


EDITORIAL

Authentic leadership: 20-Year review editorial

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Abstract

Our field has reached a critical juncture. Authentic leadership, which once promised to illuminate how leaders inspire and influence through genuine actions, has become mired in conceptual ambiguity and ideological bias. Much of the research is based on evaluations of behaviour conflated with antecedents and outcomes, presuming an oversimplified, positive view of authenticity. To advance, we must refocus on what authentic leaders actually do – their discrete behaviours – as signals of leadership. In this editorial, we redefine authentic leadership through signalling theory to address unresolved critiques and provide a platform for meaningful progress. We then summarise and synthesise the articles in this special issue, which systematically review the literature, present dynamic models of authenticity, introduce ‘bounded authenticity’ in leadership roles, advocate for rigorous experimental methods, and offer empirical support. Collectively, these papers advance authentic leadership theory with greater theoretical precision and a conceptual nuance that reflects the modern organisational leadership landscape.

Keywords: authentic leadership; conceptual; review; special issue; editorial

Introduction

A science progresses by challenging its own assumptions, altering or abandoning faulty frameworks and replacing them with newer, stronger ideas. Scholars may specialise in one of these distinct processes, and not the other, to hone their craft and conserve resources. The challenge then comes from a structural defect with how we publish research. It is often easier – and safer – to critique than to propose new solutions that might address critical issues. Thus, critiques have proliferated and efforts to advance new thinking have dwindled.

This trend may reflect the system in which scholars operate, one that is beset with structural disincentives for new knowledge. When careers often hinge on peer-reviewed publications and tenure depends on established credibility, risk-taking can seem like a luxury that few can afford. Proposing bold new models demands both creativity and the willingness to endure harsher scrutiny, delayed validation, and an increased possibility of failure. And yet the scholar’s duty is both to destroy and to create; if we shy away from the more challenging of the two, we leave the leadership field to stagnate.

But there is hope. Scholars who dare to take these intellectual risks can serve as the catalysts for progress, inspiring others to follow. By embracing the tension between critique and innovation, and encouraging environments that reward creativity, we can drive research forward. The courage to create not only reshapes the field but can also leave a lasting impact on future generations of thinkers and practitioners. Thus, we turn our attention to the present special issue, wherein the contributing authors challenge assumptions and propose bold new ideas to advance the field in meaningful ways.

Rationale for this special issue

Twenty years after *The Leadership Quarterly* special issue (Avolio & Gardner, 2005) that launched a new field of research we offer a state-of-the-science review that takes stock of the work that has been done, the challenges that remain, and sets a future research agenda.

The most recent special issue on authentic leadership was published in the journal *Leadership* and edited by Iszatt-White, Carroll, Gardiner, and Kempster (2021). Their focus echoed the times, following closely on the heels of a somewhat scathing critique by Alvesson and Einola (2019) and the subsequent exchange with Gardner, Karam, Alvesson, and Einola (2021) in *The Leadership Quarterly*. Collectively these events set the scene for an impassioned critical retrospective of the shortcomings of authentic leadership theory. There was an appetite for this kind of work at the time, and the issue served its purpose well. But given the critical nature and retrospective focus of the special issue, the volume encouraged scholars to reconsider the merits of further pursuit, rather than advanced authentic leadership knowledge. While reconsidering the merits of a construct is consistent with the stages of development for a field of research (Reichers & Schneider, 1990), and there is considerable value in retiring ‘zombie’ leadership theories (Haslam, Alvesson, & Reicher, 2024), as a field, we must take care not to discard valuable insights while addressing limitations – the jury is still out in this case and authentic leadership theory is hotly debated in the field.

Despite the critiques, research interest in authentic leadership is on a strong upward trend, supported by a burgeoning of empirical contributions, and evidenced for example by meta-analyses that find 41 unique studies in Hoch, Bommer, Dulebohn, and Wu (2018) and then 214 in Zhang et al. (2021). This includes ongoing discussions at the *Journal of Management & Organization* (e.g., Cheng, Usman, Bai, & He, 2022; Kalay, Brender-Ilan, & Kantor, 2020; Lowe, 2019; Lux, Grover, & Teo, 2023; Yikilmaz & Sürücü, 2023). Critical perspectives therefore have done little to stem the production of authentic leadership research and the popularity of the construct continues to increase. The time is right to launch a special issue that can help shape inevitable future contributions. To enable a cohesive dialogue among the papers that follow, we first address a pressing issue – the definition of authentic leadership.

