

Authentic Leadership

DESCRIPTION

Authentic leadership represents one of the newest areas of leadership research. It focuses on whether leadership is genuine and “real.” As the title of this approach implies, authentic leadership is about the *authenticity* of leaders and their leadership. Unlike many of the theories that we have discussed in this book, authentic leadership is still in the formative phase of development. As a result, authentic leadership needs to be considered more tentatively: It is likely to change as new research about the theory is published.

In recent times, upheavals in society have energized a tremendous demand for authentic leadership. The destruction on 9/11, corporate scandals at companies like WorldCom and Enron, and massive failures in the banking industry have all created fear and uncertainty. People feel apprehensive and insecure about what is going on around them, and, as a result, they long for bona fide leadership they can trust and for leaders who are honest and good. People’s demands for trustworthy leadership make the study of authentic leadership timely and worthwhile.

In addition to the public’s interest, authentic leadership has been intriguing to researchers: It was identified earlier in transformational leadership research but never fully articulated (Bass, 1990; Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; Burns, 1978; Howell & Avolio, 1993). Furthermore, practitioners had developed approaches to authentic leadership that were not evidence based, and so needed further clarification and testing. In attempts to more fully explore authentic leadership, researchers set out to identify the parameters of authentic leadership and more clearly conceptualize it, efforts that continue today.



Authentic Leadership Defined

On the surface, authentic leadership appears easy to define. In actuality, it is a complex process that is difficult to characterize. Among leadership scholars, there is no single accepted definition of authentic leadership. Instead, there are multiple definitions, each written from a different viewpoint and with a different emphasis (Chan, 2005).

One of those viewpoints is the *intrapersonal* perspective, which focuses closely on the leader and what goes on within the leader. It incorporates the leader's self-knowledge, self-regulation, and self-concept. In Shamir and Eilam's (2005) description of the intrapersonal approach, they suggest that authentic leaders exhibit genuine leadership, lead from conviction, and are originals, not copies. This perspective emphasizes a leader's life experiences and the meaning he or she attaches to those experiences as being critical to the development of the authentic leader.

A second way of defining authentic leadership is as an *interpersonal* process. This perspective outlines authentic leadership as relational, created by leaders and followers together (Eagly, 2005). It results not from the leader's efforts alone, but also from the response of followers. Authenticity emerges from the interactions between leaders and followers. It is a reciprocal process because leaders affect followers and followers affect leaders.

Finally, authentic leadership can be defined from a *developmental* perspective, which is exemplified in the work of Avolio and his associates (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Gardner, Avolio, & Walumbwa, 2005; Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing, & Peterson, 2008). This perspective, which underpins the approaches to authentic leadership discussed in the following section, views authentic leadership as something that can be nurtured in a leader, rather than as a fixed trait. Authentic leadership develops in people over a lifetime and can be triggered by major life events, such as a severe illness or a new career.

Taking a developmental approach, Walumbwa et al. (2008) conceptualized authentic leadership as a pattern of leader behavior that develops from and is grounded in the leader's positive psychological qualities and strong ethics. They suggest that authentic leadership is composed of four distinct but related components: self-awareness, internalized moral perspective, balanced processing, and relational transparency (Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, 2009). Over a lifetime, authentic leaders learn and develop each of these four types of behavior.



Approaches to Authentic Leadership

Formulations about authentic leadership can be differentiated into two areas: (1) the practical approach, which evolved from real-life examples and training and development literature; and (2) the theoretical approach, which is based on findings from social science research. Both approaches offer interesting insights about the complex process of authentic leadership.

Practical Approaches

Books and programs about authentic leadership are popular today; people are interested in the basics of this type of leadership. Specifically, they want to know the “how to” steps to become an authentic leader. In this section, we will discuss two practical approaches to authentic leadership: (1) Robert Terry’s authentic leadership approach (1993), and (2) Bill George’s authentic leadership approach (2003). Each of these approaches presents a unique perspective on how to practice authentic leadership.

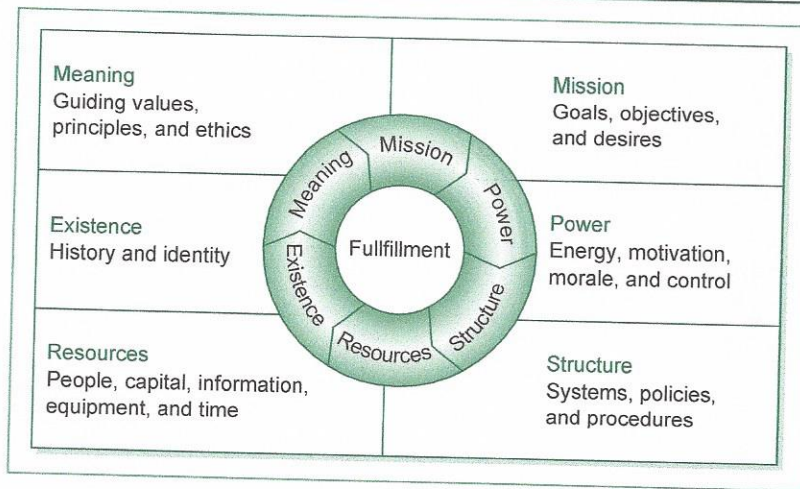
Robert Terry’s Authentic Leadership Approach. Terry’s approach to authentic leadership is practice oriented. It utilizes a formula or guide for “how to do” leadership. At its core, the Terry approach is action centered: It focuses on the actions of the leader, leadership team, or organization in a particular situation. The moral premise underlying this approach is that leaders should strive to do what is right. The framework of the approach serves as a guide to these actions.

