Looking forward but learning from our past: Potential challenges to developing authentic leadership theory and authentic leaders

Cecily D. Cooper*, Terri A. Scandura1, Chester A. Schriesheim2

Department of Management, School of Business Administration, University of Miami, 417 Jenkins Building, Coral Gables, FL 33124-9145, United States

Abstract

Recently researchers have introduced a new leadership construct, referred to as authentic leadership. There has been considerable interest in this new area of study. Scholars conducting work on authentic leadership believe that the recent upswing in corporate scandals and management malfeasance indicate that a new perspective on leadership is necessary. In order to address these negative societal trends, proponents of authentic leadership take a very normative approach, placing a strong emphasis on the creation of interventions to facilitate the development of authenticity. We concur with the basic tenets of this initiative. However, in this article, we note that it is premature to focus on designing interventions to develop authentic leaders before taking further steps in defining, measuring, and rigorously researching this construct. We draw attention to these issues with the hope of insuring that any development initiatives that are implemented are practical and effective for leaders and organizations.

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1. Introduction

The field of leadership has covered much ground in the last hundred years. Researchers in this area have created a great deal of valuable knowledge on leader traits and behaviors, follower characteristics,
leader–follower relationships, and situational contingencies of leadership as well as other related topics. Collectively, this body of work has significantly advanced our understanding of this complex and multifaceted phenomenon. Although the field has generally maintained a forward trajectory, there have been many times throughout the last century when scholars did not preserve the pace of this forward thrust, creating inertia. These periods of stagnation arose when researchers, collectively, did not adhere to the tenets of normal science that predicates that there is at least a minimal level of paradigm development within the field (Pfeffer, 1993). In other words, there has to be some consensus by scholars regarding which theoretical frameworks they should use and the appropriate methods for investigating them. Without consensus, research cannot advance knowledge in a cumulative manner.

During these periods of inertia, researchers use their time inefficiently, debating assumptions of each new theory and arguing over appropriate research methods and standards (Cole, 1983). For example, it has been common for various factions of scholars to simultaneously create measures for the same construct. The Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) literature illustrates this phenomenon. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, it seemed that almost every empirical study published in this area employed a new or revised measure of exchange quality [see Schriesheim, Castro, and Cogliser (1999) for review]. This detracts from knowledge creation in two ways. First, the parties involved are replicating efforts to create a measure of a single phenomenon, a task which could have been attended to by only one or two of these parties, while the others spent their time doing substantive work. Second, research resulting from these various measures was then not directly comparable. This detracts from the ability of scholars to build upon prior work. In the case of LMX, some studies were assessing member Negotiating Latitude (e.g., Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1975) while others were using similar, but slightly different measures such as Leadership Acceptance (e.g., Graen & Ginsburgh, 1977), Influence Opportunity (e.g., James, Hater, & Jones, 1981) or Leader-Boss Linking-Pin Quality (e.g., Graen, Cashman, Ginsburgh, & Schiemann, 1977).

We mention these issues in order to make a simple point: Leadership scholars must be cognizant of the history of the field and the lessons it teaches. We would like to draw attention to this tenet at this time to help direct research on a new construct, authentic leadership. Granted, the development of this construct is still in its nascent stages and, accordingly, some variety in perspectives would be expected. However, as research in this area builds, this body of knowledge will be expected to advance. In order to facilitate the forward momentum of this area of study and help researchers avoid historical problems, we would like to discuss where these pitfalls might arise and offer recommendations for avoiding or solving them. We believe that since this area is relatively in its genesis, authentic leadership scholars still have ample latitude for avoiding such digressions. Hence, at this early stage the current discussion is very timely, in addition to being important and useful.

2. Authentic leadership

There has been growing interest in the field around a new construct, authentic leadership. The creators of this construct contend that the decrease in ethical leadership (e.g., Worldcom, Enron, Martha Stewart) coupled with an increase in societal challenges (e.g., September 11 terrorism, fluctuating stock values, a downturn in the U.S. economy) necessitates the need for positive leadership more so than in any other time. They also argue that existing frameworks are not sufficient for developing leaders of the future (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Avolio, Gardner, Walumbwa, Luthans, & May, 2004; Avolio, Luthans, & Walumbwa, 2004; Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May, & Walumbwa, 2005; Luthans & Avolio, 2003; May,
Chan, Hodges, & Avolio, 2003). To describe the type of “positive” leadership required, these scholars have drawn from the fields of, leadership, ethics, and positive organizational scholarship to inform the creation of a new construct, authentic leadership.

The ultimate goal of scholars in this area appears to be normative in nature. Proponents of this movement ultimately desire to train and develop leaders who will proactively foster positive environments and conduct business in an ethical, socially responsible manner. To this end, those interested in moving forward with creating development initiatives for authentic leaders have turned to the larger community of leadership researchers to solicit ideas for developing authentic leadership and, additionally, increase interest in this initiative by publishing those ideas.

We agree that the recent upswing in corporate scandals and ethical violations by leaders is disturbing. We also strongly agree that it is a responsibility of management scholars to do what we can to reduce the occurrence of such incidents and we applaud the intentions of those ready to take such action. That said, however, we contend that it is premature to commence designing interventions for authentic leadership development without taking other important preliminary steps. In particular, before designing strategies for authentic leadership development, scholars in this area need to give careful consideration to four critical issues: (1) defining and measuring the construct, (2) determining the discriminant validity of the construct, (3) identifying relevant construct outcomes (i.e., testing the construct’s nomological network), and (4) ascertaining whether authentic leadership can be taught. Researchers have not given due attention to these necessary preliminary steps, as evidenced by the fact that two of the only published writings on authentic leadership have more or less brushed past these issues to focus on authentic leadership development (Luthans & Avolio, 2003; May et al., 2003). In the following discussion, we will expand on these concerns and then offer recommendations for addressing them.

