The Mirror Image: Authentic Leadership from Leader and Subordinates Perspectives

SuraniSharmalee Dias1, J.A.S.K. Jayakody2 and Nilakshi W.K. Galahityawe3

1. Postgraduate Institute of Management, University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Sri Lanka
2. Institute of Human Resource Advancement, University of Colombo, Sri Lanka
3. Department of Decision Science, University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Sri Lanka

Correspondence:SuraniSharmalee Dias, Postgraduate Institute of Management, 28, Leslie Ranagala Mawatha, Colombo 8. Sri Lanka. Tel. 94-712-343240, email:surani1000@gmail.com

Abstract

Since the last decade, researchers organizations and businesses have adopted authentic leadership scholarship to answer questions regarding deep distrust in leaders. The anchors of authentic leadership include being self-aware, true to oneself, reflecting genuineness and reliability while being perceived as a highly confident, ethical andhonorable individual (Avolio and Gardner, 2005). Leader-centered authentic leadership also encourages subordinate confidence and trust (Amunkete and Rothmann (2015); Sidani et al., 2018). Ford and Harding (2011) emphasize the need for dynamic interaction between leader and follower but argue that the authentic leadership model can be destructive if the leader becomes subjective towards organizational values. Despite this thinking, collectivistic paternalistic attitudes and power distance in a Sri Lankan cultural context have aided the strong development of leader-follower interactions (Hewege; 2011 and Liyanage, 1996a,b). This results from Sri Lankans' preference for power distance and respect for authority (Hewege et al., 2008).

Considering the authentic leadership model where the follower mirrors the leader, this paper explores the mirror effect of authentic leadership for the first time in the Sri Lankan retail sector. This study focuses on both leader and subordinate perspectives to understand the power of leadership in their dynamic interactions.The moral notion of being one's true self (De Freitas et al, 2016; Strohminger et al, 2017) is understood differently across cultures. In Western cultures, "self" is an individual with independence while in Eastern cultures; "self" is holistic, emphasizing social relationships and reflecting interdependence (Markus and Kiayama, 1991). Thus, the Sri Lankan context is different as interdependency through collectivistic and paternalistic attitudes promotes stronger leader-follower relationships which mirror differently to Ford's argument.

Although feedback seeking behavior is a proactive action, little research has been done to examine subordinate perspectives on interpersonal connections in the workplace (Ashford et al, 2016). Furthermore, the follower's role of assigning authenticity to the leader remains under-studied (Sidani et al. 2018).This paper address these areas using empirical data where two Managers from high and low turnover outlets within the same retail group were interviewed for 15-20 minutes in the Manager's office. A semi-structured interview guide was used to capture the dimensions of authentic leadership(Walumbwa et al., 2008).

Manager(HT) ranked lower on the authentic leadership dimension of relational transparency, caring little for feedback. He showed over confidence stating "I can do" but"I don't mix my personal life with work" and claiming a distant and official relationship with his staff. 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. Though he claimed that staff would not share details of their personal life with him, his staff on the contrary identified their Manager as 'one of us' someone who did not 'boss' themand one with whom they shared values. Thus they appreciated him as a good Manager who solved any customer

issues and did not take immediate disciplinary action for mistakes but rather sternly warned them not to repeat them.

Manager (LT) also ranked lower, but stated, "Yes I get feedback to correct myself" and believed in having "a good fit with everybody". Further he listened to staff views and claimed "they know me at different instances whenI solve problems".Besides, heconfidently declarednotsuccumbing tomanagementpressure saying,"I don't stop giving two off-days to my staff" and "my staff will not resign butbring other girls and boys from their villages" highlighting his positive relationship with them. The staff responded with, "sir knows that he cannot get us angry but motivates and encourages us in our career" and "is very friendly and works with us". Moreover their comment, "we want to work with him even though it is a difficult task because of the manner in which he speaks to us" exemplifiedthetrue nature of Manager(LT) in building trust and bringing meaning to work.Likewise, they applauded him for being a clever, good and transparent Manager who recognized their strengths even whilst scolding them. The difference between Manager HT and Manager LT can be explained by their attitudes towards self-awareness where Manager LT's positive thinking created a work environment of trust and meaningful work, where subordinates appreciated his authentic self.

According to Zenger et at., (2015), low ranking reflects a lack of self-awareness but in Sri Lankan culture, underestimation results from collectivistic and paternalistic attitudes where leaders do not set themselves higher as in the case of a parent. Likewise, authenticity is higher when leader values, beliefs and attitudes are congruent with subordinates, where leaders with positive attitudes and transparent behavior promote self-development and authentic followership (Price, 2017, Ilies et al., 2005, Sagnak et a., 2017). This was evident in Manager (LT)'s subordinates who mirrored their leader's self-actualization for eudemonic well-being. In addition, relational transparency and authentic actions of a leader positively link to develop subordinates' trust to mirror authentic followership.

On the Contrary, Manager(HT)'s formal and distant relationship with subordinates is part of Sri Lankan culture unlike a leader who shows a deep sense of self-awareness, demonstrating transparent and confident behaviors to followers. Manager (HT)'s statements characterize him as a 'Prozac Leader',who shows over confidence and reluctance in listening to others thereby violating the dimension self-awareness (Collinson, 2012). Similarly, a lack of consistency result in followers being unable to authenticate or show legitimacy to a leader like Manager(HT). His negative feedback of himself and others adds to value incongruence, which is perceived as inauthentic (Sidani et al., 2018). Further, negative feedback seeking enhances or protects a person'simage or ego through impressions management (Collinson, 2012), as evident in the case of Manager(HT) who was considered a good boss by subordinates who subsequently mirrored their leader's relational activities.
Authentic leadership is highly transparentand a leader is legitimized by follower authenticity. Nevertheless, for some relational actions even inauthentic leader behaviours could be perceived by the followers to be authentic and mirrored in both the leader and follower. In sum, the mirror image of authentic leadership from leader-follower perspectives impacted through leader's impression management highlights a mirror image in the relational transparency dimension.

Key words

Authentic Leadership, Authenticity, Eudemonic well-being, Impression Management, Prozac Leader

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