

THE MACRIS GROUP

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From Dean's Desk:



Prologue

We are jumping into another very interesting topic, Authenticity and Leadership. Similar to other self-help and leadership development programs, there are lists galore of characteristics of authentic leaders. As examples, some of these characteristics include: self-awareness and being genuine, mission driven and focused on results, leading with their heart, demonstrating initiative, exerting influence, exercising integrity, speaking their truth, being courageous, committing to excellence rather than perfection, etc. etc. Our guess is that if you ask any leader if they possess these qualities and/or characteristics they will say yes. But, if you ask those they lead if their leaders possess these qualities, would the answers be yes? We are not so sure, in there lies the issue regarding authenticity and leadership. We are focusing on this topic for many of the same reasons we developed the concept of Contextual Leadership. There is no elixir of leadership, there is no “answer key” to being an effective leader. Authenticity is keenly important to effective leadership, but once again we are seeing perhaps a singular focus inward, rather than a more holistic perspective where authenticity is both internal to the leader and evidenced/validated by those being led. Once again we are taking some risks here, and sincerely appreciate your thoughts and even criticism.

Authenticity and Leadership—What does this really mean?

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Introduction

As we continue our quest on the essence of leadership, authenticity is another aspect of leadership that we believe needs addressing. Similar to the overall topic of leadership; authenticity is evasive and difficult to characterize in such a way to make it both easy to understand and possible to achieve. We certainly are not profound in our search here – a simple Google search of the topic yields a significant amount of information. In addition, the number of books on the subject is equally as impressive. We have even purchased and read selected volumes. So what is it about this topic that Larry and I feel we can contribute? It turns out after extensive notes and conversations we realized that there are many more questions than there are answers. Despite the challenges we see, we believe authenticity in leadership is a significant contributor in achieving effective leadership.

A simple definition of authentic leadership is: ‘True to one’s own personality, spirit or character despite external pressures.’ Sounds good, but what does that mean in the context of leadership? We do not believe the topic of Authentic Leadership has been explored sufficiently, and as we were doing our research we realized there are more

questions than answers. This article, for the most part, will present our thinking and the dilemma as we see it. Our intention and expectation is, that as we hear from you on this topic, and delve more into authenticity and its connection to leadership effectiveness, we will follow-up on your comments and our thoughts in future UPDATE articles. So here we go.

Most of us in our careers have worked with, or been involved with, some authentic leaders and others who were the opposite. In our respective cases, we didn’t think in terms of authenticity at the time, but as we look back we can see how genuine, effective and authentic certain leaders were; and on the flip side how superficial, uninspiring and two dimensional other leaders were. Until recently, authenticity was not a common view of a leader nor a common term in the lexicon of leadership, but we believe it is a valid characteristic of a successful leader.

Do you really believe leaders think about whether they are authentic or not? How do they know? Walk back in your memory and recall leaders in any aspect of your life. Did you ever have the impression that they considered whether they were authentic in their leadership? Better yet, how would you have known if they were really authentic, or how would you recognize an authentic leader? Perhaps you

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didn't consider that concept as we call it out here, and hopefully retrospectively, you can recall an experience or a person who came across as the "real deal" in your past leaders.

This brings up yet another question; who is authenticity for? The definition above, along with many other similar 'individual focused being true to oneself' definitions, are inward looking. While knowing oneself is keenly important, and introspection is one of the focal points for our leadership development programs; does an inward focus parlay into authenticity as a leader? We think there is more to it than just an inward focus.

So, let's flip it around - Who are leaders leading? Leaders are not "leading" themselves. They are leading others. No matter how leaders view themselves, it is how those being lead perceive the leadership that is critical to the success of the organization and the effectiveness of the leader. We think another factor in authenticity is the context of the leadership situation and environment. In other words, someone can be an effective and authentic leader in one situation but not in a different situation. We'll explore this later. This is where our Contextual Leadership concept comes in.

What is Authentic Leadership?

Most commonly the thinking on authentic leadership is inwardly focused; following inner guidance built on experience, a skill set, knowledge, compassion, empathy and a focus on what is the best organization and the employees and not necessarily what is best for themselves. As we mentioned at the onset of this article, we are not suggesting we have the answer key to this issue. What we are attempting to do is frame out the argument in the dimensions beyond a leader looking inward.

The current thinking on authenticity certainly is not new. "Secular and religious notions of authenticity have coexisted for centuries under different guises; perhaps the earliest account of authenticity that remains popular is Socrates' admonition that "the unexamined life is not worth living". Plato's account of the trial of Socrates

In aesthetics, "authenticity" describes the perception of art as faithful to the artist's self, rather than conforming to external values such as historical tradition, or commercial worth. A common definition of "authenticity" in psychology refers to the attempt to live one's life according to the

needs of one's inner being, rather than the demands of society or one's early conditioning. [1][2][3]"

1. Wood, A. M., Linley, P. A., Maltby, J., Baliouis, M., Joseph, S. (2008) *The authentic personality: "A theoretical and empirical conceptualization, and the development of the Authenticity Scale"*. *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 55 (3): 385-399. doi:10.1037/0022-0167.55.3.385
2. *Authentic life*. Psychology Centre Athabasca University.
3. *"Existential Psychology"*. Eastern Illinois University.