Authentic leadership redefined

The arguments against authentic leadership primarily focus on its conceptual issues, measurement, and practical challenges (for a summary, see Gardner et al., 2021). Alvesson and Einola (2019) argue that the foundation of authentic leadership is philosophically weak, self-referential, and overly idealistic, failing to account for the complexities of organisational life where leaders navigate conflicting values, role expectations, and situational pressures. Alvesson and Einola contend in the exchange with Gardner and Karam (2021) that authentic leadership conflates concepts like sincerity, honesty, and authenticity, and risks promoting narcissism by encouraging leaders to prioritise their ‘true selves’ over organisational needs or followers’ well-being. More recently, Fischer and Sitkin (2023) explain that extant authentic leadership scale items conflate leader behaviour with the intent, execution quality, or effects of behaviour. Fischer, Dietz, and Antonakis (2024) highlight a ‘fatal flaw’ in how such positively valenced leadership styles, including authentic, conflate discrete leader behaviour with subjective evaluations, creating false causality.

We consider a portion of these concerns to stem from how authentic leadership is currently defined by Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing, and Peterson (2008) as ‘a pattern of leader behavior that draws upon and promotes both positive psychological capacities and a positive ethical climate, to foster greater a) self-awareness, b) an internalized moral perspective, c) balanced processing of information, and d) relational transparency on the part of leaders working with followers, fostering positive self-development’ (p. 94). We focus on two major critiques raised against this definition that are as yet unresolved.

First, that the definition of authentic leadership conflates antecedents and outcomes, without identifying any discrete leader behaviour (Fischer & Sitkin, 2023). This lack of clarity creates ambiguity

about what leaders actually ‘do’ when they are enacting authentic leadership (Fischer, Hambrick, Sajons, & Van Quaquebeke, 2023). By focusing on internal states or capacities, the definition blurs the distinction between what authentic leadership is, with what enables authentic leadership (antecedents like positive psychological capacities) and what results from authentic leadership (outcomes like positive self-development or an ethical climate). Not defining specific, observable behaviours presents challenges for empirical measurement, as it becomes unclear whether researchers are measuring internal psychological conditions, the actual leadership behaviours influenced by those conditions, or evaluations of behaviour (Fischer et al., 2024). Consequently, the conflation of antecedents and outcomes weakens the theoretical precision of the construct and its practical utility in leadership development.

Second, that the definition is oversimplified and reflects an ideological bias towards positive psychology (Fischer & Sitkin, 2023). The concept is based on an idealised view of leadership that assumes authenticity is inherently good and moral. This is problematic, as it disregards the complexity of organisational life and the inherent contradictions between personal authenticity and the demands of leadership roles. Authentic leadership, therefore, becomes more of an ideological construct rather than a nuanced understanding of leadership behaviour within organisational contexts (Alvesson & Einola, 2019). The moral framing of authentic leadership can be seen as arbitrary and problematic, as it precludes the possibility that authentic leadership can also have negative outcomes in certain conditions.

To address these criticisms, and to refocus authentic leadership research onto discrete leader behaviour (Banks, Woznyj, & Mansfield, 2023), we offer a new definition based on signalling theory (cf. such an approach to charismatic leadership by Antonakis, Bastardoz, Jacquart, & Shamir, 2016). First recall that leadership itself is already a well-defined process (cf. Yukl & Gardner, 2020, who define leadership as ‘the process of influencing others to understand and agree on what needs to be done and how to do it, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives’ p. 26). Authentic leadership is therefore a specific subtype of this leadership process, which could perhaps be better understood through the lens of signalling theory.

Signalling theory explains how individuals or entities convey information about themselves to others through observable phenomena (Connelly, Certo, Ireland, & Reutzel, 2011). Everything about leaders, including their attitudes, behaviour, traits, emotions, appearance, and communication, in context and over time, is constantly sending messages to everyone who can observe and receive those messages. These messages are ‘signals’ and including everything about leaders that is visible and in part designed to communicate (Spence, 2002, p. 434). Signals therefore include all messages, or ‘cues’, that leaders either actively send or passively emanate. Such signals provide a basis for followers to infer ideas about the leaders and their leadership (Reh, Van Quaquebeke, & Giessner, 2017).