3. Defining and measuring authentic leadership

It is always important to clearly define and measure constructs in order to research them in a systematic manner. This activity, however, will be particularly important for authentic leadership scholars if a central focus of efforts in this area is leadership development. It will eventually be necessary to have a valid measure of authentic leadership in order to be able to evaluate any training interventions. Specifically, if we cannot measure before and after the intervention, we cannot know whether or not the participants have become “more authentic”. Measures of authentic leadership may come in the form of traditional survey instruments or alternative forms, such as verbal or written responses to scenarios. Regardless of how authenticity is measured, however, it will be essential to conduct an assessment of it to ensure that any training intervention to develop authentic leaders is genuine (i.e., does not purport to increase self-awareness, instill positive psychological capacities, and/or change relevant behaviors if they are not affected). Yet, creating measures is not a simple endeavor and the history of leadership research clearly demonstrates the difficulty of clearly defining and quantitatively measuring valid constructs. As scholars of authentic leadership now set off down this rocky path, we would like to offer some suggestions for fulfilling this challenging but critical task.

First, authentic leadership researchers will need to identify the key dimensions of authentic leadership and then create a theoretically-based definition of the construct. In the past, leadership scholars have often used multiple conceptualizations and measures of the same constructs without fully realizing important differences among them (cf. Bass, 1990; Lowe, Kroeck, & Sivasubramaniam, 1996; Schriesheim et al.,
This practice is detrimental because it leads to the development of distinct literatures whose interpretations are not comparable or additive across independent (e.g., Schriesheim, House, & Kerr, 1976) or dependent variables (e.g., Lowe et al., 1996).

Authentic leadership research should be cognizant of this tendency and avoid it. Granted, we realize scholars have already begun the process of defining authentic leadership (e.g., Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Avolio, Luthans et al., 2004; Gardner et al., 2005; Luthans & Avolio, 2003) and have introduced some novel and compelling ideas. However, they will need to continue building on these initial efforts. Only after the authentic leadership concept is clearly defined, may scholars then move onto measurement creation. To offer an organizing framework for this impetus, we will briefly review guidelines for appropriate construct definition and measurement and relate these to current writing in this area. Then, we offer specific recommendations for moving forward with this task.

4. The current authentic leadership definition

Although efforts to define this construct have only recently begun, currently, authentic leaders are defined as, “those who are deeply aware of how they think and behave and are perceived by others as being aware of their own and others’ values/moral perspectives, knowledge, and strengths; aware of the context in which they operate; and who are confident, hopeful, optimistic, resilient, and of high moral character” (Avolio, Luthans et al., 2004, p. 4, as cited in Avolio, Gardner et al., 2004). This initial conceptualization is obviously multi-dimensional. It contains elements from diverse domains—traits, states, behaviors, contexts, and attributions. Moreover, the observers or perspectives involved vary from the leader, to followers (at various “distances”), to possibly additional observers. It is also multi-level. Levels of analysis at which the authentic leadership phenomenon may function can include the “...individual, team and organizational levels” (Avolio, Luthans et al., 2004, p. 7). While starting with such a broad conceptualization may be acceptable for conducting initial research in this area, scholars will need to continue gathering knowledge about this construct and eventually narrow this definition. Maintaining the current definition would pose serious measurement challenges.

Specifically, a refined definition must include a specification of the nature of the dimension (e.g., trait, behavior, attribution, etc.), the observer/perspective of the person(s) providing the report (e.g., self, subordinate, peer, etc.), the level(s) of analysis involved (e.g., individual, dyad, group, organization, etc.), the response category measurement units to be employed (e.g., frequency, magnitude, extent of agreement, etc.), and the dimension’s content domain (including whether there are subdimensions involved). Defining authentic leadership in this manner would help avoid conceptual ambiguity, overlap and redundancy and allow the construction of a measure(s) to be used for quantitative research and assessment of training initiatives. Clearly specifying the level(s) of analysis will be particularly important in moving forward so that authentic leadership researchers working from the definition will not measure at one level and analyze at another, producing results of questionable validity.

5. Recommendations for creating a definition and measure of authentic leadership

A number of actions can be taken to begin refining the definition of authentic leadership, particularly this early in the process of theory-building. To begin, researchers will need to specify the full set of
dimensions underlying authentic leadership. Qualitative methods might be a particularly useful way of identifying these specific dimensions. Such methods are appropriate (perhaps even necessary) when there is little extant research on which to base hypotheses (i.e., take a positivist approach). Moreover, other research domains in the area of leadership (e.g., charismatic leadership) have benefited from the initial use of qualitative investigation (cf. Burns, 1978). Researching the construct in this manner may also aid in the development of conceptual frameworks that relate authentic leadership to its key antecedent, moderating, mediating, and dependent variables (i.e., its nomological network; Cronbach & Meehl, 1955).

Scholars might begin by conducting a number of case studies of leaders who meet the current broad criteria for authenticity. An obvious choice for a case study would be Bill George, the former chairman of Medtronic. His recent book, *Authentic Leadership: Rediscovering the Secrets to Creating Lasting Value*, has provided a definition which suggests that key attributes are purpose, values, heart, relationships and self-discipline (George, 2003). Avolio, Luthans et al. (2004) mention that John Gardner, the former Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, Warren Buffet, and Eleanor Roosevelt might be good case studies of authentic leadership. However, we suggest that researchers conduct a deeper analysis of the specific behaviors of these individuals to develop further insights into authentic leadership.