Shakespeare, one of the greatest leadership gurus of all time, said it thus "And this above all, to thine ownself be true, and thou canst not then be false to any man." Finally, Kierkegaard suggests, "One must make an active choice to surrender to

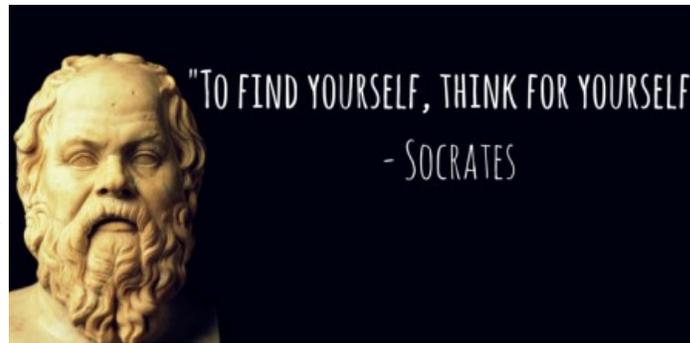
something that goes beyond comprehension, a leap of faith into the religious."¹⁵ Even if one does not want to put forth the effort of developing his own views, he must do so in the quest for authentic faith. The goal of Kierkegaard's existentialist philosophy is to show that, in order to achieve authenticity, one must face reality and form his own opinions of existence.

But who says you're authentic or not? If you are true to yourself is that the only criteria? How do people recognize authenticity in themselves? Is this not based on their values and not the ones of the leader? Then there comes the issue of authenticity and effectiveness as a leader. Can one be authentic in all contexts - this goes to the above question as to who says one is authentic.

An authentic leader probably doesn't think in terms of authenticity. And they shouldn't, because you cannot declare yourself an authentic leader. Only those following the leader can make that call. Again though they probably don't think in terms of authenticity but rather in terms of trust and willingness to follow this leader.

We believe authenticity is in the eyes of the beholder or follower. We are confident that there are many leaders who conform to the traditional perspective of being true to themselves and have examined their lives as stated above, but are/were viewed as a lousy leaders.

As always is the case, there is the opposite; leaders who were recognized as a good and effective but may not have possessed these qualities. The interesting point here is how would any of us know? Please send us your thoughts on leaders you have known or observed in either context. For the purposes of this article, we will examine three as-



pects of leadership; power, values and consistency in the context of authenticity.

Power

One thought about authenticity – if a leader is authentic, does that convert into power? In our workshops we probe the issue of leadership characteristics, verifying that a person is a leader, questioning why they are a leader, and then examining their source of their leadership power. As an example, a military officer with more stripes is the legitimate authority over those with fewer stripes. The power comes from the position/rank and not necessarily the person. Whether the person is authentic or not, the position provides the power. Many leaders who hold positional power can be authentic and of course there are some who are not. The “troops” will follow the orders but they may not respect or even trust the person giving the orders if they do not perceive the leader as being authentic.

Leadership and power possess interesting relationships. Leaders typically hold positions of power. How that power is used and exercised is dependent on many different cultural situations. Some leaders use their power to dictate, ridicule or coerce their people. Some possess Referent Power, where they consistently apply a set of values and goals, which are respected by the subordinates whether the subordinates like or dislike the leader as a person. Some leaders have Charismatic Power and are followed based on who they are and their charisma alone. This can be good or bad as we have seen through history. Finally there are some who have Expertise Power where knowledge and skill is the key to their power. Again, we have seen through history knowledge does not always make an effective leader. While many famous people exemplify these sources of power, and there is a combination that seems to be particularly effective. Referent, Charismatic and Expertise sources of power are a uniquely potent combination. Think of a person who possessed all three of these characteristics and how you perceived their leadership and authenticity.

Values

We also speak a lot about values in our workshops. Typically the focus is on corporate values, and leadership living the corporate values. In the context of leadership authenticity, for this article we focus on individual values.
 Easy Values – like the Ten Commandments – thou shall not kill, honesty, trust
 Hard Values – Integrity, money, not lying
 Conflicting Values – when values collide
 Double Standard Values – when one set of values is good for you but not for me - entitlement

So is authenticity a case where the leader is true to his values (easy and hard ones) and has no conflicting values? Most people can agree and will conform to the easy values (mostly). Most people would never think of killing someone, are mostly honest, and value a trusting relationship. The hard values are the ones that cause problems. These are ones that cause conflicts. Integrity is a good one. Integrity can be characterized as: dictionaries characterize integrity as follows: “Having integrity means doing the right thing in a reliable way.” It's a personality trait that we admire, since it means a person has a moral compass that doesn't waver. It literally means having "wholeness" of character, just as an integer is a "whole number" with no fractions.

