

## IS AUTHENTICITY HARMFUL? LEADERS' PERSPECTIVE

Tereza Kicková – Petra Sofia Horňáková

---

### Abstract

Numerous studies have explored the positive impact that authentic leaders have on their followers, in particular on their well-being, creativity, effectiveness, or work engagement. However, significantly less attention has been paid to exploring the individual components of authentic leadership – self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced decision-making, and internalized moral perspective. The aim of this work is to further examine the components of self-awareness and relational transparency, in particular how leaders perceive their leadership practices and efficacy, as well as their strengths and weaknesses. We interviewed 13 leaders from different business sectors and of various managerial levels. We conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews, which we then analyzed through reflexive thematic analysis. The findings suggest that while colleagues and subordinates tend to view authentic behavior of their leaders positively, the leaders can experience intrapersonal conflict related to the leadership approaches they employ. The conflict was more explicitly articulated especially by men from our sample, as they progressed to higher level of the organizational hierarchy. Some of them even viewed authenticity as an obstacle in their leader's role, referring mostly to being perceived as "too nice" or "too friendly, to my own detriment."

**Key words:** authentic leadership, intrapersonal conflict, workplace relationships, thematic analysis

**JEL Code:** J24, M54

---

## Introduction

The recent events, such as Covid-19 and the war in Ukraine have highlighted the crucial role leaders play not only in organizations, but primarily in societies. President Zelensky's famous response to the US evacuation offer, "I need ammunition, not a ride," (Braithwaite, 2022) at the dawn of Russian-Ukrainian conflict had sent a clear message about the kind of leader he is, echoing positive response from ordinary people and statesmen alike.

It is precisely in the times of crises, when leaders to a great extent determine the final outcome of the events. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that both professionals and researchers have been attempting to find recipe for successful leadership, examining different types of leadership behavior and what type of impact these behaviors have on followers.

Among the leadership styles considered to have particularly positive impact on the behavior of followers is authentic leadership (AL). Avolio et al. (2005, p. 802), define authentic leaders as "*persons who have achieved high levels of authenticity to the extent that they know who they are, what they believe and value, and they act upon those values and beliefs while transparently interacting with others*".

According to research by Walumbwa et al. (2008, p. 91), authentic leaders positively impact the organization and its followers – which will be further developed in the theoretical background section. Naturally, this concept also has its adversaries. While authentic leadership has been explored in the context of positive impact and is viewed as predominantly composing of desired behaviors from the side of leaders, the opponents of this concept have reservations especially about the vagueness of authenticity itself, questioning not only its meaning per se, but also individual components of leadership behavior, (Alvesson & Einola, 2019). One of the sharpest criticisms of positive outcomes of authentic leadership is linking authenticity itself to negative behavioral outcomes, pointing out that authentic leader can also be "an authentic jerk," (Zander, 2013). These reservations together compose a strong sense of ambiguity regarding authentic leadership – both its components, as well as its outcomes.

We would like to challenge and explore the ambiguity of authentic leadership, from a perspective that has been defined by the leaders themselves, to understand the pitfalls of authentic leadership from their own perspective. Therefore, the research question that reflects this goal is following:

*What do leaders perceive as negative aspects of their authentic discourse?*

## **1 Theoretical background**

### **1.1. Authentic leadership**

Authentic leadership is defined by four components of leaders' behavior: self-awareness, relational transparency, internalized moral perspective, and balanced decision-making, (Avolio et al., 2010). The aficionados of authentic leadership praise it chiefly based on its positive impact on followers, which includes positive relationship between authentic leadership and job satisfaction (Walumbwa et al. 2007), between employee well-being, productivity, and leadership style (Hendriks et al., 2020), and ability of authentic leaders to reduce stress among their reports by guiding them to become more authentic (Rahimnia & Sharifirad, 2014).

We introduce the following themes related to the components of self-awareness and relational transparency, as they have proven particularly pertinent to our research question.

### **1.2. Leadership and emotional intelligence**

Leader's ability to motivate, navigate, and develop their followers is, to a great extent, dependent on leaders' ability to understand their subordinates and create connection with them. Therefore, emotional intelligence, which is described as "the ability to understand and manage moods and emotions in the self and others", is said to contribute to effective leadership in organizations, (George, 2000).