Signalling then – in a leadership context – is the process of sending signals to leadership stakeholders, such as followers, peers, other leaders, and onlookers. Signals contain information that recipients (e.g., followers) decode in a process akin to a system of language, and therefore include all manner of communication modes, such as written, oral, and nonverbal forms (Banks et al., 2017), as well as the use of signs and symbols to convey meaning (for a primer on visual semiotics, see Dunleavy, 2020). Leaders can therefore influence their followers’ behaviour by sending signals that will trigger specific thoughts, emotions, activate identities or roles, shape attitudes, values, or beliefs, and so on (Antonakis et al., 2016). Applying signalling theory can help redress the limitations of prior authentic leadership definitions by refocusing the field onto discrete leader behaviour, and removing the positive valence, conflated concepts, and evaluations.

We therefore redefine authentic leadership as concordant, values-based leader signalling of self-awareness, internalised moral perspective, balanced processing, and relational transparency.

Signalling thereby captures ‘what’ authentic leaders do (Fischer et al., 2023). The four dimensions broadly endorsed in the literature (Gardner et al., 2021) specify what kinds of signals authentic leaders send (or emanate). Signals can convey honest information or be manipulated to send contrived messages (Reh et al., 2017). Authentic leadership signals are therefore intentionally ‘values-based’,

meaning that they reflect the leaders' true principles and ethical convictions, and 'concordant' to indicate a deep alignment between what leaders believe and what they signal. Including both the terms 'concordant' and 'values-based' is essential, as omitting these terms may leave authentic leadership vulnerable to impression management, which is inconsistent with the spirit of the construct.

We avoid any mention of a 'true self', as the notion has been correctly criticised for lacking philosophical grounding. The idea that leaders can act in line with their 'true' self, ignores existentialist perspectives that argue the self is constantly shaped by external forces and contexts. Alvesson and Einola (2019) explain that fixed and static notions of the self are out of touch with contemporary understandings of identity. Hence, we opt for 'concordant' as a way to capture that signals align with leaders' internal sense of self, while enabling a more dynamic interpretation of what that means over time, across contexts, and in sensitivity to others' needs.

We also remove any inherent 'positivity' from our revised definition, such that it dispassionately describes a specific subset of leadership behaviour, rather than an ideological concept, without conflating it with the intent, execution quality, or effects of the behaviour (Fischer & Sitkin, 2023). Indeed, we do not see the possibility of negative outcomes as inconsistent with authentic leadership theory. For example, leader humour can produce both positive and negative effects, depending on the extent to which the humour is shared by parties to the interaction (Cheng, Wang, Amarnani, & Chan, 2024). Contextual factors might likewise moderate the effects of authentic leadership and we encourage scholars to theorise and test such conditions to continue demarcating the construct.

This redefining acknowledges the situational complexities that leaders face while maintaining the core principles of authentic leadership. By focusing on concordant signalling, the emphasis shifts to how leaders align their actions with deeply held values in a way that resonates with followers, rather than insisting on an unrealistic, static authenticity. This definition embeds the notion that leadership is a dynamic process of signalling values, which can adapt to context without compromising the integrity of the leaders' core principles. Incorporating balanced processing and relational transparency addresses concerns about power imbalances and the risk of narcissism by encouraging open dialogue and respect for follower perspectives. Finally, this redefinition retains the aspirational nature of authentic leadership, framing it not as a rigid trait but as a continual process of alignment between leader behaviour and values. In practice, this means that leaders must be conscious of how their signals are perceived by diverse audiences and ensure that their value-driven actions resonate accordingly. In doing so, authentic leadership offers practitioners a more realistic and effective framework for managing the real-world demands of leadership, avoiding the pitfalls of rigidity and idealism.

A goal for future research will be to understand what signals can convey a sense of authentic leadership through the four dimensions. Subsequent contributions are encouraged to theorise and test discrete leader behaviours that signal aspects of these four dimensions (for guidance on discrete leader behaviour, we recommend reviewing Fischer, 2023).

We now turn our attention to the articles that follow in this special issue.

Overview of included articles

"Let's get real" ... when we lead: A systematic review, critical assessment, and agenda for future authentic leadership theory and research' by Gardner, Karam, Noghani, Coglisier, Gullifor, Mhatre, Ge, Bi, Yan, and Dahunsi (*in press*). This article presents a comprehensive review of 303 scholarly articles on authentic leadership published between 2010 and 2023. The authors critically examine the conceptual and empirical strengths and weaknesses of the literature, offering insights into how the theory has evolved. Their key contributions to authentic leadership include clarifying its theoretical underpinnings, applying a signalling theory based perspective to better understand authentic leadership processes, and suggesting ways to improve research rigour in the field.

