical climate of the organization (Ambrose, Arnaud, & Schminke, 2008; Victor & Cullen, 1987, 1988), which constitutes a key collective level factor that can serve to either facilitate or inhibit authentic functioning by organizational members. Ethical climate has been defined as "the shared perceptions of what is regarded as ethically correct behaviors and how ethical situations should be handled in an organization" (Victor & Cullen, 1987, p. 51). To better delineate alternative manifestations of ethical climate, Victor and Cullen (1987) advanced a typology of ethical climate that differentiates shared

ethical perceptions along two dimensions. The first dimension encompasses three ethical criteria that are used for decision-making: egoism, benevolence, and principle. The second dimension involves three loci of analysis used as referents for ethical decision-making: individual, local and cosmopolitan. Victor and Cullen (1988) empirically validated five ethical climate types that have subsequently been similarly conceptualized in most other ethical climate studies (Martin & Cullen, 2006). These five climate types are: caring (emphasizes the welfare of organizational constituents), law and code (emphasizes legal compliance and professional standards), rules (emphasizes adherence to organizational policies and procedures), instrumental (emphasizes personal and organizational interests regardless of consequences), and independence (emphasizes the application personal morality and ethics in the conduct of organizational activities).

One implication of this stream of research suggested by Ambrose and colleagues (2008) pertains to the person-organizational (P-O) fit arising from the level of one's individual moral development and the ethical climate of the organization. Specifically, their notion of moral development-ethical climate fit suggests that some ethical climates will constitute a better fit for persons striving to be authentic and character driven than others. Theoretical support for this assertion is provided by Gardner and colleagues' (2005) contention that higher levels of authenticity are associated with higher levels of moral development (Kohlberg, 1984; Kohlberg & Diesnner, 1991). Moreover, they argue that persons who reach the post-conventional stage of moral development (where they use personal ethical standards when engaged in moral reasoning) exhibit high levels of self-awareness, perspective taking (balanced processing), and relational transparency. That is, because persons operating at the post-conventional levels are able to understand and consider lower levels of moral reasoning, while ultimately making ethical decisions based on their personal values and ethical standards, they are able to remain true to the self. Consistent with this reasoning, Ambrose et al. (2008) postulated that the highest levels of P-O fit in terms of individual moral development and ethical climate would be achieved for the preconventional-instrumental, conventional-caring, and postconventional-independence combinations. From an authenticity perspective, this implies that the postconventional-independent climate combination would be most conducive to authenticity.

In assessing the degree of P-O fit between the various levels of moral development and types of ethical climates, Ambrose et al. (2008) found that the strongest effects of fit were achieved in the conventional-caring climate combination which was significantly related to higher levels of organizational commitment and job satisfaction, and lower levels of intent to leave. In contrast, the weakest effects of fit were achieved for the preconventional-instrumental combination, which was related only to higher levels of affective commitment. As predicted, congruence between the postconventional-independent combination was positively related to affective commitment and negatively related to turnover intentions.

The implications of these findings with respect to boundary conditions for authenticity are that persons who strive to achieve authenticity and act with character in organizations will find it difficult to do so when they operate in ethical climate types other than the independent climate. For example, an instrumental climate will apply pressure on individuals to engage in self-serving behaviors, since the norms and conduct of their peers reflect such behaviors. Similarly, a rules-based climate would encourage individuals to follow the company rules and procedures, even if they are in conflict with their personal values.

Other relevant streams of research that may provide insight into such collective level factors include theory and research into: 1) dysfunctional work teams (Cole, Walter, & Bruch, 2008); 2) toxic organizational

cultures (Padilla et al., 2007); and 3) psychological climate (Jones & James, 1979; Lee & Idris, 2017).

Contextual Barriers

At the contextual level, environmental factors that elicit incentives for impression management (i.e., efforts to promote desired impressions; Bolino, Long, & Turnley, 2016) and/or emotional labor (i.e., efforts to display emotions that match audience expectations and the context; Grandey, 2000) and serve as disincentives for authentic behavior (Carlson, Ferguson, Hunter, & Whitten, 2012; Gardner, Fischer, & Hunt, 2009), should be examined as possible barriers to authentic leadership and followership. Specifically, contextual dimensions of the environment should be considered, including the omnibus (national and organizational culture, industry and occupation, organizational structure, time) and discrete (situational) contexts (Johns, 2006), that invoke emotional display rules and cues for desired images that undermine authentic self-presentations at work. That is, how and when do contextual factors create expectations among leaders and followers to present images and emotions that are not genuine?