In any given situation where leadership is needed, Terry advocates that two core leadership questions must be addressed. First, what is really, *really* going on? Second, what are we going to do about it? Authentic leadership involves correctly answering these questions. It includes knowing and acting on what is “true” in yourself (authenticity), in your organization, and in the world. The challenge for leaders is to distinguish between authentic and inauthentic actions, and then to commit to authentic actions over the inauthentic. Unless leaders know what truly is going on, their actions will be inappropriate and can have serious consequences.

Terry developed the Authentic Action Wheel (Figure 11.1) to help diagnose and address underlying problems in organizations. The wheel has six components: Around the top of the wheel are *Meaning*, *Mission*, and *Power*; clockwise around the bottom are *Structure*, *Resources*, and *Existence*. The center of the wheel is labeled *Fulfillment* and represents



Figure 11.1 Authentic Action Wheel



SOURCE: Adapted from *Authentic Leadership: Courage in Action*, by Robert W. Terry, 1993, p. 84, and Action Wheel Publishing.

the completion of the process. To answer the questions posed by Terry, two steps are required: (1) Locate the problem on the diagnostic wheel, and (2) strategically select an appropriate response to the problem.

The first step, locating the problem, is accomplished by doing an assessment of employees and their organizational concerns. Based on this assessment, leaders can identify on the action wheel the real concerns of the organization. For example, if employees make comments such as “We seem lost” or “Nobody cares around here,” their concerns would be diagnosed as a problem related to *mission*. If employees are saying such things as “We are really stretched thin” or “We can’t possibly do what they’re asking us to do,” their concerns could be diagnosed as *resource* issues on the wheel. Although there are an infinite number of possible issues within a group or an organization, the Authentic Action Wheel provides a structure that allows leaders to categorize various employee concerns into six major areas.

The second step, selecting the appropriate response to the issue, is also accomplished by using the Authentic Action Wheel. However, in this phase of the process the wheel is used prescriptively, to recommend a particular course of action. After a problem is identified, the wheel is used



to encourage leaders to explore alternative explanations for the problem and to select a response based on that information. For example, if employees seem to be struggling with issues related to *power* and who is in control, leaders may wish to pay attention to the *mission* of the organization and the goals and objectives of the people involved. Similarly, if employees are raising questions about the *meaning* of a particular program, leaders may want to focus on *existence* because their concerns may be about the history and identity that undergirds the program. In other words, the Authentic Action Wheel is used to explore the various possible responses to a problem and to select the response that comes closest to solving the issue. Authentic leaders try to address the real problem in the most appropriate fashion.

To illustrate how the Authentic Action Wheel is used, consider the following story about problems in a high school baseball program.

Troubles began when leaders of the booster club asked for an investigation of the coach because of alleged improper use of funds, favoritism (i.e., the coach selected his son over others to be on the team), and violations of school policy (i.e., the coach allowed a parent with a DUI on his record to drive players home from practice). The booster club's concerns made the front page of the local newspaper, and local blogs and editorial pages were filled with reactions by parents, former players, and community members.

To analyze the baseball problem, a leader should have asked, "What is really, *really* going on in this situation?" An initial diagnosis might have suggested that the concerns about the coach clustered around issues of *structure* (i.e., school policy). Leaders of the booster club thought the coach violated school policies and wanted something done about it, while the coach thought his decisions were reasonable and that the booster club was overreaching its authority. The leaders of the booster club and the principal had different opinions about the policies governing the coach and the baseball team.

Using the Authentic Action Wheel as a guide, an authentic leader might have surmised that the conflict was about *power*. Who had the power to make decisions about use of funds, the selection of team players, or which parents could give rides to students? Using the wheel, a leader should have explored how issues of *power* were operating in this conflict. In the end, because these questions were not addressed, effective conflict resolution was *not* attained. Power struggles became even more apparent as the principal replaced the disgruntled cochairs of the booster club with different parents.