Additionally, where possible, people who appear to be authentic leaders could be interviewed and grounded theory methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) could be employed to map the dimensions of authentic leadership and their nomological networks. Case studies and interview studies could be complemented with the “life story” (Shamir, Dayan-Horesh, & Adler, 2004; Shamir & Eilam, 2005) or “narrative” (Sparrowe, 2005) approaches in which leaders biographies (written or oral) are analyzed. Leaders’ life stories could also be collected from other parties close to the leader, family members, colleagues, and followers, and compared to the leader’s story (Shamir & Eilam, 2005; Shamir et al., 2004). It may also be useful to examine a matched sample of non-authentic leaders to clarify how they differ in terms of leadership characteristics, behaviors, or life stories. Qualitative research of this type might also aid authentic leadership researchers in determining whether a behavioral or attributional perspective is primary. As previously mentioned, giving both perspectives equal weight makes measurement creation increasingly more complicated.

After a definition of the construct and its dimensions or subdimensions is honed through these methods (or others), authentic leadership scholars must develop at least two ways of assessing each authentic leadership dimension or subdimension. If the ultimate goal is the training and development of authentic leaders (cf. May et al., 2003), it will be necessary to use pretest–posttest study designs and different measures (or even measurement techniques) to reduce the inflation of training effect estimates due to pretest–training interactions (Cook, Campbell, & Peracchio, 1990). Although surveys are frequently used to assess leadership behaviors (e.g., the Multi-factor Leadership Questionnaire for transformational and non-transformational leadership styles) and are an obvious option, researchers should not close themselves off to the possibility of other methods. Since authentic leaders are supposed to be able to make ethical decisions, it may be appropriate to supply them with a variety of scenarios which depict decisions containing ethical dilemmas and gauge their responses or, perhaps, even enact some sort of moral dilemma for them, similar to an experiential learning format, and assess how they react.

Leadership researchers might also want to consider creating an assessment that models the Implicit Association Test (Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998) which is often used to assess implicit
biases (e.g., racism or sexism) by recording response times to a word association exercise. Granted, racial attitudes might not be the metric of interest but the test format could likely be adapted to measure an attribute of interest to authentic leadership researchers or coaches. Furthermore, if relationships are one of the primary tenets of the theory, data may need to be collected from both authentic leaders and their followers. For example, if authentic leadership is viewed as an attribution by followers, it will be important to be able to separate the leaders’ perception of their own behavior from follower perceptions of it. In this case, researchers would need to create parallel methods for assessment which can be applied to both leaders and followers (e.g., surveys with corresponding scales).

Although satisfying these standards will require a considerable amount of additional time and resources, these issues are not insurmountable. As discussed in more detail at the end of this paper, one idea for approaching this would be to organize the efforts of persons interested in the study of authentic leadership (perhaps in a consortium similar to that used in the Globe Study; cf. House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004) and employ a division of labor that results in the development and validation of two or more alternative (parallel) standard quantitative measures for each variable employed in researching this topic. Approaching the task in this manner would decrease the burden of this undertaking falling on only one group, as well as ensure that there is not a duplication of research effort or a proliferation of measures created.

6. Distinguishing authentic leadership from other leadership constructs

Once researchers create an appropriate measure for the authentic leadership construct it will then be necessary to determine its discriminant validity. Empirically testing discriminant validity is necessary in order to ascertain whether the construct is redundant with other similar constructs (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). Authentic leadership scholars seem to be aware of the importance of this since all of the initial writings on this topic mention this concern (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Avolio, Luthans et al., 2004; Luthans & Avolio, 2003; May et al., 2003).

In particular, these works acknowledge the similarity of the authentic leadership construct to the transformational leadership construct and have made initial attempts to conceptually distinguish between these two frameworks. Authentic leadership scholars conceptualize authentic leadership as a “root construct” underlying all positive approaches to leadership (Avolio, Luthans et al., 2004; May et al., 2003). Authentic leadership researchers will need to identify and focus on the points of divergence and accentuate these in their conceptualization and measurement of authentic leadership. This will eventually allow the empirical differentiation of authentic leadership from other types of leadership, such as transformational, charismatic, and servant, and also demonstrate that it truly is a root construct (rather than a construct which is equivalent to one or more of these types).

7. Recommendations for distinguishing the construct

Authentic leadership researchers need to be careful to accentuate the theoretical basis of authentic leadership from other leadership constructs in their theorizing. In fact, earlier in this special issue we see that Avolio and Gardner (2005) have begun this process with their comparison which is summarized in
their Table 1. That said, however, the critical test is not whether researchers can distinguish the authentic leadership construct in a theoretical discussion, but whether this construct can be distinguished from other similar constructs empirically, using commonly accepted psychometric methods for determining discriminant validity.

Researchers will need to, first, create a reliable and valid measure of authentic leadership. However, if the scale items of this new scale are not discriminated from the items of other measures (such as the MLQ), this would imply the construct is equivalent to these other constructs and, thus, redundant. Alternatively, if researchers are able to empirically discriminate authentic leadership from other constructs, they can continue to move forward with their research efforts and development initiatives. We encourage authentic leadership scholars to focus their efforts in this direction, because such an analysis would not only increase the credibility of this line of inquiry but also help garner support from authentic leadership skeptics.