What constitutes the ‘right thing’ in a ‘reliable way?’ The comment about ‘moral compass’ is also challenging.

One might think that a priest has a strong moral compass and does the right thing reliably. I think we are talking about more than any human can assimilate. Lying is another value - most people would not blatantly tell a “Big” lie, but I might suggest that most people will tell ‘little white lies.’ Money becomes yet another value that presents challenges. Perceptions of money and an amount anyone person feels they need or want is a very personal thing and a very comparative thing. Money gets us what we want or what we see other people having. But as leaders money is a hard value because it causes conflicts. As we see in many corporate scenarios, big salaries and bonuses for corporate leaders, and meager increases if any for the ‘proletariat’ of the organization.

In our quest to get our arms around authenticity, we feel that when values collide authenticity suffers. When a double standard of values exists, authenticity suffers. To illustrate this point, we will use a very positive event in the recent news.

Dan Price, the CEO of a credit card payment processing company gave up his million dollar salary and set in motion the wheels to bring all his employees to much higher pay scale. The New York Time reported:

“The idea began percolating, said Dan Price, the founder of Gravity Payments, after he read an article on happiness. It showed that, for people who earn less than about \$70,000, extra money makes a big difference in their lives.

His idea bubbled into reality on Monday afternoon, when Mr. Price surprised his 120-person staff by announcing that he planned over the next three years to raise the salary of even the lowest-paid clerk, customer service representative and salesman to a minimum of \$70,000.

“Is anyone else freaking out right now?” Mr. Price asked after the

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clapping and whooping died down into a few moments of stunned silence. "I'm kind of freaking out." If it's a publicity stunt, it's a costly one. Mr. Price, who started the Seattle-based credit-card payment processing firm in 2004 at the age of 19, said he would pay for the wage increases by cutting his own salary from nearly \$1 million to \$70,000 and using 75 to 80 percent of the company's anticipated \$2.2 million in profit this year." He balanced his values.

Consistency

We spoke about conflicting values, but consistency in values, behavior and decision-making are major components of authenticity. Perhaps one of the most disconcerting characteristics of poor leadership is inconsistency. Saying one thing and doing something else. What's good for you is not good for me. The lack of consistency on the part of leaders parlays into perceptions of entitlement and privilege despite how deserving it the privilege may be. We constantly send the message that leadership is not a privilege, it is a huge responsibility, requires sacrifice and truly is more of a stewardship/servitude position than one of privilege.

Another way of looking at this is from a leadership style perspective. We all know or have known leaders who have been really difficult to deal with, but they were consistently difficult to deal with. As a follower you knew what the standard was, you knew the expectation and you knew the consequence of not meeting the standard or the expectation. Despite the 'style' of the leader, you learn how to deal with the person. It may not be pleasant, but it's known. In contrast, a leader who appears to be your friend under a particular situation, and then misuses their power in a coercive manner, creates a high level stress in the organization. You never know who or which person you will encounter and when. The reality is some leaders use and like this style of leadership. We find it extremely disconcerting. Authenticity is non-existent.

In Summary

Our fundamental premise is while introspection and knowing oneself is key to a leader knowing their attributes, personality profiles and understanding how their experience fits into their leadership requirements; authenticity is really based on how a leader is perceived, accepted and followed by his/her people or constituency. Are people willing to follow this leader and why? This premise is not an easy one to get one's arms around. This concept of authenticity is not new but it appears to be becoming a new way of looking at leaders and leadership. There are many other aspects of an authentic leader such as their values and how they apply their values.

There are the competencies of the individual and how they impact the authenticity. There are the experiences of the individual and how they shaped the person. There are the attributes or characteristics of the individual that also impact the leadership performance. And of course there is the context of the leadership situation. We have long talked about contextual leadership, which is a significant factor in this discussion. Someone can be a very effective and authentic leader in one situation but not in another. The example is often given of Winston Churchill who led Britain through the darkest days of World War II but was not nearly as effective post-war as a peacetime leader. Churchill was the same person, but the context changed and the results were different. While Churchill was the same person in both situations, his performance was viewed differently, and how his leadership was perceived by those he led changed drastically.

Think of leaders with whom you have worked. Were they effective? How did you feel about working with them? What was the type of power they used – did they use it in positive ways or negative ways? Think about the feedback you have received about your own leadership. Do people view you as authentic?

A leader seeks data and information but does not blindly follow the data. This leader listens to the staff and the market but uses instinct and inner guidance to select the path and make decisions. A psychological definition would be someone who works to live their life according to the needs of their inner being, rather than the demands of society. How is all of this perceived by the rest of the organization? Is the leader viewed as authentic? Pretty heavy stuff. Please give us your feedback and your experiences. We want to do a follow up article talking more about how competencies, experience and attributes or personal characteristics shape a leader and help define their authenticity. However, we would very much like your thoughts and feedback and your experiences. We seek not names, but why you viewed certain people as authentic and how their performance impacted you and your career.

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