'Rethinking authentic leadership: An alternative approach based on dynamic processes of active identity, self-regulation, and ironic processes of mental control' by Bunjak, Lord, and Acton (*in press*). This article critiques the traditional static concept of authentic leadership. The authors propose a

dynamic model where authenticity is a fluid process shaped by self-regulation and shifting identities, challenging the notion of a single ‘true self’. Their main contributions include introducing a framework that connects authenticity with self-regulation, focusing on active self-identity, and exploring how leaders manage multiple, sometimes conflicting, identities across different contexts.

‘The crown must always win: Re-thinking authentic leadership through “The Crown” series’ by Kark and Cohen ([in press](#)). This article examines the theory of authentic leadership by analysing the portrayals of Queen Elizabeth II, Princess Diana, and Margaret Thatcher in Season 4 of the Netflix series *The Crown*. The study employs directed qualitative content analysis to explore how authenticity in leadership is manifested and its limitations, particularly in the context of gender roles. Their main contribution is the introduction of the concept of ‘bounded authenticity’, which suggests that authentic leadership must balance genuine self-expression with the formal demands of leadership roles. This rethinking challenges traditional notions of authenticity by highlighting how gender and role expectations shape the expression of leadership authenticity.

‘The use of experimental designs to examine causality in authentic leadership: A scoping review’ by Dadich, He, Lux, and Lowe ([in press](#)). This article explores the extant use of experimental research methods in studying authentic leadership, focusing on how these designs can establish causal relationships. By reviewing 11 publications with 16 experiments, the authors demonstrate the importance of experimental designs to isolate the causal effects of authentic leadership on various outcomes, such as follower behaviour and assessments of leader performance. Their main contributions include advocating for more rigorous use of written vignettes, multi-method approaches, and online experiments, and proposing future research directions with sequential experiments and immersive technologies to advance the field of authentic leadership.

‘Does the talk match the walk? Effects of leader exemplification and ethical conduct on perceived leader authenticity, trust, and organisational advocacy’ by Gardner, Clapp-Smith, Mhatre, Avolio, Chan, Hughes, Pandey, and Sun ([in press](#)). This article explores how leader exemplification and ethical behaviours influence perceptions of authenticity, trust, and advocacy within organisations. Using two experimental studies, the authors demonstrate that leaders who exemplify high moral standards and engage in self-sacrificial behaviour are perceived as more authentic and trustworthy. Their main contributions include highlighting the positive impact of leader exemplification and ethical conduct, while also noting the potential negative effects when leaders fail to align their actions with their stated values.

Synthesis of contributions

To advance authentic leadership theory, these contributions collectively call for a more dynamic and nuanced understanding of what authenticity means in leadership practice. A key synthesis from the papers is that authenticity should not be viewed as a fixed trait or a leader’s singular, unchanging identity. Instead, authenticity is better understood as a fluid process, shaped by context, relationships, and shifting identities. This dynamic perspective encourages leaders to continuously adapt and refine how they express authenticity in different settings, rather than striving to maintain a single ‘true self’ that remains unchanged over time. Such a shift broadens the conceptualisation of authentic leadership, making it more responsive to the complexities of modern leadership.

The role of external factors, such as organisational pressures, stakeholder expectations, and socio-cultural norms, must also be integrated into authentic leadership theory. These influences can create tension between leaders’ internal sense of authenticity and the expectations placed upon them. Rather than seeing these tensions as a threat to authenticity, they can be reframed as essential elements in the development of authentic leadership. Authentic leaders may need to navigate multiple, sometimes conflicting, identities or roles, adjusting their behaviour to balance self-expression with the demands of their environment. This expands the definition of authentic leadership to include how leaders skilfully manage this tension, aligning their actions with their values while responding to external realities.

The integration of ethical conduct into authentic leadership provides a new layer to understanding how authenticity is perceived by followers. Authentic leadership cannot be detached from ethical behaviour, as leaders' authenticity is often judged by their actions, especially in moments of ethical dilemmas. When leaders exemplify ethical standards and align their conduct with moral values, they build trust and credibility, reinforcing their perceived authenticity. This points to a critical area for further exploration: authenticity is not just an internal process but also a relational one, constructed through the perceptions of followers and other stakeholders. Future research should therefore focus more on how leaders' behaviours are interpreted by others and the role of perception in shaping what is considered authentic leadership.

A forward-looking approach to authentic leadership should also consider the role of intentional signalling. Leaders must effectively signal their authentic leadership to influence their followers in the leadership process. This involves not only behaving in congruence with their values but also communicating these values in ways that resonate with their audience. The idea that leaders must 'match the talk with the walk' introduces the need for congruence between words and actions, but it also suggests that authentic leadership involves an element of strategic self-presentation. Leaders need to be aware of how their authenticity is perceived and actively manage this perception to maintain trust and credibility.

