Oktober 2006

Authentic Leadership:
What's in the Construct?

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Authentic Leadership: What's in the Construct?[∗]

Paper presented at the 22nd EGOS Colloquium in Bergen, Norway

Subtheme 31: Leader Integrity and Authenticity

Work in progress

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ABSTRACT

In a qualitative leadership study conducted in the German-speaking part of Switzerland the quest to be oneself i.e., to be authentic was found to be central for leadership. We will present the results in detail and highlight the difficulties leaders experience when trying to be authentic in their daily interaction. By providing a contextually rich description of authentic leadership from practitioners' point of views, our study contributes to the current endeavor to understand and define authentic leadership. We compare our results with popular theorizing and outline implications for the future study of authentic leadership.

AUTHENTIC LEADERSHIP: WHAT'S IN THE CONSTRUCT?

INTRODUCTION

Authentic leadership has become the new construct in the leadership field. The reasons for its appearance are supposedly the challenging and turbulent times (e.g. Avolio & Gardner, 2005) as well as the corporate scandals and management malfeasance (e.g. Cooper, Scandura & Schriesheim, 2005). Despite the construct's newness and the fact that no single unambiguous definition has been agreed upon, some defining aspects are shared by different authors. Among them is the claim that authentic leaders possess self-knowledge and a personal point of view; that they identify strongly with their leadership role and act according to their values and convictions (Shamir & Eilam, 2005: 396).

At present, much effort is taken in order to better understand the construct and its antecedents, processes, and outcomes. The aim is to build a theory of authentic leadership from which testable hypotheses can be derived. The publications in the special issue on authentic leadership development (The Leadership Quarterly, 16 (3), 2005) provide good examples of this endeavor. For example, Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May and Walumbwa (2005) propose a model in which self-awareness and self-regulation constitute central elements of authentic leadership. In a similar vein, Ilies, Morgeson and Nahrgang (2005) develop a model that focuses on self-awareness, unbiased processing, authentic behavior and relational authenticity as the core elements of authenticity and consider their influences on leaders' and followers' well-being. Even though these models might help us to understand the processes and outcomes of authentic leadership, it is necessary to bear in mind that they are theoretical in nature and not based on empirical evidence.

Another concern stems from the fact that scholars interpret or define 'authenticity' in different

ways. It is important not to confuse 'authentic' leadership with other forms of leadership, such as moral leadership, ethical leadership, or positive leadership. Especially the equalization respectively the conceptualization of authentic leadership as the 'root construct' of all positive forms of leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005: 316) can be seen critical. 'Authentic' in its original (dictionary) sense means 'genuine', 'original', 'not a fake' (Shamir & Eilam, 2005: 396). Authentic behavior is thus the opposite of impression management (e.g. Leary & Kowalski, 1990), compliance (e.g. Festinger, 1953) or the creation of 'a facade of conformity' (e.g. Hewlin, 2003). To us, authenticity means that one's behavior is in line with one's inner values, beliefs, convictions – be they good or 'bad'. Authenticity *per se* does not imply that it concerns positive, ethical or moral behavior (similarly Shamir & Eilam, 2005). Sparrowe (2005: 424) notes "Is the authentic self … necessarily oriented towards positive values and principles? Even Shakespeare would question that assumption! In arguing that authenticity is intrinsically ethical is that 'to thine own self be true' is resolute in its indifference to moral postures"

To address the challenges of theory building, that is, refining and explaining authentic leadership, empirical research is a promising avenue. Cooper et al. (2005) advocate qualitative research because it is "appropriate (perhaps even necessary) when there is little extant research on which to base hypotheses" (2005: 479). Even though our qualitative leadership study was originally not designed to study *authentic* leadership the quest for 'being oneself' and 'being authentic' emerged as a central topic when we explored the subjective meaning of leadership among Swiss leaders in the German-speaking part of Switzerland.

The focus of the paper is hence to illustrate our empirical study and to provide the reader with a contextually rich understanding of what authentic leadership means to practitioners. The data provide insights on what challenges authentic behavior and shows the construct's

embeddedness in a net of other leadership topics.

In the concluding section the research's results will be compared with popular theoretical concepts and implications for the future study of authentic leadership will be outlined.

WHAT IS THE MEANING OF LEADERSHIP? – A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH STUDY[1]

Our qualitative research study was designed to understand what leadership means to Swiss leaders. We wanted to uncover the subjective leadership theories that every person possesses as a consequence of his or her experience and socialization process. Borrowing from implicit leadership theory (Lord & Maher, 1991) we argue that the acquired understanding of leadership provides the individual with a basic framework of appropriate and expected leader and follower behavior and defines, gives meaning to, and directs the interaction process. The respective actor has an idea, for example, what it means to be leading or being led, how the role should be performed, and how 'good' leadership as well as 'leadership success' are defined. These aspects are constitutive for the leader's self-image and self-conception. The subjective theories are often unconscious or implicit and people are usually not aware of them and can not communicate them directly. However, they were the focus of our interest because we believe that they are the key to understanding what moves and guides people in their expectation and enactment of leadership (e.g. Argyris & Schön, 1974, 1978).

