

# **The Mirror Image: Authentic Leadership from Leader and Subordinates Perspectives**

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## **Abstract**

Since the last decade, researchers, scholars, organizations and businesses have adopted authentic leadership in an attempt to answer leadership questions regarding deep distrust in leaders. The anchors of authentic leadership include being true to oneself, reflecting genuineness and reliability while being perceived as a highly honourable individual with values and high standards (Ford and Harding, 2011). Moreover, the leader with a deep sense of self-awareness of his/her strengths and weaknesses demonstrates transparent and confident behaviour to followers (Khan et al., 2017; Sidani et al., 2018). Despite being centered around a leader, authentic leadership encourages subordinates to have confidence and trust in their leader (Amunkete & Rothmann, 2015; Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Sidani et al., 2018). Ford et al., (2011) emphasize the need for dynamic interaction between leader and follower but argue that the authentic leadership model can be destructive if the leader is subjective towards organizational values. Despite this thinking, collectivistic attitudes, paternalistic attitudes and power distance in the Sri Lankan cultural context have aided the strong development of leader – follower interactions (Hewege et al., 2008; Liyanage, 1996b, Kamalika, 2008; Nanayakkara, 1992; and Liyanage, 1996 a,b). This is mainly due to Sri Lankans' preference for power distance and respect for authority in all relationships including personal and work situations (Hettige, 2000; Hewege, 2011; Hewege et al., 2008; Wickremasinghe & Hopper, 2005; Wickremage, Hopper & Rathnasiri, 2004).

Moreover, Avolio and Gardner (2005) reports on authentic individuals being confident and optimistic where they know about themselves and are perceived by others for their strengths, knowledge, values and ethical perspectives. Considering the authentic leadership model where the leader develops him/herself and the follower mirrors the leader, the authors of this paper explore the mirror effect of authentic leadership for the first time in the Sri Lankan retail sector. This study focuses on authentic leadership from both the leader and subordinate's perspectives to understand the power of leadership in the dynamic interactions of those working with the leader. In addition to what is mentioned above, true self is considered to be good and moral (De Freitas et al., 2016;) which is seen in both self and others (Nina Strohminger, 2017) whilst the inverse is considered referred as false self (Harter, 2002). However true self in different cultures is understood differently. For example, in Western cultures the "self" indicates an individual with independence whilst "self" in Eastern cultures the self is more holistic and emphasizes social relationships, thereby reflecting interdependence (Markus & Kiayama, 1991). The Sri Lankan context is different as interdependency through collectivistic and paternalistic attitudes promotes stronger leader follower relationships which is a different mirror image effect to what Ford et al., (2011) mentions in their article "The impossibility of the 'true self' of authentic leadership".

While literature on authentic leadership advocates feedback seeking behavior as a proactive

action for understanding one's own behavior and work performance, little research has been done to examine this from the subordinate's perspective to comprehend human connections at the workplace (Ashford & Tsui, 1991; Ashford et al., 2016; Millward, Asumeng & McDowall, 2010). Furthermore, the follower process role of assigning authenticity to the leader remain under-studied (Sidania et al., 2018). The authors attempt to address these areas in their study using empirical data.

The empirical data was collected within the same retail group comprising over 300 managers and over 6000 subordinates. The HR department selected two managers from high and low turnover outlets respectively and 4-5 subordinates from each of the outlets who were selected by the manager. Each person was interviewed for 15-30 minutes in the manager's office at the outlet using a semi-structured interviews to capture the four dimensions of authentic leadership (as defined by Walumbwa et al, 2008) self-awareness, internalized moral perspectives, balanced processing and relational transparency. The case analysis for the manager and his subordinates in high turnover (HT) and low turnover (LT) outlets were thematically analyzed using the dimensions of authentic leadership. The results from studying the managers and subordinates in HT and LT are presented and discussed below.

Interviews revealed that the Manager in HT ranked himself lower than his subordinates on authentic leadership dimensions especially in relational transparency asserting his own point of view with staff with less care given to getting feedback for himself. He presented himself as over confident stating "I can do" without seeking much feedback, resulting in negative feedback of self, feeling distant with his staff claiming only an official relationship and reporting "I don't mix my personal life with work". Although he impressed his staff by explaining their job roles and bringing meaning to what they did, he was reluctant to show paternalistic care or lend an ear to them. On the contrary, though he said staff would not share about their personal life with him, the staff identified their manager as 'one of us', does not 'boss' them and shared his values thus claiming to have a good relationship with him. Further, the staff appreciated him as a good manager who solved issues they faced with customers without taking immediate disciplinary action for mistakes considering the fact that the staff may not be able to withstand punishment. Instead he gave them a stern warning not to repeat the mistakes.

