

Recognizing “Authentic Leadership”- *What does it Mean?*

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Abstract

The notion of authentic leadership is perhaps the most over-used and least understood term in leadership and management discourse. In the same way that nobody wants to be emotionally unintelligent, nobody wants to be ‘inauthentic’. But what does it mean to be authentic, and is being authentic necessarily a moral model of leadership, or can people, authentic in their behaviour be immoral in their actions? This paper explores this notion using Donald Trump and Scott Morrison as case studies and compares the idea of authentic leadership to the leadership model outlined in Natural Born Leadership (NBL) theory (Haraida & Blass, 2019).

Introduction

Authentic Leadership what does it mean? Is it even applicable in the modern world where everyone by their own definition is authentic?

If you check out the word authentic in the dictionaries, the quality of being authentic is about something or someone not being false or copied, being trustworthy and valid; and being or having the quality of authenticity in what they do or say means being or having genuineness and correctness. Apply the word to human behaviour and there appears to be a greater divide between opinions as to who is or who isn't authentic, or what is and what is not authentic?

It is the extent to which one's actions are aligned with their core values, their conviction, and their purpose. In other words, being true to who they are; but is this enough? Is being authentic simply being true to who you are? As always the devil is in the detail and with authentic leadership the measure of authentic lies with one's core values and their philosophy which underpins their motivations, their purpose, who they are; are they simply following in the footsteps of others or are they treading a new pathway to aspire to?

So what does it mean to ‘be authentic’?

Shamir and Eilam (2005) note that while the literature on authentic leadership varies in definitions, they all cover the notion of the leader having self-knowledge and a personal point of view which reflects clarity in their values and convictions, and this is enacted in their leadership role. There are three elements then to authentic leadership; the first is Self-Knowledge; second is Epistemic Belief and third is Ethical Conduct

While self-knowledge may be the starting point, the development of a personal viewpoint is that something that emerges over time as we learn and experience the world and come to understand our world through our experiences. In essence this is epistemic belief as it is what we believe about the world based on how we have experienced it. Finally, if we live our life according to our belief system then we apply our own morality to our actions, and this becomes our ethical conduct.

Shamir and Eilam (2005) argue for a rather normative exploration of what being authentic is, that presents a bias of ‘goodness’, and this is largely reflected in all the authentic leadership literature. The assumption is that people take on leadership roles because they genuinely believe they are leading for good.

While this may not have been challenged a decade ago, we have seen the rise of narcissistic, ego driven behaviour in leaders in societies around the world in the last decade that makes authentic leadership or the ontology of authentic leadership somewhat problematic. We argue this based on some case studies.

Case Study 1: Scott Morrison, Prime Minister of Australia

In case study one let's take the example of Scott Morrison in Australia. In 2019 the Liberal Party led by Scott Morrison won the federal election against the expectations of all political analysis and public opinion polls. Their campaign centred on Scott Morrison – not policies, his party or cabinet, but Scott himself.

Indeed, rather than campaigning on the basis of policies, they ran a personal 'anti' campaign against the opposition leader, asking the nation to choose between two personalities rather than two policy stances. Soon thereafter in the summer 2019 / 2020 Australia experienced one its worst natural disasters on record, the bushfires. This natural disaster had soon reached crises point and informally was known as the Black Summer, with an estimated 18.6 million hectares (46 million acres) burnt, over 5,900 buildings destroyed, 34 people lost their lives and an estimated one billion animals perished with some either extinct or pushed to the brink of extinction by its end.

During the peak period of the crises when the country's people, the people that had voted this charismatic leader into the country's top position turned to him to take action, he had chosen to holiday in Hawaii; and expressed in his statements the willingness to pray for a good outcome rather than take action. For this he received endless criticism, and outcry for his handling and leadership of the situation.

