

A Case Study Exploration of Authentic Leadership Development in Kenya.

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ABSTRACT

In complex and challenging times many people seek for hope and encouragement from those who have influence. Authentic leadership style has been found to resonate as a positive form of leadership. This case study explores the development journey of three authentic leaders in Nairobi, Kenya. The selected leaders for the study had been rated highly on a 360 authentic leadership assessment as part of a leadership training course. The data consisted of information from the assessment reports and one semi-structured interview with each of the leaders and an observational session with one of the leaders in a management team meeting. Analysis of the data revealed that; 1.) Authentic leaders do not have a clear definition of their leadership, they are clear on what they do and how they do it and why they do, and in their description of these themes it clearly matches the literature definition of authentic leadership. 2.) Authentic leaders live and work by deeply held values that in fact seem like ‘a matter of fact way of life’, influenced by a positive interpretation of very critical and somewhat challenging times in their childhood. 3.) They have a clear sense of purpose, they discern what needs to be done and persist at it till they achieve desired results. 4.) Authentic leaders have deep respect for people and are passionate about developing people around them; they replicate their values, convictions and way of work within those they lead by leading an open, honest and very relational life. 4.) All the three leaders interviewed went through a process we shall call ‘formation’ in their late teen /young adult years.

Keywords: Authenticity. Authentic leadership. Leadership development

INTRODUCTION

The importance of leadership in any sphere of society cannot be overemphasized. The subject of leadership has drawn the attention of scholars and practitioners in many ways, evidenced by the number of published articles and books on the subject (Bratton & Bratton, 2020). In recent years, there has been a quest to find a leadership style that may fit the circumstances facing society. In that regard, authentic leadership was popularized as a response to the many corporate malfeasance and scandals at the beginning of this millennium (Northouse, 2018).

The challenges facing the world, ranging from poverty, to inequality, to climate change have been reframed into the United Nations sustainable development goals, and require as many hands on deck as possible to make the world a better place for humanity and leadership is critical to success (Corriveau, 2020). One of the scholarly challenges is that even though organizations are investing billions of dollars in leadership development, ‘the science that supports this practice is still immature’ (Wallace et al., 2021, p. 1). The second challenge is that even though there are many positive theories of leadership, efforts linking these theories with development are scarce (Day et al., 2021; Eva et al., 2019). There are arguments being made that the investments being made to develop leaders are not commensurate with the returns (Hieker & Pringle, 2020). Some have speculated that it is because many leadership development efforts are focused on changing behavior rather than on underlying mindsets (McCauley & Palus, 2020).

Proponents of authentic leadership style foresaw these challenges and linked the proposition of the theory with its developmental journey (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). The purpose of the current study is to validate the applicability of the authentic leadership development process in a different cultural context from that from which it was developed. The exploration will be guided by the developmental framework by (Gardner et al., 2005).

The study was conducted with senior, C-suite executives of privately owned companies in Nairobi, Kenya. The cohort consisted of eight-director level senior managers and 4- chief executive officers. The five-day executive leadership development program was organized by a talent development company based in the United States with an affiliate office in Nairobi, Kenya. Prior to attending the development course, the participants were requested to complete an assessment that evaluated their leadership. The assessment was based in authentic leadership tenets. The participants had also been asked to provide contacts of at least 4 immediate reports, their supervisor; current or past, some associates they worked closely with and a friend or family member who knew them well. All these were also send the assessment and asked to rate the participant. Of the twelve participants, six scored very highly on authentic leadership characteristics, and three of them agreed to an in-depth interview for the study. The objective of the case study was to explore the developmental journey of these three leaders who had been rated as excellent authentic leaders through a 360 feedback assessment that included peers, followers, bosses, associates and family.

Conceptual Definitions

Several terms are associated with authentic leadership development. These include leadership, leadership development, authenticity, authentic leader and authentic leadership development (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). The working definitions of these terms are provided below.

Leadership has been defined simply as influence. According to Northouse (2018), leadership is a ‘process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal’ (p.5). In the context of the ethical and moral challenges facing society today and the need to push to achieve sustainable development goals, this definition may seem insufficient. It can be expanded to include a focus on greater good, because just ‘common goals’ may be destructive to others. Leadership development, on the other hand, is defined as “an appreciation of the concept of leader development and leadership development loosely combined as leadership development and defined as the seeking ‘to understand, predict and intervene effectively in addressing the questions of how individuals develop as leaders and collections of individuals develop a capacity for leadership’ (Day et al., 2021, p.1).

Authenticity can be defined as ‘owning one’s personal experiences, be they thoughts, emotions, needs, wants, preferences or beliefs, a process captured by the injunction to know oneself (Harter, 2002, as cited in Gardner et al., 2011, p. 344). What this means is that one can grow in authenticity, the process of becoming aware and accepting and or changing the contents of thought, emotion, belief to align to what one desires of themselves.

