

Authentic leadership: Taylor's version

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this manuscript is to explore an assignment given to students in an online survey of leadership theory and practice graduate course to help them learn and apply information on authentic leadership theory and critically examine the literature on this theory through a feminist lens.

Design/methodology/approach – After studying authentic leadership theory, students were prompted to examine Taylor Swift's public statements, actions and impact on her industry and society and how her words and actions support or refute her status as an authentic leader. Students were challenged to examine how Swift's gender impacts her status as an authentic leader and to critically examine how the demographics of the authors who developed this theory could affect its application.

Findings – Students critically engaged with the concept of authentic leadership, thoughtfully applied their knowledge to a real-world case study, and displayed an understanding of the interplay of gender and authentic leadership.

Originality/value – Recommendations are provided to inspire new ideas for leadership educators who seek to prepare students to understand (the often gender-influenced) applications of authentic leadership in a modern setting.

Keywords Authentic leadership theory, Women and leadership, Gender and leadership, Feminist pedagogy

Paper type Teaching tools

Introduction

Authentic Leadership Theory is often described as a blend of established leadership concepts, and while a standard definition is still evolving, many scholars generally accept that is built on four distinct dimensions: self-awareness, relational transparency, ethical/moral behavior, and balanced processing (Ash, 2022). A review of the origin of Authentic Leadership and the literature supporting the development of the concept reveals a narrow demographic group (mostly white males) as the primary contributors to the available research. This limited perspective has left some in the field of leadership education wondering if the concept can truly be applied in the same way for individuals who are outside this demographic, especially as women tend to have a more difficult time being viewed by peers as “authentic” (Eagly, 2005; Liu, Cletcher, & Grant, 2015).

Review of related literature

Evolution of authentic leadership theory

The central thrust of Authentic Leadership is being true to oneself, which can be traced back to the ancient Greek philosophy “to thine own self be true”. In order to be true to oneself, it is assumed you must know yourself, and therefore, self-awareness is a key component and outcome of Authentic Leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; George, 2003; Luthans & Avolio, 2003). Beyond self-awareness, other key components of Authentic Leadership have emerged. From the roots of positive psychology and transformational leadership, Luthans and Avolio (2003) introduced a model of Authentic Leadership. The model posits we all come to where we are via our life experiences and ideally, along the way, we leverage positive psychological capacities like hope, confidence optimism, and resiliency. Those antecedents are then filtered



through our current experiences, challenges, and triggers from which self-awareness and self-regulating behavior emerge, resulting in authentic traits such as confidence, hopefulness, optimism, resilience, transparency, moral/ethical behavior, and future orientation.

George (2003) brought Authentic Leadership to mainstream business practice and described similar key traits/components of being an Authentic Leader, all of which emerge from what he referred to as “the crucible” or a transformational challenge. One essential quality is to “be your own person, authentic in every regard” (George, 2003, p. 12) along with knowing your own leadership style and being aware of your weaknesses; all of which can be summed up as “self-awareness”. He also presented five dimensions of Authentic Leaders: purpose, values, heart, self-discipline, and relationships. Over the past twenty years, other traits, qualities, and components have been identified as essential to Authentic Leadership, but they can all be distilled down to the four main components presented in this paper: self-awareness, relational transparency, ethical/moral behavior, and balanced processing (Ash, 2022; Hopkins & O’Neil, 2015).

Criticisms of authentic leadership theory

As with any leadership theory, Authentic Leadership has its share of detractors/sceptics. Alvesson and Einola (2019) warn of the excessive positivity associated with Authentic Leadership and argue that it stands on a shaky foundation, of which to “know yourself” and “act according to your true self” are tricky concepts. They assert that it is crucial to recognize the tension between job-based roles and acting according to your “true self”. As evidenced in the model itself, there is a notion that “positive psychological capacities” (such as confidence, hope and resilience) beget the outcomes of Authentic Leadership (i.e. confidence, optimism and resilience). Alvesson and Einola frame this as “problems related to a priori positive framing” (p. 285).

Beyond general critiques of the challenges in measuring and operationalizing Authentic Leadership, several scholars have also presented the difficulties in aligning the components of the theory with the behaviors, actions, and characteristics of underrepresented groups - specifically, women. In the same special edition of *The Leadership Quarterly* where the seminal works of Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May, and Walumbwa (2005) were first collectively published, Eagly (2005) introduced the question “Does gender matter?”. She inquired about this specifically because achieving relational authenticity is said to be contingent upon followers ascribing legitimacy to the Authentic Leader, something that is inherently difficult for “outside” leaders. Outside leaders are members of groups who have traditionally not had access to particular leadership roles – often, women. Authenticity itself emerges via the transactions between leaders and followers, as “followers must identify with their leader and perceive the leader’s values as suitable for the community within the leader has authority” (p. 463). While men might easily scale the “glass elevator” and are often leaders in communities composed primarily of women, conversely, women often have outsider status even in communities comprised of followers of the same gender, because few women have held these roles.