8. Analyzing the nomological network of authentic leadership

After suitable measures have been developed and discriminant validity analyses have been conducted, research will need to further map the dimensions and subdimensions to the nomological network of variables that may be associated with authentic leadership. It is important to clarify the relevant dependent variables, in order for other researchers to be able to test hypotheses and advance knowledge on this topic. Avolio, Luthans et al. (2004) have begun this process and have noted that authentic leadership should impact several mediating variables, including “…leaders’ and followers’ self-awareness, efficacy, regulation, and collective efficacy and identification” (p. 37). These initial efforts are noteworthy but, once again, we must dissect them in order to recommend needed steps for progress in this area.

Current discussions of authentic leadership appear to treat the concept as one independent variable (Avolio, Luthans et al., 2004). For example, it is posited that, “Authentic leaders fundamentally influence their own and followers’ sense of self-awareness of values/moral perspective, which in turn provides a relational base for sustainable, veritable performance” (Avolio, Luthans et al., 2004, p. 15). Looking more closely at this hypothesis, Avolio and colleagues imply authentic leadership is a global independent variable (with various subdimensions) and sustainable (long-term) veritable (genuine)
performance is the global dependent variable (which would be measured at multiple levels of analysis; Avolio, Luthans et al., 2004, p. 7). Follower responses are suggested as mediators (sense of self-awareness of values/moral perspective). There also appears to be a mediator at the dyad level (relational base). One thing that is clear from this hypothesis is that theorizing on authentic leadership needs further development to relate specific dimensions/subdimensions of authentic leadership to specific dependent variable measures. If global or composite measures are used, aggregated positive, negative, and neutral subdimension relationships may distort obtained overall relationships (as happened, for example, with the initiating structure dimension of the Ohio State leadership scales; Schriesheim et al., 1976).

As one illustration of our concerns in this area, consider the global dependent variable, sustained veritable performance. Without further theoretical guidance, one can only imagine the many ways in which this effectiveness variable can be conceptualized and operationalized. For example, Lowe et al. (1996) report that over three-dozen different variables have been employed as effectiveness indicators in the transformational leadership research that has used the MLQ (see Table 1 for some illustrations). This does not include differences in operationalizations of the same or similar variables—only gross differences between them. Imagine the possibilities for sustained veritable performance and for some of the hypothesized mediator variables (which can be conceptualized as intermediate effectiveness measures)—such as moral capacity, moral courage, moral resiliency, and moral efficacy (May et al., 2003).

9. Recommendations for building and analyzing the nomological network

One basic goal in building the nomological network is to make sure all of the relevant constructs are identified. As mentioned in the prior Section on construct definition, qualitative research may facilitate the identification of all relevant dimensions and variables. Since theorizing in this area is still in its nascent stages, it is likely that not all of the relevant dependent variables have been identified. Second, once these constructs are identified their level of analysis must be specified. Levels-of-analysis issues are particularly relevant here since research investigating authentic leadership will need to employ level-appropriate measures and data analytic techniques (such as Within-and-Between Entities Analysis, WABA, or Hierarchical Linear Modeling, HLM; Bryk & Raudenbush, 1992; Dansereau, Alutto, & Yammarino, 1984).

Once these tasks have been carefully completed, the next issue that must be considered is sampling. Currently, many of the leaders discussed as authentic leaders are high ranking executives in organizations (i.e., CEOs). However, authentic leadership is supposedly exhibited at all levels of the organization (Luthans & Avolio, 2003). Thus, we expect authentic leadership will most likely be studied at all organizational levels. In addition, when testing the network of variables, the really interesting questions are probably those that must be tested longitudinally.

The criterion of sustainable, veritable performance suggests that it is only over some period of time that the influence of an authentic leader is discerned. Research will have to address what this period of time is (i.e., how long must performance be sustained to know that authentic leadership is having it hypothesized effect). Also, the fragility of authentic leadership should probably be studied over time. The 2004 presidential candidate poll results on Howard Dean are a clear reminder that what is seen as authentic one day might be seen very differently the next. The effect of critical incidents (Dean’s Iowa
concession speech as an example) on follower attributions of authentic leadership would be a useful avenue for longitudinal research to pursue.

Finally, when conducting these analyses authentic leadership researchers need to be cognizant that although measures exist for some of the variables needed to test the nomological network of authentic leadership they have already proposed, a number still need to be developed and validated. For example, to our knowledge there is no existing measure of “self-awareness.” Thus, researchers will need to concurrently develop and validate measures for self-awareness and authentic leadership separately before studying them in conjunction. This situation poses unique problems in addition to raising concerns about the resources needed to develop the new measures that are necessary to adequately investigate authentic leadership. Authentic leadership researchers will have to contend with this challenge.

10. The difficulty of developing authenticity

Granted, some leaders will not need any guidance to become authentic, as evidenced by the multitude of current or historical leaders (e.g., Ghandi and Nelson Mandela) who fit the profile of “authenticity.” However, others may have the potential to become authentic but may need help in realizing their potential. We know that there is considerable interest in the question of whether or not the training and development of authentic leaders can be effective (e.g., May et al., 2003). We made the point previously that it is very early in the development of authentic leadership theory to begin a program of research to develop authentic leaders through training. However, we would like to raise some issues surrounding training and development initiatives that need to be addressed should research begin to move forward in this area. These issues are not trivial. In fact, we will speak to the essence of what authentic leadership is, and whether or not it can be developed by training.3

Authentic leadership is not like other areas of leadership for which competency sets might be acquired in traditional training programs. For example, teaching coaching skills involves a relatively straightforward set of guidelines that can be reinforced with role-play exercises. Studies of charismatic leadership (Howell & Frost, 1989; Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1996) also suggest that charisma can be learned, and that followers may respond positively to leaders that exhibit such learned behavior. Alternatively, to begin thinking about how to develop authentic leaders, we must think outside the parameters of traditional leadership training. Specifically, the four major issues which any authentic leadership development intervention must address are: (1) ensuring that the program, itself, is genuine, (2) determining how “trigger events” can be replicated during training, (3) deciding whether ethical decision-making can be taught, and (4) (if these first three issues can be addressed) determining who should participate in authentic leadership training.