The Manager in (LT) also ranked himself lower than his subordinates did saying, "Yes I get feedback, so I can correct myself" and believing he had a "good fit with everybody". Even though Manager(LT) did not believe in being open, he listened to the staff views and claims saying, "they know me at different instances where I attempt to solve their problems". Besides, he confidently declared that he did not succumb to management pressure and said, "I do not stop giving two off days to my staff which I arrange with my assistants". Further, he assuredly reported, "my staff will not resign but will bring other girls and boys from their villages to work in this company" highlighting his positive relationship with them. Nevertheless, the staff viewed the situation as, "sir is aware that he cannot get the work done if we are angry and therefore he motivates and encourages us to progress in our career", adding that "sir is very friendly and works with us". "We want to work with him even if our tasks are difficult because of the manner in which he speaks to us", they continued, exemplifying the true nature of Manager(LT) in building trust and meaning to work.

Likewise, they applauded him for being a clever and good manager willing to know himself and displaying transparency in his relationships. For example, while he did scold them, he also recognized and appreciated their individual strengths in the process. Thus, the significant difference between Manager HT and Manager LT can be explained by their attitudes towards self-awareness where Manager LT's positive thinking created a positive work environment, promoting trust and meaning in working with the subordinates while appreciating his authentic self.

Based on this evidence, both managers showed a low rating for themselves which matches the study of Zenger et al., (2015) who attributed this to a lack of self-awareness from a study conducted with 100 firms including 69,000 managers and 750,000 respondents. The presence of self-underestimation in Sri Lankan culture may result from collectivistic and paternalistic attitudes, where leaders claim togetherness with their subordinates without setting him/herself up as a parent to the subordinates such as in the case of manager(LT). Similarly, leadership authenticity is higher when the values, beliefs and attitudes are congruent with the subordinates, who develop positive attitudes and transparent behaviours with open and close relationships for meaningful work (Hassan et al., 2011; Sagnak et al., 2017). Therefore, authentic leadership carried out by the leader promotes self-development in authentic followership (Price, 2017) which is evident in the case of the Manager (LT) and his subordinates in the given case. Moreover, the definition of authentic leadership sketches the human aspects of daily life for both leader and followers, where eudemonic well-being results in the leader's self-actualization that mirror positive influence in followers (Ilies et al., 2005) which is evident in the interactive statements made by Manager(LT) and his subordinates. In addition, relational transparency and authentic actions of a leader positively link to develop subordinates' trust in the leader (Hassan et al.,2011). All of the above literature findings and empirical data on Manager(LT) relate to the definitions of authentic leadership associated with leader behavior, confidence, values and motives which mirror authentic leader and authentic followership.

Contrary to the above, Manager(HT) preferred to keep his distance with the subordinates and have formal relationships with them, which is very much a part of Sri Lankan culture unlike in the case where the leader showed a deep sense of self-awareness regarding his strengths and weaknesses and demonstrated transparent and confident behaviors to their followers (Khan et al., 2017; Sidani et al.,2018). Nevertheless, congruence in work behaviours, attitudes and values are reported to develop authentic leadership for meaningful work (Sagnak et al., 2017) which is evident but not to the expected degree due to the leader's reluctance to have good relationships with subordinates in the given case for Manager (HT). Moreover, Manager HT's statements characterize him as a 'Prozac Leader', one who shows over confidence and reluctance to listen to others thus violating authentic leadership's dimension of self-awareness (Collinson, 2012) Similarly, when there is no consistency between what is said and done, the followers are not able to authenticate or show legitimacy to the leader, which is seen in the case of Manager(HT). Legitimation is a known process which brings meaning between the follower and their leader (Nielsen & Rao, 1987). When the leader's negative feedback of himself and others show value incongruence and relational distance, the leader behaviour is perceived to be inauthentic (Sidani et al. 2018). Further, negative feedback seeking is thought to enhance or protect a person's image or ego through impressions management of the leader (Ashford et al., 2003; Ashford & Tsui, 1991,

Collinson, 2012) which were evident in the case of Manager(HT) who was still considered to be a good boss by his subordinates which could be a mirror image of what subordinates see in the leader who performs relational activities as mentioned in the case.

In conclusion, authentic leadership is known to be highly transparent where the leader is legitimized by the follower for their authenticity (Sidani et al., 2018). Nevertheless, for some relational actions, even inauthentic leaders behaviours could be perceived by the followers to be authentic which mirror the relational transparency dimension in both the leader and follower. In sum, the mirror image of authentic leadership from leader-follower perspectives impacts through impression management of the leader, highlighting the mirror effect mainly in the relational transparency dimension.