Who is an authentic leader? Many definitions have been provided in the recent past. See (Shamir & Eilam, 2005; Walumbwa et a., 2008; Whitehead, 2009). The definition we adopt is by Avolio et al., (2005), that authentic leaders are “those who are deeply aware of how they think and behave and are perceived by others as being aware of their own and others’ values/moral perspectives, knowledge and strengths; aware of the context in which they operate; and who are confident, hopeful, optimistic, resilient, and of high moral character”(p.321). This means authentic leaders are true to who they are, motivated by personal ideals and convictions, lead from within their own view and their actions are rooted in personal values. Keying in the definition of leadership as an influence process for good, it means authentic leaders influence others from a deep personal conviction, values and with a good moral character.

Authentic leadership, therefore, is where an authentic leader influences others towards achievement of

common goals with self-awareness and self-acceptance through authentic relations with followers and associates characterized by transparency, openness and mutual trust (Northouse, 2018). This, in essence, means authentic leadership produces authentic followership.

Key concepts in authentic leadership development

There are several conceptualizations of authentic leadership. Ilies et al., (2005), proposed a multi-component model consisting of four concepts; self-awareness, unbiased processing, authentic behavior and authentic relational orientation (Ilies et al., 2005). Another conceptualization is by Shamir and Eilam (2005;2018), which proposes a model that is rooted in a life story approach, with the constructs of self-knowledge, self-concept clarity and person role merger. The conceptualization applied in the study is based on the work of Avolio and Gardner (2005) and Gardner et al., (2005). This is because this particular conceptualization takes a developmental approach (Northouse, 2018).

Gardner et al., (2005), proposed a model of authentic leadership development with the antecedents of personal history and trigger events, self-awareness and self-regulation which lead to positive modeling and in turn influence follower authenticity through developing their self-awareness and self-regulation.

Personal history and trigger events

This relates to the meaning an individual gives to the life experiences and interpretation of events or situations that they find challenging. According to Gardner et al., (2005), these include ‘critical elements of one’s personal history including ‘family, childhood, culture, education, occupation, work experience, role models and prior leadership experiences’ (p.348). Given the leadership development definition by Day et al., (2021), it means development in this area includes a growing capacity to explore positive and motivating aspects. Trigger events are those things that trigger and stimulate positive growth and development. They may include personal crises.

Self-awareness

The importance of self-awareness in the development of authentic leadership cannot be over-emphasized. It has been established that achieving heightened self-awareness is a core critical first step in the development of authentic leadership behaviors (Brewer & Devnew, 2022). Self-awareness includes awareness and faith in their own motives, feelings, desires. It also includes identification and reflective alignment with values, identity, emotions, goals, strengths and weaknesses, talents and abilities (Gardner et al., 2005). To be an authentic leader therefore, means one has high levels of self-awareness.

Self-regulation

One rendition of self-regulation is simply channeling of one’s emotions, feelings and habitual tendencies towards positive outcomes (Goleman, 2022). The self-regulation outlined in the self-based model of authentic leadership development by Gardner and others involves exercise of self-control through set internal standards, evaluation of any differences between the standards and potential outcomes and setting of actions that resolve these discrepancies. In the process of development, authentic leaders increase their capacity of internal regulated processing through deeper self-knowledge, self-concordant identity, a deep commitment to internalized values and goals.

Authentic followers

Essentially, the proposition for authentic leadership development is that as the authentic leader develops a deeper capacity for authenticity, they role-model authenticity and, in the process, the followers also develop

deeper self-awareness and self-regulation. It is the exposure of the follower to an authentic leader that then triggers their own growth in authenticity. Development in this area includes the leaders' efforts at developing truthful relationships that then enable unconditional trust in their followers, who in turn identify with the leader (Ilies et al., 2005).

Context

Kenya is located on east coast of Africa. It is the largest economy in East Africa (Oluwole, 2023). According to the World Bank (2023), the country derives its major strengths from its geostrategic location, high domestic demand, well-educated workforce, and strong financial position. The World Bank has noted that even though Kenya has made significant progress over the last decade, its key development challenges remain poverty, inequality, transparency and weak private sector investment among others (Worldbank, 2023). A scan of the local media over the last few years revealed societal concerns ranging from rapid population growth, to great misconduct by religious leaders to political intemperance and ethical misconduct (Omulo, 2023). Yet among all these, there are stories of growth, of integrity and leaders who practice authenticity. Exploring and illuminating these leaders' development journeys may encourage others to practice authentic leadership as well.