However, when you look into this particular statement, it appears to be completely genuine to his core values. Scott Morrison like so many others has a strong Christian faith, having been brought up and influenced in this religious culture, and it is this faith that underpins his very being and hence his belief in this situation. To pray for a good outcome rather than take action, including his belief that climate change being a phenomenon outside the realms of human control, saw him turning to prayer rather than action. Indeed, he was vindicating his denial stance on climate change.

During the bushfire crises his behaviour also demonstrated a complete lack of empathy and self-focus when, for example, he found the need to forcibly shake hands with fire fighters and grief stricken community members when they clearly shunned his offer of an outstretched hand – noting on media afterwards that he didn't take their rejection personally. His view was that they are understandably upset, but it was nothing to do with him – it was the circumstances. He could not relate his actions to their circumstances, or even how they could have perceived this link. Is this an ego-driven narcissist leader with a strong faith or is this authentic leadership?

According to Shamir and Eilam (2005) we need to fall back on the point of self-knowledge to decide. We may also need to look at the elements of Epistemic Belief and Ethical Conduct to further decide if the actions taken by Scott Morrison measure up to what followers chose to follow.

Every day we face our own self judgement when we look into the mirror, we ask ourselves who are we? What are we? And what we are becoming? So, when Scott Morrison looks into the mirror who does he see? Is he aware of whom he is becoming?

Case Study 2: Donald Trump

In case study two we turn to the United States of America and President Donald Trump. Roger Stone became the sixth Trump aide to be convicted and was to be sent to jail for charges relating to interfering with the law (lying to congress, witness tampering, etc which Trump has now commuted). Trump himself was charged with impeachment for misuse of the Presidential Office, and the Mueller inquiry did little to clear his name regarding Russian interference with his successful election to office. Trump believes the office of President is above the law, and his behaviour and beliefs completely align on this matter. The fact that this would arguably be unconstitutional is irrelevant to him, as he sees holding the highest office in the country as a licence to do what he wills, and he treats the USA like it is a brand of his business, competing for 'profit' at every opportunity. But again, this appears to be in line with his core values which also give reason to his complete lack of understanding of the nature of science, vindicating too his denial stance on climate change

So, when Donald looks into the mirror? Does Donald see someone who believes that winning at all cost is acceptable and all that matters? That profit is more important than humanity or environmental matters? That someone acting genuinely above the law is ethical? If he does, then maybe he is being authentic to himself.

So who decides authenticity?

Walumba et al (2008) set out to design an Authentic Leadership Questionnaire (ALQ) which consisted of 5 higher order dimensions: self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced processing, internalised moral perspective, and the extent to which followers perceived them as authentic.

Relational transparency is presenting oneself as ‘authentic’ rather than fake or distorted, which involves the skills of openly sharing one’s opinions and thoughts on information without displaying inappropriate emotions (Kernis, 2003), which in turn leads to the perception of being authentic to followers. Self-awareness, balanced processing of information, and having an internalised moral perspective are all tacit processes, evidenced only by their outcomes, rather than the process itself.

So, do Donald Trump and Scott Morrison qualify as authentic according to the ALQ? Probably less so than more so. It is difficult to see how they could justify their processing of information as a balanced approach or Ethical Conduct, and their internal moral perspective is out of line with the law makers in their country. Scott Morrison recently said he believed his sports minister did nothing wrong when an investigation into her behaviour of grant allocations led to her having to be removed from office. Donald Trump was charged with impeachment, and constantly undermines the legal process in the US. But I’m sure they would consider themselves balanced and ethical and would see this as part of their self-awareness.

So, who gets to be judge and jury on whether someone is authentic or not? And how should we judge who is authentic and who is not? Gardner et al (2005) posit that the role of the followers authenticates the role of the leader. Their central premise is that through increased self-awareness, self-regulation, and positive modelling, demonstrated by authentic leader’s results in their followers’ attainment of sustainable performance and well-being. So, to a degree, you can judge the authenticity of the leader by the actions of the followers noting this Scott Morrison failed miserably on recent account as exemplified below.

