Power dynamics, flawed theorizing and (in)authentic leadership theory

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Abstract

Leaders are often depicted as some version of Superman – strong, confident, bold, decisive, empathic and visionary. Researchers identify an ever greater range of attributes and skills which they insist that all leaders should aspire to develop and which a select few are deemed to possess. Nor does there seem to be any cap on the number of consultants who promise to teach the skills that are said to be needed. CEOs and wannabe CEOs find much of this appealing. It is more satisfying to think that you are a charismatic visionary than a boring person in a business suit, and that you are transforming the world rather than reading a spreadsheet. Such heroic models reinforce the power of leaders, and frame academic debate on leadership in a way that I suggest is harmful. In this paper I discuss these problems with reference to Authentic Leadership Theory (henceforth, ALT), which has emerged as a popular leadership theory in recent years.

The tone of the literature on ALT is captured in the following definition of authentic leadership, from a controversial paper by Walumbwa et al (2008). They describe ALT as

'a pattern of leader behavior that draws upon and promotes both positive psychological capacities and a positive ethical climate, to foster greater self-awareness and an internalised moral perspective, balanced processing of information, and relational transparency on the part of leaders working with followers, fostering positive self-development' (p.94 – Italics in the original).

The word 'positive' runs throughout many of the publications advocating ALT, and establishes it as a part of the movement known as 'positive psychology.' Fred Luthans and Bruce Avolio contributed a chapter to a book on positive psychology in 2003 where they fully own this connection. They write that: 'As a positive construct, descriptive words include genuine, reliable, trustworthy, real, and veritable. Positive psychologists conceive this authenticity as both owning one's personal experiences (thoughts, emotions, or beliefs, "the real me inside") and acting in accord with the true self (behaving and expressing what you really think and believe)' (p.242). They approvingly cite the example of the polling organization, Gallup, which has been 'focusing on positive psychology's application to the workplace by identifying and fitting employee talents and strengths into the right job… which in turn significantly relates to desired organizational outcomes such as productivity, profit, customer service, safety, and retention…' (p.245). As with other mainstream leadership theories a unitarist interest is simply assumed.

I offer six key arguments:

1. The assumed positivity of ALT is a mask for deep and enduring power relationships in the workplace
2. ALT is at bottom a business venture. Its assumed positive content seeks to build the power of its academic advocates as business partners and consultants, and therefore legitimises a world view that they find conducive.
3. The theory itself is a series of meaningless tautologies.
4. In stressing the numerous benefits that allegedly flow from ALT, and the equally numerous positive qualities that authentic leaders are said to possess, ALT can be viewed as a reincarnation of transformational leadership rather than an advance from it.
5. The methods deployed to support the theory – in particular, the widespread use of the Authentic Leadership Questionnaire – are used so that only positive results that support the theory can be found. The theory is therefore scientifically invalid.
6. I relate this critique to how leadership theory is generally developed – through prefixing 'leadership' with positive sounding adjectives, and then marketing the results to credulous businesses, and other researchers in search of fresh fields and sub-fields to cultivate.

Overall, ALT is viewed as theoretically limited, empirically flawed and as little more than a new mask for enduring power relationships in the workplace.