### **1.3. Leadership and Trust**

Having trust in their manager is essential for the well-being of subordinates. Followers' ability to rely on their leaders and vice versa is the building block of successful work relationship. The research shows the importance of sustaining trusting relationships in a workplace, (Bligh, 2016).

## **2 Methods**

### **2.1. Data Collection**

The data for this article were collected between September 2021 and April 2022, using the semi-structured interviews. First, we conducted a pilot study with five participants, based

on which we adjusted phrasing of the questions, and we replaced some questions in order to gain deeper insight into the main topics of our research. We focused on building rapport and establishing trust with the participants, which in many cases allowed us to ask sensitive follow-up questions, especially those connected to insecurities and fears they have as leaders.

## **2.2. Interview Protocol**

In the semi-structured interviews, participants were asked questions that were centered around the four components of AL, focusing especially on relational transparency and self-awareness. The central questions included “what are your strengths and weaknesses in leading others,” “How would you describe your behavior towards followers,” “Which principles do you follow when leading others.” The interviews were in Czech language and were conducted both in person, in respondents’ and researchers’ offices, as well as online, using Zoom with video option.

## **2.3. Participants**

The sample consisted of 13 leaders across sectors (fintech, real estate, NGO), from companies of different sizes (from 3 to over 700 employees) in the Czech Republic. The participants range from low level to top level managers (e.g. account manager to CEO) and have a wide range of years of experience with leadership role (from 1 year to 22 years). Distribution of gender equates to approximately 40% of women and 60% of men. The table below provides with detailed information about respondents, (Tab. 1).

We used snowball sampling method to approach and interview leaders that were considered authentic, based on the components of authentic leadership described in the theoretical section. The sampling selection follows maximum variation for the mapping of examined phenomenon.

**Tab. 1: Respondents**

Respondent ID	Industry	Position	Gender	Age	Years of leadership experience
ID01	IT	Head of finance	Female	43	1
ID02	IT	Account manager	Male	28	1
ID03	Fintech	Managing Director	Male	29	3
ID04	Tech	Project Manager	Male	30	3
ID05	IT	Lawyer	Female	30	5
ID06	NGO	CEO	Male	29	7
ID07	NGO	CEO	Female	30	7
ID08	IT	Head of Software development	Male	33	8
ID09	Financial Advisory	Area director	Female	28	8
ID10	Fintech	CEO	Male	47	18
ID11	Real estate	Commercial director	Male	42	20
ID12	IT	Business Unit Director	Male	43	20
ID13	FMCG	Brand Communication and Campaign Manager, CE	Female	43	22

Source: authors

## 2.4. Data Analysis

We used thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) to analyze the collected data, focusing on discovering themes related to negative aspects of authentic behavior. The process included transcribing the interview recordings and coding them, as well as discussing the codes that we assigned. The interviews were conducted in Czech language and we translated the following quotations to English to our best abilities, aiming to preserve the original voice of each participant.

## 3 Analysis

During the analysis, we discovered the following themes:

**Tab. 2: Main Themes**

Code	Theme specification
Trust	Trusting people too much, to the point of feeling

	used
Emotions	Tendency to feel for others
Authority	Lack of authority – over-friendliness

Source: authors

We include these themes in the context of leaders' authentic behavior, which we framed as behavior that is natural to them, and is described as such.

### 3.1. Trust: Trusting people too much

Trust is considered as essential part of workplace relationship by most leaders. However, many of them question the extend to which they trust their subordinates, indicating, that it leads to decrease in team effectiveness and productivity, as well as leading to self-doubt about their leadership abilities.

ID13: „*I choose the people, give them my trust and work with them. The biggest managerial lesson for me is, that the people with who I suffered and gave them second and third chance, that it would have been better to end it sooner.*“

ID12: “*I think (CEO) and I have a positive attitude and we look for the positive, in people and things. When something does not work out, then we discuss what went wrong. But when it doesn't work out repeatedly, then I'm dissatisfied. In this sense I believe in – I don't want to call it second chances, but in that something can go wrong. But when these things happen repeatedly, then it is necessary, and I am working on it, not to be so nice.*”

ID13: “*One employee didn't tell us and just left for vacation for one month. So once we forgave her, but when a person does it for a second time, then it is a no-go. Then you feel like she is using you.*”

ID 07: “*I really trust my people and I base my leadership of people and the whole organization on this principle. I build a lot on relationships, on empathetic communication. But sometimes it is more like a downside – I don't want to say downside, but sometimes I regret it. Sometimes the people need to be managed, more than lead.*”

Interestingly, one participant provided us with a different approach to trust in leadership, one that is placed on the opposite side of the specter than the respondents above.