In the case of the Australian Bushfire crisis in 2019/2020, after mounting pressure from the Australian people and media, the Government finally came to the assistance of those in need with the offer to pay volunteer fire-fighters to compensate them for lost income. This was touted at the time as \$300 per day, up to \$6,000 per person for volunteers who had done a minimum of 10 days service in the field, and was aimed at the self-employed or those employed by SME’s who could not afford to pay them (on the basis of large companies will continue to pay staff beyond their leave entitlement). The reality is that the 10 days in the field has to be completed in order to become eligible, but does not count for payment – so days 11 to 30 need to be completed in order to claim the maximum of \$6,000; and you need to be able to provide evidence of lost income; and it only applies to fire fighters and not any of the support crew who keep the firefighters going, and only covered hours that would be office hours. This appears to lack authenticity and would be an example of inauthentic leadership rather than authentic. While the media, marketing and sales pitch is great and placates the general public the reality of being able to claim the funds is so impossible, nobody will actually be able to be recognised and compensated for their service in the field. The process implemented undermines the intent of the action, and hence the whole gesture is inauthentic. Not surprising given the Government’s hand was forced on this issue rather than the offer being genuine and driven by Government itself. A good example of how the acts of the followers belie the intentions of the leaders. The civil servants tasked with enacting the payment policy enacted it in a manner that represented the Morrison true intent.

It would appear, then, that ego-centric leadership and authentic leadership can be closely associated, although I am sure that is not what the authentic leadership theorists intended. Hence their notion of some internal moral reasoning, but the outcome of that reasoning is not known, and for the ego-centric, it will be narcissistic. Does that prevent their actions from being considered authentic?

Ego-centric leadership is centred on self-esteem, inflated self-opinion and self-consciousness, whereas Authentic Leadership is centred on not being false, being trustworthy and on being valid, in particular legally valid because all necessary procedures have been followed correctly. The difficulty is that an ego-centric leader would argue that they are not being false, are trustworthy and their actions are valid only because their opinions centre on themselves; their convictions like all true convictions drive them forward relentlessly, maybe recklessly. A clear difference between ego-centric and authentic leadership is their balance in their overall mindfulness to their approach or outcome, and hence the suggestion of Ethical Conduct as an element of authentic leadership in the early stages of the paper.

Does that prevent one’s actions from being considered authentic? Who gets to decide where the line is between ethical conduct and ego-centric conduct?

Ethics versus Ego-Centrism

Fundraising for the Bushfire crisis has seen some interesting behaviour. Many people have made donations anonymously which is honourable; some have specifically undertaken activities to raise money which is great; some have made large donations with a ‘quiet’ media announcement; and then there are those who are taking public recognition for raising money, as if the donations would not have occurred had they not been involved.

This has been seen when people add their name (or ego) to an existing fundraising page or cause, and then distribute it. The premise being that because their name is on it, people will donate more than they would if their name was not on it. So, they have done nothing at all for the effort, other than add their name. Is this ethical behaviour or ego-centricism?

Avolio and Gardner (2005) look at the history of authentic leadership from a more philosophical and psychological stance, noting the word authenticity has its roots in Greek philosophy – To thine own self be true – but also relate it to Maslow's work and the notion of the self-actualised person. They refer to Maslow's work in 1971 which refers to self-actualising people having strong ethical convictions, and this being more than mere sincerity.

Focussing on ethical leadership alone, Rocheford et al (2017:761) defined ethical leadership as 'the ability to consider issues from multiple stances, including what is fair and just, balance alternate perspectives against each other, and encourage followers to do likewise through the demonstration of consistent inspiring conduct, reinforcement of fair and just decisions, and humane interpersonal relations.' Their paper explores the notion that ethical leadership requires a balance in the neurological tension between analytical reasoning and socioemotional reasoning. When too much focus is placed on the analytical reasoning, the human element of moral dilemmas, and as such people, become dehumanised. The notion of strong ethical convictions outlined in Maslow's theory suggests that if anything, the authentic leader would tend more towards the socioemotional reasoning of their convictions that they would then support with the analytical reasoning necessary to support it. But this still does not solve the problems of Trump and Morrison. They could argue their cases on the basis of analytical or socioemotional reasoning – as they often do. Perhaps it is the rubbishing of alternate arguments or the denial of their validity, rather than the consideration of issues from multiple stances, that rules them out. The devil is in the detail.