Hopkins and O’Neil (2015) were more explicit in their critique of Authentic Leadership Theory in relation to women leaders and refer to it as a “gendered construct with challenges for women leaders” (p. 3). For example, one challenge presented is the prevailing perceptions of what it means to be a woman are often in tension with the “think manager, think male” mindset of conventional leadership perspectives. Even if a woman is behaving in alignment with her “true self”, if her authentic behaviors and actions (such as self-confidence, decisiveness, and direct communication) are typically seen as traditionally male leader traits, then the woman will likely be perceived as inauthentic. Another challenge for women leaders is that organizations themselves are not gender neutral and often have been created by and for men. So when a female leader is faced with a major life event that puts her values and behaviors in conflict, what should her attempt to be an Authentic Leader look like? Can women and other

marginalized groups truly utilize the existing and/or evolving literature on Authentic Leadership? As leadership educators, we are tasked with balancing the history of a theory with its evolution and discussing both historical and modern applications as we teach our students. Case studies can be an effective way to help students apply the theoretical information in a modern context ([Christensen & Carlile, 2009](#)).

Taylor Swift was selected as the individual for students to research in the first term that this assignment was incorporated into the course because she is a current pop culture icon, and the instructor was able to connect her words and actions to all four current dimensions of Authentic Leadership.

Description of the teaching tool

The course Survey of Leadership Theory and Practice serves as a core requirement in a fully-online Master of Science in Leadership program. Students are typically advised to take this course in their first semester of the program. As students entering this program can hold an undergraduate degree in any discipline, knowledge of leadership theories and concepts varies as students enter the program. Oftentimes, students already hold leadership positions in the workplace, but have not yet formally studied the discipline of leadership, and concepts may sound and feel familiar, but are unfamiliar as a named academic theory. This is frequently the case when we discuss the concept of Authentic Leadership. Students can recognize the importance of a leader embodying the four components of Authentic Leadership, but may not have recognized or studied it as an academic concept.

During the second week of the course, students were directed to prepare for a unit on Authentic Leadership by reading seminal and summary articles and a relevant section of the course text, watching a video lecture on the four dimensions of Authentic Leadership, and discussing the influence of author demographics on the implications and application of the theory. Students were then prompted to complete an assignment with the following instructions:

After reviewing the resources on Authentic Leadership Theory, craft a 3–5 page essay analyzing the words and/or actions of Taylor Swift to support or refute her status as an Authentic Leader. All four components of Authentic Leadership should be addressed. Additionally, support a position on whether (or not) her gender affects her status as an Authentic Leader. Be sure to support your argument with information from outside resources.

Assignments were graded based on a rubric provided in the course. Students could earn up to fifty points in total, with up to 40 points awarded for a thorough analysis of the topic supported by ideas from relevant sources and up to 10 points awarded for organization, mechanics, formatting, etc.

Discussion of outcomes

Identification of Taylor Swift as an Authentic Leader in the entertainment industry was unanimous. One hundred percent of the students who completed the assignment supported an overwhelmingly positive argument naming Swift as an Authentic Leader, even if they also highlighted an event/lyric/quote that was negative in one or more of the areas. The most common evidence students used to support this status was as follows:

Self-awareness:

- (1) Known for cultivating genuine connections with her audience/fanbase
- (2) Displays willingness to be vulnerable with the public
- (3) Identified her own strengths and weaknesses at an early age
- (4) Stepped out of spotlight after some perceived scandal in 2016, spent time introspecting, and returned with a greater sense of self

- (5) Known for introspective song lyrics
- (6) Intentionally uses positional power to influence others for good
- (7) Acknowledges her own privilege and wealth (e.g. When she accused a man of sexual assault, he denied it and sued her for \$3 million defamation [erroneously assuming she would settle], and she filed a countersuit for \$1)
- (8) Re-invented herself and her image with Reputation album (“Look What You Made Me Do”; “The old Taylor can’t come to the phone right now. Why? Oh, ’cause she’s dead”) and a few times since then
- (9) First-hand understanding of gender dynamics and double-standards in the music industry

Relational transparency:

- (1) Transparency is amplified by skillful use of social media platforms
- (2) Unprecedented relationship with fans (Easter eggs, social media interactions, etc.)
- (3) As an artist who writes her own music, she maintains control over the messaging in her lyrics
- (4) Lyrics depict her actual experiences
- (5) Switched genres (from country to pop to indie-folk and back again) skillfully
- (6) Long career has allowed her lyrics to span from girlhood to womanhood, helping her to amass a fan base that spans generations
- (7) Speaks out for diversity, and “walks the walk” by hiring diverse people to be on her team
- (8) So close with her fans, and gained so much support for the unfamiliar process of re-recording her albums, that her four “Taylor’s Version” albums all hit #1 on the charts in the first week they were re-released. . . despite being 9–13 year old music. Spent a lot of time educating the public on the importance of the process and symbolism of this business practice.