METHOD

The purpose of the study was to explore authentic leadership development using a group of leaders who had been rated highly as authentic leaders on a 360-degree feedback assessment. The study was conducted with senior, C-suite executives of privately owned companies in Nairobi, Kenya. The cohort consisted of eight-director level senior managers and 4- chief executive officers. The leadership development program was organized by a talent development company based in the United States with an affiliate office in Nairobi, Kenya. Prior to attending the development course, the participants were requested to complete an assessment that evaluated their leadership, the assessment was based in authentic leadership tenets. The participants had also been asked to provide contacts of at least 4 immediate reports, their supervisor; current or past, some associates they worked closely with and a friend or family member who knew them well. All these were also send the assessment and asked to rate the participant. The assessment sought to get feedback on three thematic areas; self-awareness, follower perspectives and the leadership context. Of the twelve participants, six scored very highly on authentic leadership characteristics (their own rating on the various concepts was very much aligned with the other assessors rating). Of the six, three agreed to an in-depth interview for the study. The objective of the case study was to explore the developmental journey of these three leaders who had been rated as excellent authentic leaders through the 360 feedback assessment that included peers, followers, bosses, associates and family. The researcher reached out to six of the highest scoring leaders and three were available and accepted to participate in the case study.

Case study is a suitable approach to exploring an issue in-depth (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). According to Yin (2014), case study involves the study of a case within a real-life contemporary context or setting (Yin, 2017). Therefore, case study was deemed appropriate for the current exploration into authentic leadership development of leaders in the African context and specifically in Kenya.

Procedure

Three leaders from three different organizations were selected from a group of leaders who were participants in a leadership development program. Prior to the start of the program, each participant was requested to complete a 360 feedback developmental assessment. And out of the six who received the highest scores for being authentic leaders, three agreed to participate in the study. Each of the three was interviewed in a one and half hour meeting. The questions were relatively unstructured but largely open,

guided by four themes: personal histories and convictions, their leadership journey, pivotal moments in their leadership and perspectives on followers. According to Charmaz (2014), a few open-ended and broad questions can stimulate a narrative. Further themes were explored under self-awareness, self-regulation and follower development through self-assessment feedback forms that had been obtained earlier.

Analysis

The concept of authenticity is central to authentic leadership development. The interviews focused on eliciting personal views of the leaders on what makes their life and how they view themselves, the people in their lives and the responsibilities they have. These personal stories are at the heart of authenticity, they uncover deeply held conceptions of self-awareness and self-regulation (Shamir & Eilam-Shamir, 2018). Using cross case analysis and constant comparisons, four themes emerged in the process of exploring how these three leaders developed capacity for authentic leadership. The themes emerged out of qualitative analysis of feedback forms and the stories told by the participants: 1) the power of a personal story curated by a process of intentional formation during the ages of 18–23 years. 2). Conscious awareness of thoughts and feelings and the capacity to ‘train’ them to ‘empowering’ and ‘loving’ dimensions. 3). Deep commitment to personal values that are lived out ‘loud’. 4). A passionate intention to grow, mentor and develop potential in others. 5). An unwavering focus on success through building great teams, products and services. The purpose of this case was not to make generalizations, rather to explore the concept of authentic leadership development through a group of senior organizational leaders who had been rated highly as authentic leadership. The study is valuable to the extent that others may get insights into the concept.

RESULTS

In the work of the three leaders interviewed, they do not set out to ‘practice authentic leadership’, they set out to live their lives in an intentional and deliberate manner, making choices and decisions from their hearts’ commitment. The emergent themes are discussed below;

Personal stories and convictions

The leaders interviewed had deep, vivid life stories. They tell their story with respect for the people, the culture and experiences from childhood. They have a sense of connection to this history and pay tribute to even difficult and challenging moments in their childhood. One of the leaders described his childhood experience as a very difficult life that needed a lot of effort to survive and thrive. From that emerged a strong conviction that there is no problem he cannot solve or difficulty he cannot overcome, from this childhood experience, the leader felt it created in him a never-dying persistent personality that propels him daily. He has no fear of failure, but tries over and over again until he succeeds. It also emerged that as they overcame various childhood challenges, they developed a sense of positive self-motivating energy and a positive view of themselves that propels them. This is in alignment with what other studies have found; that personal history and the meaning attached to it has a foundational impact on self-awareness (Brewer & Devnew, 2022; Shamir & Eilam-Shamir, 2018).

The process of processing the past, life events and making peace with them, however, was not automatic. All the three leaders, in their own journey, living and attending very different educational institutions, tell of being invited as teenagers to attend a religious-sponsored program for young adults, which lasted between 12- 24 months that helped them to work through fundamental life questions e.g. Who am I? Why am I here? What is my role in the family as a man/woman? What is my moral compass? How do I make decisions? How do I deal with situations that test my convictions? And in the process, their personal values were shaped, basic tenets of purpose established, and a deep belief that there is a bigger force at play in their life for good was established. According to Gardner et al., (2005), self-awareness is the process of one reflecting on their values, identity, emotions, talents as they get triggered by external events. Studies have found that

self-awareness, specifically, the aspect of personal identity and collective identity influence perceptions of authentic leadership and leader endorsement (Steffens et al., 2021).