The ethical and moral element is also the focus of Sidani & Rowe (2018:623) who claim that 'Authentic leadership represents legitimated follower perceptions of a leader's authenticity which are activated by moral judgments.' They discuss the cultural appropriateness of moral judgements and ethics, and the difference between being moral as a person and moral as a leader. They claim that 'a leader is perceived as a person who has adopted a value system, who is true to this value system, and whose behaviour is seen by others to be in harmony with such a value system.....Based on a process of evaluation, a certain category of followers legitimizes this person as an authentic leader (ibid:632). The authors use the example of Margaret Thatcher in the UK as someone who was seen as authentic but then lost her followership and was usurped from power, compared to Nelson Mandela whose leadership was authenticated by the ANC in his fight against apartheid, and his followership continued throughout his Presidency.

When we consider this with our case studies; Scott Morrison might be facing the same destiny as Margaret Thatcher? But not from within his party, but more within the Nation as public opinion for the moment has turned against him. Donald Trump is about to face the same scrutiny with the up & coming elections to see if he wins his second term as President. If Donald Trump is able to win over the American people and his tenure is extended for a second term of Presidency, are the American people authenticating him as leading to his values, his beliefs and ethical conduct all of which is something they themselves adhere to themselves?

The problem with leaving it to the followers

Follower based judgement of authenticity is worrying because the moral element can be extremely immoral and the leader may still fit the authentic leadership model. Take authentic leadership to its extreme and Hitler would have been an authentic leader, but there was nothing ethical about the Holocaust, the 2nd World War or his treatment of Gypsy's, Homosexual's, and other minority groups. In effect, any cult leader could meet the criteria of authentic leadership if it is follower dependent, and relying on them living their beliefs.

This is probably where the balanced processing element needs to factor in – but who is to be the judge of balanced? Natural Born Leadership theory (Haraida and Blass, 2019) specifically recognises follower free leadership to remove any 'power' relationship from the equation of what constitutes good leadership.

So, having the majority of voters doesn't necessarily mean you are the people's leader of choice, albeit the title may say so. You just have majority of the votes (or maybe not even that given the US electoral process).

In the example of Hitler, dictatorship, suppression, and intimidation are the more dominate elements than the elements of authentic leadership, same for leaders such as Saddam Hessian. There was nothing authentic about these types of leaders. But is it history or their legacy that is the judge of balance and authentic leadership? What will history say about Donald Trump, for example?

Diddams & Chang (2012) question the use of strength based leadership theories underpinning authentic leadership and focus on weakness identification, and how the humility of weakness recognition is part of self-awareness and balanced processing, increasing the element of authenticity in the leadership process. This definitely separates the wheat from the chaff.

Trump and Morrison are not known for their ownership of weaknesses, rather they tend to cover them up, blame others, or deny that a situation ever arose. Morrison's weakness with interpersonal skills demonstrated with his forcibly shaking hands with people who did not want to shake his outstretched hand during the bushfires, he later put this down to the individuals being traumatised and upset stating "people are angry, and if people want to direct that at me, that is up to them" and of course he appreciated that and didn't take the rebuke personally. There was absolutely no evidence of questioning why people might be angry with him. Even his apology for taking the mistimed holiday in Hawaii, was an apology for people having been upset about it (their problem), not an apology for going (his problem).

Trump's weakness for divisive language demonstrated through racist and sexist remarks is constantly challenged by sports persons, entertainment professionals, and other politicians, but he simply claims he is being misquoted, misinterpreted, or that he is simply right! He is the master of apologising for other people rather than himself.