3 We should clarify that in this Section we are focusing on the development of authentic leaders. We recognize that the notion of “developing authentic leaders” is not synonymous with “authentic leadership development.” The former pertains to developing leaders which fit the profile of authenticity which certain scholars have begun to define (e.g., Luthans & Avolio, 2003) and which is the focus of this manuscript. The latter terminology refers to leadership development programs that develop the type of leadership (e.g., transformational, participative, etc.) that they purport to develop (i.e., the program, itself, is genuine). That said, we do believe that any program to develop authentic leaders must, itself, be authentic and briefly address this issue in the manuscript.
11. Creating genuine interventions

Authentic leadership development need not be a seminar and, in fact, a seminar may not be ideal. Thus, the idea of “interventions” needs to be broadened to include other elements. Most importantly, for leadership development to be authentic it must be what it purports to be. For this to be achieved, it seems that the key aspects of theory, context and time must be addressed.

Authentic leadership development must be based upon an underlying theoretical model that is valid. Additionally, the development process must adequately and faithfully contain and transmit all the key aspects of that underlying model. Elsewhere in this article we address conceptual issues relating to the theory of Luthans and Avolio (2003) of authentic leadership. Our prescriptions would serve as an excellent point of departure for developing the necessary theory on which to base the design of development initiatives.

For example, the role of context in authentic leadership development will need to be addressed, and the degree to which authenticity is in the “eye of the beholder” in various contexts is a potentially interesting area for future research. For this type of training to be genuine, it will need to be sensitive to a number of organizational concerns. Key aspects of context to consider would be the industry, organization, size, organizational culture, organizational histories, work group cohesion, conflict, previous leadership interventions and the degree of success/failure.

Individual differences, such as demographics and personality variables, may also affect the development of authentic leadership. For personality, Big Five characteristics such as emotional stability may impact the potential of certain individuals for becoming authentic leaders. Various demographic variables may also play a role. One that seems particularly relevant is age. For leaders to be able to reflect on trigger events (addressed in the following Section), they must have had the opportunity to experience such events in their lives.

National culture should likewise be considered. What might be seen as authentic in the United States may be seen very differently by Chinese, for example. Hence, an intervention which may be genuine in the United States may not be genuine if implemented elsewhere. As interest in authentic leadership grows, culture should be explored as a boundary condition.

Authentic leadership development must also attend to temporal issues. These development interventions will probably not be effective if they are treated as a one-time training event. Unique designs of field interventions may be required to evoke the responses needed to develop authentic leaders. For example, such interventions may need to be a longer-term commitment that involves training, one-on-one coaching, and trigger events. Our reading of the authentic leadership literature suggests that important life events that trigger personal growth and development could be an important component of authentic leadership development.

12. Replicating trigger events

Many discussions of authentic leadership describe trigger events in the life of these leaders which had significant impact on their world view and leadership style. We include examples of Mother Teresa and Bill George to illustrate this concept.

Mother Teresa of Calcutta is often cited as an example of an authentic leader (e.g., George, 2003). We have searched biographical information on Mother Teresa and found that there does appear to be a
triggering event in her life. In 1948, Mother Teresa came across a dying woman lying in front of a hospital in Calcutta. She stayed with this woman until the woman died, and after this event she dedicated her life to helping the “poorest of the poor” in India. For over 50 years thereafter, she worked tirelessly for this cause and won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979. Without question, her life meets the criteria generally explicated by authentic leadership scholars.

In the business world, Bill George introduced the authentic leadership concept and his leadership of Medtronics implies that he exhibits a heightened sense of self-awareness, optimism, and belief in followers. Bill George overcame a number of personal challenges which could be considered “trigger events” (which he writes about in his book). In particular, he was faced with the sudden death of his mother and his fiancé in a short time period (he lost his fiancé 3 weeks before their planned wedding).

Similar to the notion of trigger events, Bennis and Thomas (2002) agree that the ability to overcome adversity and become stronger is one of the attributes of exceptional business leaders. They define “crucibles of leadership” as “... a transformative experience through which an individual comes to a new or an altered sense of identity” (p. 6). Their interviews with top executives revealed that most could recount stories of critical life events that shaped their ability to lead others. These individuals showed an ability to learn from experience, and insight through self-awareness that is characteristic of authentic leaders. Thus, the notion that trigger events facilitate leadership development seems to have merit.

We expect that trigger events may be dramatic and high profile events in one’s life as the aforementioned examples illustrate. However, less sensational events may also be able to trigger the kind of personal development that leads to authentic leadership. The importance of triggering life events needs to be discerned as research in this area continues as this is a central notion to the development of authentic leaders. Yet, as pointed out by Luthans and Avolio (2003), triggers may also include more routine events such as reading an important book that has profound impact on the way one thinks about their life and career. The establishment of a formal mentoring program may even serve as a trigger event. Bennis and Thomas (2002) note that “... not all crucible experiences are traumatic. In fact, they can involve a positive, if deeply challenging, experience such as having a demanding boss or mentor” (p. 10). Managers (i.e., bosses) and mentors might be trained in authentic leadership and given guidelines for providing the types of challenges that the successful executives interviewed by Bennis and Thomas discuss. For example, they describe how a mentor would confront the protégé on mistakes made and carefully explain how those mistakes might lead to erroneous decision-making. Mentors could then reinforce ethical principles and role model the various positive psychological states.

