

Authentic Leadership: Clashes, Convergences, and Coalescences

Edited by Donna Ladkin and Chellie Spiller

Edward Elgar

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As a Professor of Management and Leadership Consultant, the concept of authentic leadership has tended to be a very soft and rather vague approach when it came to the execution and practice of leading. When Jeffrey Pfeffer's book, *Leadership BS* (2015), was published many of my questions around authentic leadership were validated. Authentic leadership appeared to be more about the persona of the leader and much less about adding anything of value operationally. Enter Ladkin and Spiller's fine editorial work on bringing together a collection of pieces addressing some of the research around the theory and practice of authentic leadership. I have found the arrangement, variety, and content of the articles to be insightful and significantly helpful in shedding critical light on authentic leadership.

The book is divided into six parts where each part addresses a particular perspective or claim made by the evangelists and advocates for authentic leadership. Each part contains up to five essays, cameos, and viewpoints. Consistent with Elgar's approach in their "New Series in Leadership Studies" series, each piece in this work is written by academics many of whom also have deep and broad experience as consultants. I decided the best way to review this book in this particular context was to feature a piece from each of the six parts.

From Part I: groundings: historic, critical, and subjective perspectives, the essay by Alvesson and Sveningsson entitled, "authentic leadership critically reviewed," highlight the importance of taking a closer, more critical look at the theory of authentic leadership in light of its popularity over the last 20 years. The authors identify some of the significant discrepancies around the claims of authentic leadership advocates. In particular, they note that authenticity, that is, being true to oneself as a leader, can create distortions, conflicts, and inefficiencies. Additionally the authors note that, in the final analysis "authentic leadership is a naïve response" (p. 52) and represents an ideological rather than a realistic response to the complexities and expectations for today's leaders.

In Part II: being true to the self: figments, fragments or facets, the authors Eilam-Shamir and Shamir, offer an essay addressing the life stories and ambitions of a selected group of 15 successful leaders. The authors note that in the stories of these leaders, success was not found to be driven by "a moral perspective, highly developed social values, a socially based or socially oriented life purpose or vision, a desire to make a difference in the world" (p. 94). Instead, the success of these leaders was based on "an extremely high need for personal achievement" (p. 95) rather than a concern to demonstrate authentic leadership.

In Part III: markers: reading the signs of authentic leadership, author Joanne Ciulla explores whether or not Mandela was an authentic leader. She notes that the closer one looks at Mandela, the more questions are raised about who he really was. Mandela, as Ciulla



observes, had different personas based on the audience and community with which he was working. Over time, after managing a myriad of expectations and dealing with a variety of interest groups which had different expectations of Mandela the man and leader, Ciulla notes that Mandela may well have “found himself before his journey ended [...]” (p. 171).

In Part IV: relational spaces: coming into authenticity through others, authors Goffee and Jones offer a cameo entitled, “authentic followership in the knowledge economy.” This cameo addresses those “clever followers” (p. 208) or highly specialized knowledge experts and what they need to thrive in the organizations. The authors, through their research, found that these clever followers do their best work when they have autonomy over their work and when left alone to do pursue that work. Whether or not a leader is authentic is unimportant as long as they have freedom over their own work. In fact, as Goffee and Jones argue, authentic leaders represent a distraction to a clever follower’s autonomy and work style.

In Part V: authenticity at the intersection of identity and institutions, authors Wang and Turnbull-James speak to how authentic leadership is understood and demonstrated in multicultural settings. In their cameo entitled, “the challenge for authentic leadership in multi-cultural settings,” the authors make very clear that the traditional characteristics used to describe authentic leadership could actually hinder and even derail communication and unravel trust within multi-national, multi-cultural contexts.

Finally, in Part VI: developing authentic leaders, author Zander argues that authentic leaders can be an example of destructive leadership. Being true to one’s aspirations and inspirations, according to the maxims of authentic leadership, can be distracting and even toxic among a team. In this vein, Zander observes that “[...] these most ‘authentic’ parts of a leader [...] need the most management” (p. 279).

In summary, anyone who is looking for a critical look at the theory and practice of authentic leadership will find this edited work to be an excellent resource. As a Professor and Leadership Consultant, I have for years been uncomfortable with advancing and otherwise supporting this approach to leadership because it appears to add little-to-any value operationally.

Jeffrey D. Yergler

Golden Gate University, San Francisco, California, USA