A current working example

Natural Born Leadership theory (Haraida & Blass, 2019) posits that leadership is the combination of courage, conviction and balance. While their paper does not specifically address the issue of authenticity, it is arguably implicit as the theory alludes to those elements that authentic leaders need to display. The theory postulate that no one element is more important than the others, but this deconstruction of authentic leadership suggests that their notion of balance may be the key. If we look at response to the COVID-19 pandemic, we see courage and conviction being demonstrated by most leaders, but balance for some is highly skewed, particularly in the face of expert medical and pandemic management and leadership evidence (see, for example, Guest et al: 2020), or one of the 400 articles published on the pandemic by the end of February 2020 (del Rio, 2020).

Donald Trump, for example, is arguing that the cure is worse than the cause, and that America needs to re-open for business? This aligns completely with his core values of personal greed and belief in the capitalist system, and so his commitment to this line of action is understandable. He is also being somewhat courageous in suggestion a course of action that is at odds with every other country in the world. But is he being balanced?

Where is the concern for humanity? There isn't any. While economically this makes sense for his right-wing views, the virus will wipe out those who are the biggest burden on the economy so why would Trump want to save them? He would not. Economically, America will be better off without anyone who can't afford to save themselves. Bowing to public demand, Trump finally announced a lockdown in some areas and fiscal stimulus.

Scott Morrison is marginally more balanced, seeking a solution that will support economic sustainability while implementing life-saving policies to endeavour to flatten the curve. His move to fiscal stimulus, however, is being challenged by a right wing think tank (the IPA) which could undermine his standing in the Liberal Party. His middle of the road stance lacks both courage and conviction and his messaging is as unclear as are his policies, and the logic and reasoning of his actions don't stand up to scrutiny. You cannot, for example, freeze and economy paying 80% of minimum wage (which incidentally is double what the unemployed used to get indicating it was previously woefully inadequate).

Boris Johnson, in the UK, perhaps comes out best of the trio of leaders in demonstrating courage, conviction and, on this occasion, balance. He has taken a very firm stance on saving lives, and a firm stance on protecting the economy at a huge cost to the government's balance sheet, subsidising 80% of actual wage (with a relatively substantial cap). Other leaders who are combining courage, conviction and balance are Jacinda Ardern in New Zealand and Angela Merkel in Germany. They have a clear strategy that balances risks and outcomes.

Is authenticity a feminist issue?

It would be easy to make the case that women are approaching leadership under COVID-19 differently to men, as their addresses to their nations worldwide tend to be more empathic, demonstrating vulnerability, and are delivered from the heart as well as the head. They are also taking decisive action of the type recommended in *The Lancet* (2020) and clearly taking advice from epidemiologists and experts in this field.

They are certainly coming across as more authentic, while Boris Johnson arguably comes across as sincere, but given his previous appearances and standing in the media, does this now feel authentic, and if it is, what was he previously? His near-death experience with the virus where he ended up in ICU in a London Hospital may well have changed his view on NHS funding in the future, as he now owes his life to them.

While delivery of the message may be one thing, the content of the message itself is also key, and there are plenty of examples of men being authentic as well as women. Indeed, the individual State Premiers in Australia all seem to be doing a better job than the Federal Prime Minister in the authenticity stakes, both male and female.

Liu et al's (2015:238) study 'shows how being constructed as authentic depends on the leader performing authenticity in line with gender norms, so that performing authenticity is also about performing gender'. Their study looked at authenticity of bank leaders by gender during the GFC and how the media treated them so was also looking at a crisis type situation. Media portrayal of leaders fitting gender stereotypes abounded with the male down to business representation and the female family friendly vision. 'Despite attempts to "craft" and control the image of the authentic self for consumption by followers, gendered media representations of individuals and leadership remain. Thus, alternative approaches to crafting an authentic leadership self which extend beyond (mainstream) media is suggested (Kapasi et al, 2016:339). This may be what is working for the women leaders of the world now. The generalised media portrayal of female leadership as family friendly could be what the world needs during the Covid-19 pandemic, and the idea that 'women have this covered at home' may be extending to 'women have this covered in the country'.

