How Self-reflections Helps Leaders in Developing their Followers: A Thematic Analysis

Tereza Kicková[*], Petra Sofia Horňáková

Prague University of Economics and Business, Czech Republic

*Corresponding author

Abstract

Authentic leadership has been in the focus of researchers for almost the last two decades, thanks to its perception as valuable organizational resource. Numerous studies have explored the impact of authentic leadership on different employee areas, such as their well-being, creativity, effectiveness, or work engagement. However, little attention has been paid to exploring the relationship between the four components of authentic leadership themselves – self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced decision-making, and internalized moral perspective. The aim of this work is to examine which of these four components have the strongest link with leaders' ability to lead others. In the pursuit of this, a total of 10 leaders from different sectors in the Czech Republic were interviewed based semi-structured scripts. Thematic analysis was then performed, utilizing the MAXQDA 2018 software to code and categorize the data. Six themes in leadership behaviour, in particular people development, were identified and described. The findings suggest that self-reflection is a crucial aspect of authentic leadership, strengthening leaders' ability to lead others. Empathy and perception of leading others as a priority also stood out as having a strong link to leadership abilities. Based on these findings, we consider the limitations of our work and offer recommendation for practice and for potential further research.

Keywords: authentic leadership, self-awareness, employee development

1. Introduction

Authentic leadership emerged in response to corporate scandals, such as Enron, that shoke the public perception of leaders, leaving little trust in them, (George, 2015). Having a leader whom others can trust, rely on, and learn from is relevant in todays' dynamic business environment more than ever.

Avolio et al. (2004, p. 802), define authentic leaders as "*persons who have achieved high levels of authenticity to the extent that they know who they are, what they believe and value, and they act upon those values and beliefs while transparently interacting with others*".

The theoretical background will demonstrate that such leaders have positive impact on the behaviour of their subordinates in numerous areas. This assertion is also bolstered by

Walumbwa et al. (2008, p. 91), who state that authentic leaders positively impact the organization and its followers.

While significant number of research studies have been devoted to examining the impact of authentic leadership on employees, much less attention has been paid to exploring the relationships between individual components of authentic leadership. Therefore, we decided to find answer to the following research question:

Which component of authentic leadership is the most strongly linked to the ability of leader to lead others?

1.1 Theoretical background

Studies dedicated to this topic have demonstrated thus far, that there should be a positive relationship between authentic leadership and job satisfaction (Walumbwa et al. 2007). Ilies et al. (2005) presume, that by strengthening the feeling of self-determination of their followers, authentic leaders will have a positive impact on their subordinates. Supporting self-determination as means of improving intrinsic motivation of employees has been also proved by Deci et al. (Deci et al., 1989). Furthermore, authentic leaders can reduce stress among their reports by guiding them to become more authentic (Rahimnia & Sharifirad, 2014).

The impact of leadership styles (authentic and transformational) and their positive influence on employee well-being have also been examined and established by Gardner et al. (Gardner et al., 2005). Significant number of research work on this topic has been realized by Avolio in cooperation with various colleagues (Avolio & Walumbwa, 2014; Avolio & Gardner 2005; Avolio et. al. 2010), and his observation of positive impact of authentic leadership has shown as a natural evolution of his previous work on transformational leadership.

In the past decade there has been surge of studies examining the relationship between employee well-being, productivity, and leadership style (Hendriks et al., 2020). Because of the demonstrated positive impact of authentic leadership on various areas of employee outcomes, another stream of research of authentic leadership focuses on its development within leaders. Research has shown, that one of the tools effective in developing authentic leadership among leaders is coaching, as it improves leaders' self-awareness, which in turn has a positive impact on direct reports, (Frasier, 2019).

The four components of authentic leadership, as introduced by Avolio et al., 2010 include:

1. Self-awareness
   Is related to positive self-concept and refers to one's faith in his or her own character, motives, etc.
2. Relational transparency
   Describes openness in relationships and the effort to achieve desired level of openness.
3. Balanced decision-making
   Describes to which extent leaders invite others to participate in the decision making process

4. *Internalized moral perspective*
   The moral compass of leaders, what they consider to be appropriate behaviour in different situations and contexts

Being aware of the components of authentic leadership is crucial for consequent understanding of interview structure.