ID 06: *“My weakness is that I’m a micro manager. I’m very pintlich (meticulous) and I don’t trust that people will do they job well. I will start trusting them after they prove themselves, but it is not given. I’ve had too many bad experiences to just be trusting with anyone.”*

Overall, trust is stated as important by all leaders. However, the self-regulation of the attitude once trust is broken is what varies among them, leading to lack of trust as a weakness, or occasional feeling of failure as an internal conflict.

### **3.2. Emotions: tendency to feel for others too much**

Leaders agree that they use emotional intelligence to understand and relate to their followers. However, some of them are aware about their tendency to become overly emotionally engaged in the lives of their subordinates, which often inflicts in them intrapersonal conflict.

ID13: *“My weak side is that I am too empathetic and I try to think for the other person, how he or she feels. Then I think that maybe it is not like that. That maybe the person had a fight at home or something, but sometimes instead of asking I want to save the person’s face and don’t want to ask directly, because I dont want to hurt him emotionally and then I say to myself omg why didn’t I just ask. I make it harder for myself than I have to.”*

ID05: *“I think that my weak side it that I have to internalize that it is not my life, but their life. That sometimes I care about things more than the people. That I take some things more personally than them and then I ask too much if they are ok. Because I wouldn’t be. But they are totally fine. Sometimes I see that it even bothers them, that I care so much, so I’m still searching for the balance, when to let things be and where to ask the people if they are allright.”*

ID07: *“I know a lot about my people, I take the time to really learn about them, about what they are experiencing at different moments. But sometimes I have to tell myself that these are the information that I use to work with my team, but I don’t need to live through them.”*

Interestingly or not, this issue of authenticity is experienced solely by women leaders. One man-leader reported feeling on the opposite side of emotional scale, indicating that lack of empathy is a problem for him.

ID03: *“My weakness is empathy. I cannot recognize what the people want, I cannot relate to them at all. They would describe me as closed-up and reserved, as someone who doesn’t really talk to them.”*

It is evident that emotional intelligence plays a significant role in leadership outcomes, however, it puts some strain on the leaders, who need to find balance between acting in their natural way, and acting in a way that is effective for the team and does not put unnecessary baggage of doubt on them.

### **3.3. Authority**

Having authority is perceived as important aspect of successful leadership by the study participants. The idea of friendliness and friendly relationship with subordinates as an opposite and harmful side to authority has appeared multiple times in the interviews.

ID05: *“I have mostly friendly relationship with my subordinates, which is not always right, I think. So I try to limit it, so that they feel good and I can develop them, but that it has some limits, from here to there.”*

ID10: *“I think I’m too friendly. In certain phase I think it becomes a disadvantage. I am introvert and on managerial positions should be extroverts, speakers, presenters, I’m not a typical one. My people don’t think of me as a typical director, like Tomas Cupr, I’m not so authoritative.”*

ID08: *“I try to be friends with them, although it is not totally right. I think it is causing me problems now. I have been friends with many people and now I am pretty much their boss and I ask them for things where friendly relationships go aside. But unfortunately, most of my career has been based on some personal relationship. I would need to learn to be more direct, to show some authority.”*



Being viewed as overly friendly, or behaving too friendly, is viewed as negative, acting in opposite to being perceived as having authority.

## **4 Discussion**

Based on the theory of authentic leadership, the behavior of authentic leaders should have various positive impact on their followers, although this is being rebuked by opponents of this leadership style. While trust, emotional intelligence, and strong focus on positive work relationships are generally considered among the positive outcomes of authentic leadership, the level to which these behaviors are adopted and acted out has a significant impact on how leaders feel about their leadership abilities and effectiveness. The findings indicate that the dark side of authentic leadership does not lie in the misbehavior of interviewed leaders or in misuse of their power, but quite the opposite. Interestingly, the dark side is on the shoulders of the leaders, in the prisons of their own situational perceptions.