Trigger events may also be artificially created in an intervention-type setting. For example, the Implicit Association Tests (e.g., Chugh, 2004), which were mentioned earlier as a possible format for assessing authentic leadership, might also work quite well as trigger events. An individual may not think that they harbor tendencies to be racist or sexist, however, an implicit association test may indicate that they do, in fact, possess some of these latent tendencies. This testing event may be a genuine way of making the individual more self-aware. Additionally, if this information is disturbing to the person (i.e., if they didn’t think of themselves as racist or sexist), then the activity may serve as a catalyst for them to devote more conscious thought to their daily decisions along these lines to make sure those decisions are ethical.

Alternatively, trigger events may also be the culmination of smaller events which accumulate over time until a threshold level is reached which evokes behaviors that are characteristic of authentic leaders. Authentic leadership may thus be evolutionary as well as revolutionary. Granted, a development intervention for authentic leaders will likely require more than behavioral modification if increased self-
awareness is also a pre-requisite. However, the current conceptualization implies that there will be behaviors which are associated with this type of leadership and it is possible that these behaviors may be taught through a reinforcement process. Reinforcement theory describes two processes, “chaining” and “shaping,” which may offer guidance for developing the complex behaviors associated with authentic leadership (Skinner, 1969).

Chaining involves the teaching of a complex behavior pattern by reinforcing the simpler behavioral components that collectively comprise that complex pattern. Similarly, shaping is the process of rewarding successively closer approximations to a desired complex behavior. Shaping may be used in conjunction with or as an alternative to chaining. The efficacy of reinforcing smaller events for behavior change (specifically developing authentic leadership behaviors) should be examined in laboratory studies and their cumulative effects compared to the effects of single trigger events or crucibles of a larger magnitude.

In sum, the impact of the accumulation of small reinforcing events versus crucibles is an important direction for research on authentic leadership, particularly because this research would speak directly to the design of development initiatives. It is also important to realize, though, that trigger events (of any frequency or magnitude) may not always produce authentic leaders. It is the interaction of the trigger event and personal insight that produces behavior change. As with many leadership interventions, not every manager may respond, but the differences between those that do and do not will be a critical aspect of early intervention studies.

13. Teaching ethics

Third, the matter of the degree to which ethical behavior can be readily impacted in adults remains a subject of debate. As noted by Price (2003)

“... leaders sometimes behave immorally precisely because they are blinded by their own values. In the end, we can expect that this kind of blindness will come to bear importantly on the moral psychology of leadership and, in some cases, encourage transformational leaders to believe that they are justified in making exceptions of themselves on the grounds that their leadership behavior is authentic” (p. 67).

The ethical foundation of authentic leaders appears to be a central concept. Moreover, ethics is an important subject, given the recent ethical problems highlighted by the media in the corporate world today. However, authentic leadership theorists appear to assume that the true selves that authentic leaders discover through trigger events is an ethical self as they increase self-awareness. The topic of leadership ethics is clearly a subject that is gaining interest from both scholars and practitioners (Ciulla, 1995). Yet, the question of whether adult ethical behavior can be changed is a key issue that must be addressed.

In fact, it is questionable whether any adult behavior can be changed over the long-term. Research on training and development indicates that training programs rarely produce long-term, documented effects on behavior (Arthur, Bennett, Edens, & Bell, 2003). The levels of training effectiveness of Kirkpatrick (1994) are important to note here. At the first level, training programs are evaluated on reactions, or affect (i.e., “did you like the training?”). At the second level, the degree of learning in the training program is assessed (i.e., were the skills acquired). Third, the impact on behaviors in the workplace,
referred to as transfer of training, is assessed. Finally, the results of the training program on individual, work group and/or organizational performance are measured.

Most training programs are only evaluated at the affective level of reaction because it is difficult to link training with behavioral and performance-level outcomes. Clearly, developmental programs have not been held to a very high “proof of performance” standard. In a recent meta-analysis of training evaluations within programs conducting training assessments at multiple levels, Arthur et al. (2003) found there is a substantial decrease in effect size as evaluation moves from the learning level to the behavioral and results levels. They hypothesized this decrease was a function of the favorability of the post-training environment for the actual application of the learned skills. Thus, the degree of effectiveness that can be expected as a result of formal, planned training programs may, indeed, fall considerably short of the mark than might be required to justify the expenditures for authentic leadership development training (i.e., have a low return on investment). Importantly, if the intervention’s effects are not lasting, the intervention probably would not be considered genuine.

14. Selecting participants for authentic leadership training

A fourth issue is who should participate in authentic leadership training. It seems that the proponents of training authentic leaders believe that most managers can become authentic leaders: “We take a positive approach to developing such leaders and believe that most people have the innate potential to become an authentic moral leader” (May et al., 2003, p. 250). However, the issue of the “dark side of leadership” was discussed over a decade ago by Conger (1990). Authentic leadership skeptics may speculate that individuals with Machiavellian tendencies would participate in authentic leadership development interventions simply to further their own personal power or self-interests. In other words, if these leaders are aware that authentic leadership will result in “veritable sustained performance”, they might be motivated to learn how to be (or at least appear) authentic. Moreover, if they are very adept at communicating and managing impressions, these leaders should be able to make themselves appear authentic to followers even if they are not.