Ethical/moral behavior:

- (1) Advocacy for artists’ rights (influenced change in Apple Music royalty policies)
- (2) Re-recording/re-releasing her own albums as a stand against bad industry practices
- (3) Humanitarian/philanthropic efforts
- (4) Empowering lyrical messages to embrace individuality and reject social expectations and unnecessary criticism (“You Need to Calm Down”; “The Man”; “Shake it Off”)
- (5) Adjusts her art to align with her values
- (6) A lasting legacy of cultivating kindness (friendship bracelet culture, famously telling her security to back off a fan during a concert, distributing water for fans at concerts during a heat wave, etc.)
- (7) After winning a lengthy court case (against a man convicted of sexually assaulting her), made a large donation to sexual assault victims

Balanced processing:

- (1) Known to fairly/generously compensate support staff (including hefty bonuses, health insurance, etc., in an industry known for not providing these types of benefits)
- (2) Prioritizes alone time and time with friends
- (3) Displays emotional intelligence through song lyrics
- (4) Prioritizing self-care as she trains to stay in shape for extended Eras World Tour

Additionally, students recognized the impact of gender on the application of Authentic Leadership Theory, citing such concepts as the following:

- (1) Highlighted the “stipulation” in the description of Relational Transparency (as a dimension of Authentic Leadership) that it “is achieved by leaders without displaying *too much* of their emotions”
- (2) Lyrics to “The Man” highlight gender-based societal and industry double-standards
- (3) Outspoken on issues like gender equality. She has highlighted gender-based double-standards in interviews. (e.g. “A man is allowed to react. A woman can only over-react.”)
- (4) Her personal life is more scrutinized than male celebrities. (e.g. coverage of her presence NFL games blown far out of proportion.) This aligns with Eagly’s work on role incongruity. “When women take space in traditionally male-dominated spaces, role incongruity and prejudice can play a significant role in the perception and attributes of leaders.”
- (5) Gender directly impacts leader perceptions, not their abilities. . .but perceptions can affect impact of abilities.
- (6) “Women achieve Authentic Leadership through emotional intelligence, and she displays copious amounts of emotional intelligence.”
- (7) “Stereotypes in society change slowly. Women have only been competing against men in the workforce for about 75 years. Hopefully in another generation or two, women will be much more commonly seen as Authentic Leaders since kids today have women like Swift to set an example for them.”

Most of the students who completed the assignment submitted well-crafted essays. Grades for the content of the essay (up to 40 points awarded) averaged 37.08, or 92.5%. Overall, students were successful in their efforts to apply the information on Authentic Leadership to the words and actions of Taylor Swift. Anecdotal feedback from students was positive overall. They indicated that they found relating the course content to a current much-celebrated pop culture icon was refreshing and helped to hold their interest in the topic.

In course discussions that followed the assignment, we were impressed with students’ abilities to connect the demographics of the authors of seminal works on this topic with the application of the theory itself. Many students expressed the viewpoint that they had not previously considered the demographics of authors of the body of literature that shapes our field of study. Making this connection provided an opportunity for students to consider the limited viewpoints that exist for the interpretation and application of some generally accepted leadership theories. Several mentioned that seeking out diverse representation in authorship can help craft a more broadly-applicable view on these theories.

Recommendations for future implementation

The course, taught in Spring 2024, was offered in a time when information on Swift was ubiquitous. Students were easily able to find evidence of her words/actions that supported each

dimension of Authentic Leadership, even if they were not personally familiar with (or a fan of) her work as an artist. Weaving in the information on how Swift's gender has affected her status seemed to help students realize that her gender, in part, is what makes her actions groundbreaking. Telling students that Authentic Leadership Theory has been forced to evolve to include a wider audience is a good place to start, but giving them an opportunity to investigate a modern application reinforces the lesson in a way that will likely prove to be more memorable for them.

Centering an application-based assignment on an individual who is at the top of their career is recommended. Students (even the ones who did not identify as Swifties) seemed to connect with this assignment more enthusiastically than with other assignments that focus on current, more traditional organizational leaders. Leadership educators are in a unique time in which we can identify demographic monopolies on research authorship and work toward presenting material from a more balanced range of scholars to our classes to ensure that multiple viewpoints are presented for their consideration.

This exercise was completed using Taylor Swift as the case study, but various female pop culture icons, organizational leaders, or historical leaders could be used, based on student/instructor preferences. Suggestions for alternate leaders to anchor this assignment include:

- (1) Malala Yousafzai
- (2) Ruth Bader Ginsberg
- (3) Kamala Harris
- (4) Dolly Parton
- (5) Eleanor Roosevelt
- (6) Condoleezza Rice
- (7) Jacinda Ardern
- (8) Melinda Gates
- (9) America Ferrera
- (10) Indra Nooyi
- (11) Michelle Obama
- (12) Tsai Ing-wen
- (13) Cynt Marshall

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