Conscious awareness

The three leaders were described by followers and associates as emotionally intelligent. They keep an intentional eye on their thoughts and feelings and especially when it comes to other people and in difficult or challenging moments (George, 2008). When asked about how leaders conduct themselves in difficult moments, one follower wrote ‘my boss is the kind who fires you, and you leave his office laughing, grateful and knowing that you not only have a friend in him but also that it shall be well, and you can count on him’. The concept of emotional intelligence consists not only of awareness of the emotions of self but that of others, and channeling these emotions to better outcomes. It includes self-regulation, social awareness and relationship management (Goleman, 2022). The concept of self-regulation in authentic leadership is characterized by balanced processing, authentic behavior and relational transparency (Gardner et al., 2005). A recent study found that ‘mindful self-regulated attention and political skill are important for leaders to be authentic and ultimately effective’ (Dietl & Reb, 2019, p. 1849). The authors posited that these skills help leaders stay connected to their core self while busy with work and life and keep the leader feeling authentic and together with political skills. It helps them relate with employees in a way they sense is authentic and effective.

A focus on developing people

The three leaders interviewed took deliberate interest in people, they spent considerable amounts of time in one-on-one sessions with team members, associates and stakeholders. They share their vision, their journey, hopes and dreams openly. They share personal values and explain their decision-making processes to people. One of the leaders who, in a period of 16 years, had built a business from him being employee number 1 to a multinational business employing more than 6000 people said;

‘I have a strong respect for people and believe in developing people. My guiding principle is ‘do unto others what you would like them to do unto you’. The other theme that emerged here is that they respect other people’s opinions and perspectives and consult extensively yet have very deep values that guide their decision-making and share widely how they make their decisions. They admit mistakes and seek help to correct them when they happen. One of the leaders exclaimed;

‘I’m happy, in fact, proud when I come before my team and admit a mistake, and I walk them through how I arrived at the decision, and how I now know it was wrong. It rarely happens, but when it does, I am happy to share that with my team’. It appears to these leaders, developing people and role – modeling their own values are all entwined. These leaders not only lead people, but we could say they replicate their values, convictions and ethics in those whom they lead. In fact, one of the leaders said,

‘I not only have a successor, I have six capable successors whom I have coached, developed, and I encourage my executive team to develop successors and I require it of them because I believe when you empower people, you get empowered too.’ There are studies confirming that authentic leadership and authentic followership, cross-interact to enable not only meeting of basic needs of the followers but also leading to optimal role performance because of the synergistic effect between leader authenticity and follower basic psychological need satisfaction (Schoofs et al., 2023).

Goals and motives

The three leaders in the study were found to have two specific overall goals and motives. One, was to live out their purpose fully and second to help unlock potential in others. One of them repeatedly referred to his

purpose as a divine co-laborer in creating meaningful solutions for people. All the three leaders had ambitious goals for themselves, their teams and organizations, and the key word was building through service. The second goal that emerged was helping people unlock their potential through building trusting relationships and giving them opportunity to explore and grow. This is in line with the idea by George (2008), that authentic leaders have a strong sense of purpose.

SUMMARY

The results have provided illustrations of authentic leadership development and practice. This has also provided examples of how these leaders practice authentic leadership without necessarily having the technical definitions of this concept. One finding of the study that stands out, is that the development of authenticity is a process that needs to start long before one enters into a leadership responsibility. It could be that the vices that society is experiencing at the hands of leaders in positions of great responsibility are rooted in them not having dealt with challenges in their earlier life. These challenging experiences are referred to as crucible moments in authentic leadership literature (George, 2008). This study also has established that the process of authentic leadership development in the Kenyan context is similar to that proposed in literature, even though the words may not be there, the process is similar to what is found in the root construct of authentic leadership development as proposed by scholars such as (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Gardner et al., 2005; Ilies et al., 2005; Shamir & Eilam-Shamir, 2018).

Implications for Leader Development Practice

From the leaders studied, it became clear that the foundational tenet to their effective practice of authentic leadership was an unrelated process that happened many years before they became leaders. We are referring to the process here as personal formation that helped these leaders establish an identity, curate their past story and firmly establish values and deep convictions. The implication for leadership development may be that no matter the style of leadership preferred in an organization (transformational, servant, ethical or authentic), it may appear that this foundational process needs to be incorporated in all leadership development efforts as it might be a key panacea to the challenges that society is experiencing at the hands of 'unformed' leaders.

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