As an example, many might consider Herb Kelleher, former CEO and founder of Southwest Airlines, to be an authentic leader (e.g., Luthans & Avolio, 2003). Descriptions of his leadership style, along with accounts from the airline’s employees (i.e., his followers), indicate that SWA employees were extremely committed to Kelleher and that he engendered feelings of confidence, hope, and resiliency throughout the organization. As a result of this (as well as other factors), Southwest Airlines is the only airline which has exhibited performance which could be characterized as “veritable” and “sustained” (O’Reilly & Pfeffer, 1995). However, the question remains: Is Herb Kelleher truly authentic OR is he simply a gifted communicator and actor who has been able to connect with his employees and run a very profitable airline? If the latter is true, does the distinction between real and enacted authenticity matter if the outcomes associated with each are still the same? We do not pretend to know the answers to such questions, but we highlight them here for scholars of authentic leadership to contemplate.

These concerns are similar to those which have previously been levied at charismatic (Gardner & Avolio, 1998; Howell & Avolio, 1992) and transformational leadership (Conger, 1999). In the case of authentic leadership, however, the “dark side” would be that those leaders who could emulate authenticity (e.g., relying on “principles” to make decisions, appearing to involve other stakeholders in decision-making, appearing to make the needs of others primary) should be able to engender elevated
levels of trust and commitment from followers, even if they are undeserving of such trust. Followers can easily be harmed by identifying with ill-intended leadership (Conger, 1990; O’Connor, Mumford, Clifton, Gessner, & Connelly, 1995). We are pointing out that there is a danger that one may be viewed as authentic and then gain power and status in an organization through careful impression management. Training interventions would possibly highlight the behaviors that are associated with authentic leaders and this information could be used for devious purposes.

15. Recommendations for designing authentic leadership development interventions

Although May et al. (2003) believe most people have the ability to become authentic leaders, our position is somewhat different. Moral or ethical behavior may be difficult to alter in adults. Such behaviors are value-based and may be shaped by culture and/or family experiences. It seems that to maximize the likelihood of training leaders to be authentic, researchers may have to pre-screen potential training candidates and select those who would most likely benefit from such a training intervention. It may be that these individuals would be those that have experienced a critical life event, for example. The training could then help re-frame those experiences so that they facilitate the development of authentic leadership.

Alternatively, some form of assessment might be developed which identifies those with a propensity toward ethical decision-making and/or authentic leadership. This approach was described by Cronbach (1957) as the “two disciplines of scientific psychology”. In this approach, individual differences and treatments are both considered (aptitude by treatment interactions) to produce more effective training results. At this early stage in the development of authentic leadership training, it may be sensible to try to select candidates for this training that might benefit from it. Others can be offered a different type of training that is more suited to their needs. Once the efficacy of the training method is established, the base of individuals to whom authentic leadership training is offered might be expanded.

Also, it is important to remember that authentic and ethical behavior may be highly context-dependent. Luthans and Avolio (2003) mention that a supportive organizational context is essential for the long-term effects of authentic leadership development to be realized. We would like to stress this point further. Ethical behavior may be influenced by the persons in power in an organization or by the peer group. For example, it has been demonstrated that employees will engage in discriminatory behaviors toward minorities, at the request of their supervisors, even if these employees do not hold anti-racial attitudes. Such individuals say that they are “... just following orders” (Brief et al., 1997, p. 63). Even after training, such pressures may be more powerful than training effects. In a study of 505 supermarket managers, Tracy, Tannenbaum, and Kavanagh (1995) found that both organizational climate and culture played important roles in the transfer of training to the job. Specifically the social support system from supervisors and peers was most related to transfer of training. Thus, a support system for the training must be in place.

Finally, rigorous program assessment will be the key. Training in authentic leadership will need to be linked with behavior change (rated by others in the workplace) and performance at all levels (individual, group, and organization)—preferably using non-perceptual measures. As mentioned above, management development is rarely evaluated at the impact level for any type of training program. Only through such assessment can we determine the utility of an authentic leadership development initiative. The bottom line is that it would be irresponsible (and not genuine) to implement interventions claiming certain benefits if, in fact, they do not provide them.
Taken together, our set of recommendations has certain parallels to the socialization process as described by Schein (1992) which may offer guidance as an over-arching framework for designing genuine interventions to develop authentic leaders. Schein’s model is notable because it emphasizes the critical role of candidate selection, describes behavioral change through trigger events (which he presents as tactics for “unfreezing”) and training with reinforcement, and stresses the pivotal role of context.

Essentially, Schein sees socialization as involving eight interrelated steps: (1) careful screening and selection of subjects for the socialization process; (2) development of a humility-inducing experience which essentially “unfreezes” the subject and makes them open to new understandings and learning; (3) in-the-trenches training that teaches the subject a set of core competencies, norms, and values; (4) development and employment of a reward system that appropriately rewards (reinforces) what is being taught; (5) a system of shared values and sense-making that justifies the sacrifices involved in abandoning old ways and learning new; (6) a folklore that is told and subtly reinforces the core values and norms that are being taught; (7) role models that act consistent with the new ways being taught the subjects; and (8) systematic de-selection of subjects (throughout the process) who do not make satisfactory progress with respect to competency, norms, and values.

In sum, much work needs to be done in terms of theory building and measurement before training to develop authentic leadership should be undertaken. However, through thoughtful analysis of this concept and careful attention to these issues, the probability of such efforts being successful may be increased.