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Service industries provided a context within which the original research on emotional labor was conducted, beginning with Hochschild's (1983) qualitative study of flight attendants and followed by studies of nurses (Timmons & Tanner, 2005), supermarket and fast food clerks (Leidner, 1991; Leidner, 1993), food servers (Hall, 1993), amusement park employees (Van Maanen, 1991), and service "professionals" such as banking employees (Wharton, 1993) and insurance agents (Leidner, 1991). Indeed, there is ample evidence that emotional labor is high in professions and institutions that involve "people work" (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002).

The occupational health industry context is one that has been particularly fruitful with regard to the exploration of antecedents to and consequences of emotional labor and one that is likely to vary in the extent to which it encourages and supports authentic emotional expressions among organizational members (Grandey, 2000). Indeed, there can be a strong norm for compassionate detachment in a health care setting, such that "getting emotional" is viewed as unprofessional (Henderson, 2001; Lewis, 2005). Grandey et al. (2012) proposed and validated the construct of a climate for authenticity that can be driven by the shared norms about expressing emotions (verbally and nonverbally) or display rules (Ekman, 1993) within the industry itself (in their case, with health care providers).

Yet, as Humphrey, Pollack, and Hawver (2008) point out, the leader's role provides prescriptions regarding appropriate emotions that transcend employees within a service industry. For example, while leaders in the service as compared to manufacturing industries may be expected to exhibit empathy and caring emotions across a wider variety of settings and audiences, all leaders are typically expected to express sympathy when

they learn that a follower has lost a loved one. Thus, we expect the role of leader to interact with industry, occupational, organizational, and societal norms and expectations, among other factors, to determine the types of emotional displays that are expected and considered appropriate in a particular context (Rafaeli & Sutton, 1987).

Beyond the considerations of display rules for emotional labor associated with certain professions, industries, and roles (Gardner et al., 2009; McCauley & Gardner, 2016; Rafaeli & Sutton, 1987), future research should consider the contextual influences of national culture (e.g., individualistic versus collectivistic; Hofstede, 1980), environmental dynamism and munificence (Dess & Beard, 1984) and temporal factors (Ancona & Goodman, 2001; Bluedorn & Denhardt, 1988). Indeed, it is likely that the larger environmental context creates certain norms, expectations, and obstacles to authenticity that may foster or inhibit the ability of both individuals and collectives to achieve authentic leader-follower relationships.

In addition, consideration should be given to potential strategies for overcoming the barriers to authentic leadership at each level, and thereby expanding the boundaries of the theory.

Future Research Directions and Practical Recommendations

Authentic leadership theory shows much promise for enabling leaders and followers to foster genuine, trusting, and character-based relationships that bring out the best in both parties, while promoting high levels of sustainable and veritable performance (Gardner, et al., 2005). Nevertheless, many questions remain about the boundaries under which such leadership can flourish. The goal of this paper is to provide some initial questions and tentative directions for identifying the intrapersonal, dyadic, collective and contextual forces that serve as obstacles to the practice of authentic leadership. In addition, consideration should be given to potential strategies for overcoming the barriers to authentic leadership at each level, and thereby expanding the boundaries of the theory. At the individual and dyadic levels, promising tools for leadership development have been identified that may serve to heighten leader self-awareness while lessoning the biasing effects of ego defense mechanisms, and thereby promote higher levels of relational transparency and moral character (Avolio & Hannah, 2008; Hannah & Avolio, 2010, 2011; Hannah, Avolio, & May, 2011). At the collective and contextual levels, leadership and organizational level interventions should be explored whereby more positive ethical climates can be cultivated, and thereby foster a safe environment (e.g., a "climate of authenticity"; Grandey et al., 2012) within which authentic and character-based leadership and followership can develop and flourish.

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