### 4.1. Limitations and future research directions

Given the sample size of 13 managers, we are cautious in generalizing our results. Having a larger sample could provide a more varied range of themes. Adding a quantitative method to measure followers' perception of their leaders' authenticity, such as Authentic Leadership Inventory, would be useful in confirming the claims made by leaders. Furthermore, while the maximum variability of sample was purposely selected, narrowing the sample down in future research, for example by setting limits on minimum years of experience, type of industry (IT showed to be a specific industry with the project-based approach) or on number of direct reports could yield more particular results.

### Practical implications

Once we identify and understand the risks that some aspects of authentic leadership pose on leaders, we can proceed to suggest a set of risk-mitigating mechanisms. In addition, by simply bringing these themes to light, by addressing them publicly, could allow the leaders to challenge their perception about strengths and weaknesses.

## **Conclusion**

As the world and organizations are facing increasingly bigger challenges, the need for effective and true leaders is increasing. In search for somewhat universal recipe for

leadership, authentic leadership emerged and has been praised, as well as criticized. While some research proves various positive impacts of authentic leaders on their followers, other rebuke is as vague, insufficiently examined, and altogether not well-thought through. A key takeaway from this study is that the “dark side” of authentic leadership, based on the interviewed sample, does not lie in the traditionally condemned leadership behavior, the proverbial “authentic jerk,” but in the leaders’ strictness in evaluating their positive behavior and in the extent to which they truly care about others and authentically relate to them. It becomes clear that authenticity is, above all, about balance between helping followers to grow and feeling capable as a leader and this trade-off needs to be further recognized.

### **Acknowledgment**

This paper is an output of the science project IG303021 at the Prague University of Economics and Business.

## References

- Alvesson, M.; Einola, K. (2019). Warning for excessive positivity: Authentic leadership and other traps in leadership studies. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 30(4), 383–395. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2019.04.001>
- Avolio, B. J., & Gardner, W. L. (2005). Authentic leadership development: Getting to the root of positive forms of leadership. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 16(3), 315–338.
- Avolio, B. J., Griffith, J., Wernsing, T. S., & Walumbwa, F. O. (2010). What is authentic leadership development? In P. A. Linley, S. Harrington, & N. Garcea (Eds.), *Oxford library of psychology. Oxford handbook of positive psychology and work* (p. 39–51). Oxford University Press
- Bligh, M. C. (2016). Leadership and trust. *Springer Texts in Business and Economics*, 21–42. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-31036-7\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-31036-7_2)
- Braithwaite, S. (2022, February 26). *Zelensky refuses us offer to evacuate, saying 'I need ammunition, not a ride'*. CNN. Retrieved April 28, 2022, from <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/02/26/europe/ukraine-zelensky-evacuation-intl/index.html>
- Braun, V., and Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qual. Res. Psychol.* 3, 77–101. doi: 10.1191/1478088706qp063oa
- George, J. M. (2000). Emotions and leadership: The role of emotional intelligence. *Human Relations*, 53(8), 1027–1055. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726700538001>
- Hendriks, M., Burger, M., Rijsenbilt, A., Pleeging, E., & Commandeur, H. (2020). Virtuous leadership: a source of employee well-being and trust. *Management Research Review*, 43(8), 951–970.
- Rahimnia, F., & Sharifirad, M. S. (2014). Authentic Leadership and Employee Well-Being: The Mediating Role of Attachment Insecurity. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 132(2), 363–377.
- Zander, L. (n.d.). Viewpoint: An authentic jerk. authentic leadership can be bad leadership. *Authentic Leadership*, 279–281. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781781006382.00036>

Walumbwa, F. O., Avolio, B. J., Gardner, W. L., Wernsing, T. S., & Peterson, S. J. (2007). Authentic Leadership: Development and Validation of a Theory-Based Measure†. *Journal of Management*, 34(1), 89–126.

### Contact

Tereza Kicková

Prague University of Economics and Business

nám. Winstona Churchilla 1938/4, 120 00 Praha 3-Žižkov

[tereza.kickova@vse.cz](mailto:tereza.kickova@vse.cz)

Petra Sofia Hornakova

Prague University of Economics and Business

nám. Winstona Churchilla 1938/4, 120 00 Praha 3-Žižkov

[petra.hornakova@vse.cz](mailto:petra.hornakova@vse.cz)