16. Recommendations for action and concluding remarks

We have noted that research on authentic leadership faces a multitude of challenges in the years ahead. Since much needs to be accomplished, it might be beneficial to develop a consortium of authentic leadership researchers. This would ensure that work is not duplicated, and might advance knowledge in the area more rapidly. This consortium might operate in a similar fashion as recent projects on international leadership. For example, one of the broadest investigations of leadership research is House’s GLOBE project (House et al., 2004; Scandura & Dorfman, 2004).

House and his colleagues organized a large consortium of researchers in 62 different countries to study leadership and cultural context. With respect to authentic leadership, each group of researchers could focus on one of the issues we have outlined in this paper (for example, theoretical development, measurement, levels of analysis, interventions) and complete each task using the recommendations we have noted as guidelines. These groups would need to organize their activities and feed into one another. Of course, these tasks would need to be addressed sequentially, but a plan of organized action with various groups contributing might go a long way in getting authentic leadership research on the right track.

We believe that the recommendations offered in the previous Section should help advance knowledge on the topic of authentic leadership—knowledge which could subsequently be applied to creating authentic leadership development interventions. However, before concluding we must acknowledge that there are limitations inherent even in our own recommendations and authentic leadership researchers are likely to be faced with certain lingering questions for which they should be prepared. Three such questions are of particular note.

The first question is whether a leader must always act “authentically” in order to be considered an authentic leader. Previously, we mentioned Herb Kelleher and described his successes as CEO of
Southwest Airlines. Many people would probably consider him an authentic leader and he has even been cited as such (e.g., Luthans & Avolio, 2003). However, there are times when Kelleher may not have acted authentically. Jim Parker, who took over as CEO of Southwest after Kelleher, suddenly resigned from the post in July of 2004 citing “no overbearing reasons” for his resignation (Allen, 2004). However, it has been heard that one reason for Parker’s resignation is that Kelleher undercut his authority during contract negotiations with the pilots union when the ex-CEO was called in to help negotiate a contract. Although this story remains a speculation without explicit confirmation from Parker, this possibility highlights an interesting question: Is someone considered an authentic leader even if he or she may act inauthentically in certain situations?

Although other leadership distinctions may depend on the execution of a skill-set, such as charisma, the distinction of authentic leadership rests heavily on perceptions of morality. Research has shown that there is a fundamental difference in how perceivers weigh information when making judgments about another individual’s morality versus ability. Specifically, when considering matters of morality, perceivers weigh negative acts more heavily than positive acts (see Snyder & Stukas, 1999 for a review). Hence, even if a leader almost always demonstrates high integrity, even one digression may cause others to believe this leader is immoral. In other words, a leader may be able to be charismatic at times and non-charismatic at times and still be considered a “charismatic leader.” However, it is likely that a leader must act with integrity consistently in order to be considered an “authentic leader.” Hence, if a leader commits one immoral act are they not an authentic leader? Alternatively, is authenticity not an all or nothing distinction but a matter of degree? These are questions authentic leadership scholars must consider. Interestingly, the story of Herb Kelleher also illustrates how perceptions of authenticity can vary between different constituents of the same leader. If this story is true, we can assume that Jim Parker probably didn’t think Kelleher acted very authentically in this situation, whereas the pilots union may still have a very positive overall perception of Kelleher.

Finally, authentic leadership scholars will undoubtedly also receive criticism from other researchers regarding the necessity and appropriateness of creating another leadership construct. When researchers introduce a new construct to the field, it detracts from the field’s ability to build knowledge, because research including the new construct (in this case authentic leadership) is not directly comparable to research on other types of leadership (Cole, 1983). Researchers should not introduce a new construct if they are able to address the same questions using existing constructs.

In particular, is it necessary to introduce a new leadership construct (i.e., authentic leadership) in order to understand whether or not it is important that leaders be self-aware or have positive psychological capacities? Could we gain the same insights by studying these characteristics in relation to existing frameworks? For example, researchers could design a study where they examine whether self-awareness moderates the effectiveness of different leadership styles, such as transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire. Scholars could design similar studies to assess hope, confidence, and resiliency as mediators or moderators of various leadership styles. By studying the constructs in this manner, rather than combining them together in a new construct, the relative value of these attributes ascribed to authentic leaders may be more readily determined. Once again, we do not have a definitive answer to this question.

However, the answer should reveal itself if authentic leadership researchers carry out the first three recommendations we have prescribed (i.e., defining, measuring, and researching outcomes of the construct). If rigorous empirical research reveals that this construct is unique and associated with outcomes that are important for organizational effectiveness, then this will attest to the appropriateness of introducing and using this construct in future leadership theory and research.
In sum, although the purpose of this special issue is to inform initiatives for the development of authentic leaders, we suggest that the timing of such an impetus may be somewhat premature given how little we know about this construct. As we have argued here, if authentic leadership scholars have a sincere desire to develop leaders who possess ethical, positive capabilities, they can best achieve this goal by conducting research on authentic leadership and its development in a thorough, systematic manner. By revisiting some of the challenges that leadership researchers have faced in the past, we have identified a set of core concerns that we believe need to be addressed before the study of authentic leaders and, subsequently, their development can further progress.

Attention to these issues will increase the likelihood that significant threats to the usefulness of authentic leadership research and development interventions will be avoided or, at least, anticipated and dealt with as best possible. Failure to consider these and related concerns is expedient but likely to yield a literature that, in the long run, has very limited usefulness for advancing knowledge about the authentic leadership phenomenon, much less aid in the development of authentic leaders. We hope that our comments are useful in stimulating discussion of how to best proceed in the study of this exciting new leadership domain. Our goal is the production of knowledge that is interesting, useful, and scientifically valid, since it is only this type of knowledge that can ultimately benefit practice.

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References