Most leaders would consider themselves authentic. But does their behaviour illustrate this balance that Natural Born Leadership Theory requires? Arguably Alan Joyce, CEO of Qantas ticks the box. Within days of the pandemic halving the airline industries capacity, he announced that Qantas would be in trouble, and while he was at that time asking staff to take holidays and reduced hours, he announced he would not draw any salary for the year. While some criticised this as being tokenistic because he could afford to do this, there are plenty others in the same boat who are not. When Qantas then came unstuck with workforce protection, they righted the situation quickly, showing that they are not invincible, but prepared to reconsider actions and correct them. And he is still working very hard to save his company throughout the crisis. Compare this with how the NRL responded, saying that their players might need to take a 10% pay cut while not playing, and they would seek government assistance to keep the league safe. They lost a lot of fans that day – if everyone came out of this only a 10% loss of income, the world would be celebrating! Meantime the NRL are planning to get back out playing and relaunch their season in May, which is questionably undermining the constant government and media messaging about lockdown being a long-term situation.

So Alan Joyce's actions came over as authentic – he was leading from the front, taking the hit that he's enforcing on his staff, and committing himself to the longer term future of his company. The NRL's actions came over as inauthentic – players being stood down and seeking government help to top up already high salaries when many of their fans are hitting the line for unemployment benefit (80% of minimum wage), and undermining government policy and messaging on lockdown.

Perhaps it is the 'macho male' that struggles with authenticity, while those men who are 'more in touch with their feminine side' find it easier? While this paper is not focussing on gender identity or feminism, it would have been remiss not to note this fact in passing as an area for further research.

Conclusions

Authenticity is clearly about being true to your core values, so that you can look at yourself in the mirror each morning and like who you are, because you are living your life and leading in line with what you believe to be right. While many theorists would like this to be underpinned by a moral compass that is compassionate to others, this adds a subjective element to the notion of authenticity, which at the extreme is easy to see, such as with Donald Trump, but becomes more blurred as you approach the likes of Scott Morrison and the NRL leadership and players.

Natural Born Leadership theory places this morality at the centre of its idea, requiring the courage and conviction to see it through. Balance here is much like the notion of sustainability – you don't make a decision that leaves anyone worse off than previously albeit not everyone may agree with the decision. It is always striving for win-win, so even in difficult times like COVID-19, the win-win sought is economic and human, with the courage and conviction to really see it through. From the way they are conducting themselves in the public eye, Boris Johnson, Jacinda Ardern and Alan Joyce are perhaps the best examples we are seeing of this during the COVID-19 pandemic; Scott Morrison and Donald Trump sadly represent the other end of the spectrum.

As this is written, Scott Morrison is picking up in popularity, but it is based on the sympathy vote. Pictures are being released of him looking tired, stressed, and concerned. The public is feeling sorry for him. But there is no opportunity to simply disagree with him. Parliament has been shut down for 5 months so there is no opportunity for the opposition to contribute to the discussion on how to manage Covid-19, and any discussion post-event on what they might have done will look like sour grapes, with the benefit of hindsight.

The silencing of voices, the closure of debate, and the lack of scrutiny of decisions being made are the hallmarks of democracy, and the pandemic response in many countries is moving democracies dangerously close to becoming totalitarian regimes. The authentic leader would be keeping avenues of debate and conversation open; they'd be ensuring balance is being achieved; and they'd be acting with the courage and conviction necessary to sustain this balance, even if meant being humble and back-tracking. History will no doubt highlight authentic leadership during Covid-19, and may be the best judge of authenticity full stop. Certainly, trying to ascertain it as it is experienced is becoming increasingly more difficult as everyone claims it and very few are delivering.

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