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In summary, the Authentic Action Wheel is a visual diagnostic tool to help leaders frame problems. Leaders, with their followers, locate the problem on the wheel and then strategically respond to the major issues of concern. The Terry approach encourages individuals to see things differently and more clearly. In essence, this approach urges leaders to be authentic or “true” to themselves, their organization, and their world, and to base their actions on what is really going on in the situation.

Bill George’s Authentic Leadership Approach. Although the Terry Authentic Action Wheel focuses on problem areas, the authentic leadership approach developed by George (2003; George & Sims, 2007) focuses on the characteristics of authentic leaders. George describes, in a practical way, the essential qualities of authentic leadership and how individuals can develop these qualities if they want to become authentic leaders.

Based on his experience as a corporate executive and through interviews with a diverse sample of 125 successful leaders, George found that authentic leaders have a genuine desire to serve others, they know themselves, and they feel free to lead from their core values. Specifically, authentic leaders demonstrate five basic characteristics: (1) They understand their purpose, (2) they have strong values about the right thing to do, (3) they establish trusting relationships with others, (4) they demonstrate self-discipline and act on their values, and (5) they are passionate about their mission (i.e., act from their heart) (Figure 11.2; George, 2003).

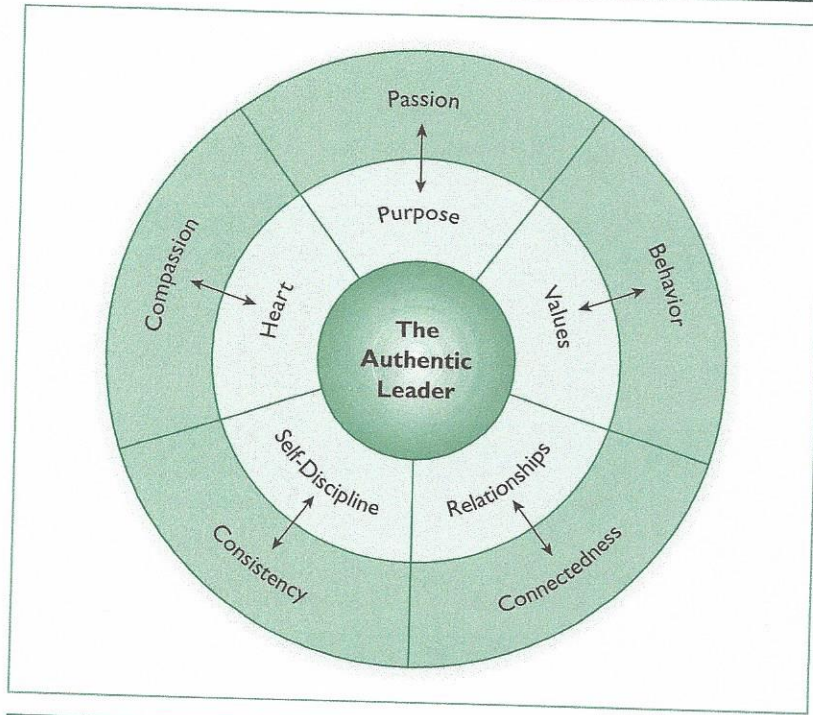
Figure 11.2 illustrates five dimensions of authentic leadership identified by George: purpose, values, relationships, self-discipline, and heart. The figure also illustrates each of the related characteristics—passion, behavior, connectedness, consistency, and compassion—that individuals need to develop to become authentic leaders.

In his interviews, George found that authentic leaders have a real sense of *purpose*. They know what they are about and where they are going. In addition to knowing their purpose, authentic leaders are inspired and intrinsically motivated about their goals. They are *passionate* individuals who have a deep-seated interest in what they are doing and truly care about their work.

A good example of an authentic leader who exhibited passion about his goals was Terry Fox, a cancer survivor, whose leg was amputated after it was overcome by bone cancer. Using a special leg prosthesis, Terry Fox attempted to run across Canada, from the Atlantic to the Pacific, to raise awareness and



Figure 11.2 Authentic Leadership Characteristics



SOURCE: From *Authentic Leadership: Rediscovering the Secrets to Creating Lasting Value* by Bill George, copyright © 2003. Reproduced with permission of John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

money for cancer research. Although Terry died before he finished his run, his courage and passion affected the lives of millions of people. He also accomplished his goals to increase cancer awareness and to raise money for cancer research. Today, the Terry Fox Foundation is going strong and has raised more than \$400 million (Canadian) for cancer research (<http://www.terryfoxrun.org>). Of the dimensions and characteristics in Figure 11.2, Terry Fox clearly demonstrated purpose and passion in his leadership.

Authentic leaders understand their own *values* and *behave* toward others based on these values. Stated another way, George suggests that authentic leaders know their “True North.” They have a clear idea of who they are, where they are going, and what the right thing is to do. When tested in difficult situations, authentic leaders do not compromise their values, but rather use those situations to strengthen their values.