2. Methods

2.1. Sample

The sample consisted of 10 leaders across sectors, from companies of different sizes (from 35 to over 700 employees) in the Czech Republic. The participants range from low to top level managers (e.g. account manager to CEO) and have a wide range of years of experience with leadership role (from 0,5 years to 22 years). Distribution of gender equates to 40% of women and 60% of men. The table below provides with detailed information about respondents, (Tab. 1).

We used snowball sampling method to approach and interview leaders that were considered authentic, based on the components of authentic leadership described in the theoretical section. The sampling selection follows maximum variation for the mapping of examined phenomenon.

Table 1: Sample Overview

Respondent ID	Industry	Position	Gender	Age	Years of leadership experience
1	IT	Head of Software development	Male	33	8
2	FMCG	Brand Communication and Campaign Manager, CE	Female	43	22
3	IT	Account manager	Male	28	1
4	Fintech	CEO	Male	47	18
5	Real estate	Commercial director	Male	42	20
6	IT	Head of finance	Female	43	1
7	IT	Business Unit Director	Male	43	20
8	Fintech	Managing Director	Male	29	3
9	Financial Advisory	Area director	Female	28	8
10	IT	Lawyer	Female	30	5

2.2. Procedures

In the semi-structured interviews, participants were asked questions from scenario that was prepared based on the four components of authentic leadership, such as "how do you

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develop your subordinates?" or "how do you think your behaviour affects others?" The interviews were in Czech language and were conducted both in person, in respondents' offices, as well as online, using Zoom with video option. The sessions were recorded and then transcribed and stored under Respondent ID. We conducted the interviews in the period between September 2021 and March 2022, with average length of 47 minutes per interview.

2.3. Analysis

Given the absence of specific theoretical foundation which would provide insight into potential relationships between individual components of authentic leadership, we adopted thematic analysis to develop themes. We used the MAXQDA 2018 software to code the data and consequently group them into categories. We extracted respondents' citations in Czech original, which we then translated into English and used them to illustrate our findings.

3. Results

All respondents answered questions from the semi-structured interview scenarios. Across the sections of relational transparency, balanced decision making, and self-awareness, We searched for evidence that would enable us to define what leaders perceive and practice as types of leadership behaviour and what they consider important for developing people. Six themes emerged as prevalent in leading others and are indicated in Table 2: Themes in leadership, based on their frequency among leaders. As anticipated, the most frequent form of leadership behaviour was "providing feedback." The leaders unanimously agreed that immediate feedback is vital for developing others, together with regular occasions. On contrary, "explaining the bigger picture" emerged on the opposite side of frequency spectrum, and, interestingly, was only practiced by three female leaders.

Table 2: Types of leadership behaviour focusing on developing followers

Theme	Sample comment
Providing feedback	"openness in feedback is important, both praise and critique need to be done immediately" "in person meeting, where we discuss what did not work out, so that it doesn't happen anymore. And we also have performance appraisals twice per year where we mostly accentuate both positive and negative things"
Showing genuine interest in followers	"for me an important part of good-quality cooperation is to be up to date, at least a bit, about what is happening outside of the company and if there is some need of company support"
Identifying and developing strengths of followers	"I develop them by motivating them and steering them to the areas where I feel they have some advantage or added value" I follow their needs (), I try to observe how they function and I develop them in the things they are good, exceptional.
Pushing the limits of their followers	"people need the external anchor, that someone forces them to go beyond the boundaries of their comfort"

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Creating the right work environment	"I try to keep friendly atmosphere in the team because I think it is an ideal way how to lead and motivate people"
Explaining the bigger picture	"understanding WHY is really important for me. That's why [in 121 meetings] we establish why the person does these things and where it will move him" "when you teach a person how to do something, they need to know how it fits in the overall meaning of what we do"

After identifying the types leadership behaviour, we examined the individual authentic leadership components, breaking them down into further sub-categories, and scrutinizing them to discover patterns and relationships. The aim was to uncover specific types of behaviour or leadership approaches that would explain high frequencies of leadership behaviour themes among leaders. We identified that leaders who exhibit high levels of self-reflection are those who score high on the number of types of leadership behaviour they carry out. The table below illustrates the four most categories of self-reflection performed by respondents.