Finally, the call for more experimental research methods in authentic leadership highlights the need for greater rigour in understanding the causal effects of authentic leadership. By incorporating robust methodologies, such as sequential experiments and immersive technologies, future studies can more precisely identify the conditions under which authentic leadership enables positive outcomes. This empirical rigour will help move authentic leadership theory beyond causal illusions and offer actionable insights into how authentic leadership can be cultivated and sustained in practice.

In synthesising these contributions, the future of authentic leadership research lies in understanding it as a dynamic, context-sensitive process that is both internally driven and externally constructed. Authentic leadership is about more than just being true to oneself; it involves navigating ethical challenges, signalling congruence between values and behaviour, and managing the perceptions of others, all while adapting to shifting roles and contexts. This reframing opens up new avenues for leadership development, emphasising the importance of self-awareness, adaptability, and ethical action in the ongoing practice of authenticity.

What's missing in this issue

One significant area underexplored in this special issue is the application of authentic leadership in the digital age, particularly as it relates to the growing prevalence of flexible and remote work. Digital platforms, such as video conferencing, instant messaging, and collaboration software, now mediate the majority of leadership interactions in many organisations, raising critical questions about how authentic leadership is signalled through these channels. In face-to-face settings, leaders can draw upon a rich repertoire of verbal and non-verbal cues to convey their authenticity – through tone, body language, eye contact, and spontaneous interactions. However, the move to digital communication often strips away many of these cues, limiting leaders' ability to send the same depth of signals. What does relational transparency look like in a world where leaders and followers may never meet in person? How can leaders signal self-awareness through asynchronous communication or during brief, task-focused virtual meetings? These changes present new challenges for leaders striving to convey authenticity when so much of what has traditionally constituted leadership presence is now mediated by technology. Future research should investigate how leaders can adapt their signalling strategies in virtual environments, considering both the limitations and opportunities offered by digital tools. As the boundaries between work and personal life continue to blur, understanding how to sustain authentic leadership signals in the remote work era will become increasingly important.

Another critical yet underexamined aspect is how leaders signal authentic leadership to increasingly diverse cohorts, encompassing a broad spectrum of age, culture, gender, and other demographic

factors. In modern workplaces, leaders must navigate a multiplicity of cultural values, expectations, and interpretations of what authenticity means. For example, younger employees may experience discrete leadership behaviour and signals differently to older generations, while employees from different cultural backgrounds might interpret signals in distinct ways (for a primer on implicit leadership theory, see Lord, Epitropaki, Foti, & Hansbrough, 2020). Authentic leadership is culturally embedded and what signals balanced processing to one group may not have the same meaning for another. This diversity demands a more nuanced approach to authentic leadership signalling, where leaders must be attuned to the different ways their signals are received by varied audiences. Leaders must also be aware of how their own identity and background intersect with those of their followers, shaping the authenticity they convey. In increasingly multicultural and multigenerational workforces, the ability to align personal values with a wide range of follower expectations is critical. Future research should explore how leaders can adapt their authentic leadership signals to account for these diverse interpretations and build trust across demographic lines, ensuring authenticity is not only perceived but also understood in ways that are meaningful to all stakeholders.

Conclusion

This special issue advances the field of authentic leadership by addressing key critiques and offering fresh perspectives on its conceptualisation and practical application. We offer a revised definition of authentic leadership based on signalling theory to help refocus research onto discrete leader behaviour, and remove the positive valence, conflated concepts, and evaluations. The papers included in this volume then collectively push the boundaries of the field by reframing authentic leadership as a dynamic, context-sensitive process. The contributions challenge the idealised, overly simplistic notions of authentic leadership, embracing complexity and acknowledging that authenticity is not immune to negative outcomes or situational pressures. This expanded understanding allows for a more nuanced exploration of how leaders navigate competing demands and how authenticity is socially constructed and experienced. Looking ahead, we invite researchers to engage with authentic leadership in ways that acknowledge its dynamic and bounded nature, adapted to evolving organisational contexts, and to embrace rigorous methodological approaches. We encourage further exploration into how authentic leadership can be effectively signalled in the digital era and across increasingly diverse workforces. By helping to advance a more conceptually robust framework of authentic leadership, we hope to inspire scholars and practitioners alike to continue refining the theory and applying it in meaningful ways.

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