Table 3: Forms of leaders' self-reflection

Theme	Sample comment
Individual self-reflection	
Regular	"I have a very fixed time slot in my schedule, I call it consultation with myself. There I review where I am heading on the trajectory of my plans, I look at the number of key activities, I also check on my feelings and generally review what I did, what was good and what I can do better next time" "I always try, either during or at the end of a project, self-reflect the performance, what was achieved and what could have or should have been achieved. And map where in the process occurred some mistakes and conclude what can be improved"
Irregular	
Facilitated/shared self-reflection	
Regular	"what helped me the most in long term are sessions with my coach Kevin. We analyse different situations at work and it already helps that you can tell it to someone, think about the way what you want to tell him, how you want to tell him and the fact that he listens" "what works well for me is that I talk about it with someone. Because when you have to tell it to someone you have to make some synthesis and simplify it. And when you talk with for example the colleagues, as I mentioned, then they could have heard it from the other side so you can understand the situation better"
Irregular	

Additionally, two more factors appear to have connection to the number of performed leadership behaviours. Firstly, leaders who did not indicate personal and genuine interest in their subordinates both agreed that leading people is not their priority, "if I had more people

reporting to me I would have a stronger need for it to be more perfect, no it seems to me a little bit useless, maybe (6)", "if I had more subordinates or if my subordinates started to have subordinates and the complexity would grow, then I would dedicate some space for (leadership) improvement." Therefore, it is important that the leaders have desire to lead their followers and perceive it as important for successfully achieving organizational goals.

Secondly, leaders who execute high number of leadership behaviours consider themselves to be empathetic and they assign it value when talking about it, "I try to look at things with their (followers') point of view," "I think I have empathy, I can feel with others, sometimes maybe even too much." On the other hand, one of the leaders who displays only a few leadership behaviours openly admitted that empathy is his weakness, "I don't empathize with them at all." Consequently, we decided to include these two factors to be influential in the ability of leading others, as shown in the figure below.

Figure 1: Perceived relationship between self-reflection and the ability to lead others
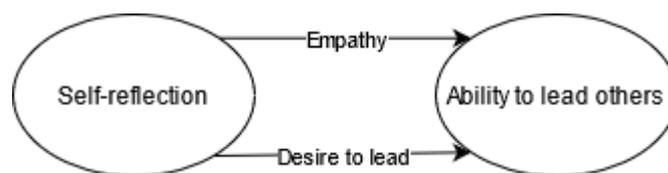
Source: Authors

4. Discussion

Based on the theory, authentic leadership has positive impact on various employee areas. We decided to focus on the particular components of authentic leadership to better understand which one has the strongest link to leaders' ability to lead others. The key findings demonstrate that self-reflection, which is part of the self-awareness component of authentic leadership is connected to the number of leadership behaviours performed by our respondent sample. This corresponds to findings by Frasier, whose research links greater self-awareness among manager nurses to perceived positive change of managerial behaviour of their direct reports, (Frasier, 2019). Two more factors having link to ability to lead others are empathy and understanding leading as a priority.

Limitations and future research directions

Given the sample size of 10 managers, we are cautious in generalizing our results. Having a larger sample could decrease the importance of some themes and, on the contrary, anchor those themes that would prove accurate. Furthermore, while the maximum variability of sample was purposely selected, narrowing the sample down in future research, for example by setting limits on minimum years of experience or on number of direct reports could yield more particular results.

Practical implications

As the investigated link between the ability to lead people and leaders' self-reflection indicates, encouraging self-reflection among leaders has the potential to positively influence their ability to lead others. This can be carried out both formally, by providing company coach or facilitating master mind groups, or informally by pushing them to assign time in their schedules for self-reflection.

5. Conclusion

As the workforce environment is becoming increasingly dynamic and competitive, it is crucial to ensure that leaders are devoting time and energy to development of their followers. Authentic leadership can, in this context, be viewed as company resource that allows for facilitating employee development. This is thanks to the perceived link between one of the AL components – self reflections, which this research demonstrated strengthens the leadership behaviour outcomes. A key takeaway of this study is that leaders must know themselves in order to develop others and self-reflection is a powerful tool for self-discovery. Accordingly, this study includes examples of self-reflection forms which can serve as inspiration for leaders in practice.

Acknowledgment

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