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[1] The research method that is subsequently described is rooted in a social-constructionist, interpretive tradition. More specifically, we have integrated aspects of symbolic interactionism as well as of hermeneutics (e.g. Prasad, 2005). While ideas of symbolic interactionism are to be found in our focus on the self as key to understanding the process of sense-making and reality construction, ideas of hermeneutics are especially relevant in our attempt to understand what the interviewee wants to tell us i.e. by interpreting the interview transcripts from the interviewee's point of view (see below).

Research Design of the Qualitative Study

To get access to the self-images and subjective leadership theories we conducted narrative interviews (e.g. Czarniawska, 2004). The method is claimed to yield stories and experiences that reveal the understanding and meaning of the narrator's every-day-life reality. By emphasizing and repeating specific aspects and by interpreting certain events, the narrator's perspective, his or her frames of reference and subjective understanding concerning leadership become available. We assume that even though the narrated stories refer to past experiences, they disclose the narrator's current understanding of leadership because the descriptions are influenced by the narrator's currently active frames. Czarniawska (2004: 49) adds that what people present in narrative interviews "is but the results of their perception, their interpretation of the world, which is of extreme value to the researcher because one may assume that it is the same perception that informs their actions". While the interviewee narrates, the interviewer takes on an 'active listener' position and closely follows what is being said. Possible questions should always be open and not suggest any categories or concepts.

We started each interview by inviting the interviewee to tell us about their first experience with leadership. The question we applied was as follows:

> *'Mr./Ms. ..., we know you are currently in a management position. We would like to ask you to think back and tell us about your first experience with leadership. What happened, what did it mean to you, how did you experience it?'*

All interviews were conducted in a comfortable surrounding, usually the interviewee's office or home. The interviews varied between 1.5 – 2 hours, all were recorded and subsequently transcribed.

Sample

It is important to stress that we did not aim at representativeness but instead strove for generalizability in the sense of revealing the 'typical'. To achieve this, our sampling strategy was one of maximum variation (heterogeneity). Patton (2002: 234) puts forward that "this strategy of purposeful sampling aims at capturing and describing the central themes that cut across a great deal of variation". The logic is that "any common patterns that emerge from great variation are of particular interest and value in capturing the core experiences and central, shared dimensions of a setting or phenomenon" (Patton, 2002: 235). 'Leadership' is practiced with different meanings in many different settings and organizations. Individuals who have experienced many different leadership settings in their lives will have developed their specific understanding of the term. Nevertheless, people are able to practice leadership in their daily interactions. Among all the variations there are common features that define leadership within a cultural community. In other words, if we grasp as much variety as possible in our sample but are nevertheless able to identify commonalities among all these individual variations, we can conclude that we have found something that is central to our research topic. As a consequence, we have conducted twenty-six interviews with leaders who represent male as well as female managers, different hierarchical levels, and different age categories. They work in various organizational settings and hence provided a great variety of different perspectives.

Data analysis

The overall aim of the analysis was to understand the meaning of leadership from the *narrator's point of view* (Bryman, 1984: 77, Bryman, Bresnen, Beardsworth, & Keil, 1988: 61; similarly, Smircich, 1983: 166). This implies that we approach the interview material without any pre-defined categories but instead look for topics that emerge from it. To reduce the

influence of our own frames of reference and to increase the validity of the interpretation, the data analysis involved several steps.

In a first step, we interpreted the interview scripts individually. We were trying to see through the eyes of the interviewees and asked ourselves: 'What topic is the narrator addressing in this episode?' 'What does the narrator want to tell me here?' 'What is his or her message?' The aim of the analysis was neither to summarize what the narrator was saying nor to categorize and count the statements. We also abstained from focussing on the personality of the narrator, i.e. we did not 'psychologize' by referring to traits, causes or dynamics of the person. This first individual interpretation resulted in a list of approximately 6 to 12 topics. A topic is an issue that has been repeatedly (at least three times) addressed throughout the interview and can therefore be seen as characterizing one of the cornerstones of the interviewee's leadership understanding.

In a second step we met in our research group and compared our individual interpretations. The aim was to control as much as possible for the intrusion of our own concepts into the interpretation of the empirical material. This second step can be seen as a 'communicative validation', i.e. the evaluation of the interpretation in a dialogue, as suggested by Kvale (1995).

After having identified the topics of one interview, the research group tried to get the 'whole picture', that is, we tried to relate the different topics within one interview to each other. To support this process we applied the 'cognitive mapping' technique (e.g. McDonald, Daniels, & Harris, 2004). A cognitive map is generally a pictorial representation of the data. Since our data deals with the understanding of leadership we call the maps 'leadership landscapes'.

A further step to enhance the interpretation's validity was to obtain the interviewee's reaction to our reconstruction of his or her leadership understanding. For this, we sent the transcribed interview together with the interpretation of topics and the pictorial representation back and asked for their opinion concerning the plausibility of the interpretation.

In a final step we tried to aggregate the individual leadership landscapes by identifying 'commonalities' that were 'typical' among the varying understandings of leadership. For this, all twenty-six individual leadership landscapes were screened for similarities and recurring topics. At the end of the data analysis we had (re-)constructed twenty-six individual leadership landscapes as well as one 'overall' Swiss leadership landscape. The latter was created to reflect the socially constructed leadership phenomenon in its cultural and societal context. It is important to note that a pictorial presentation of data that is derived from interpretive analysis necessarily reduces complexity, and does not claim to be exhaustive. Similarly, the landscape does not depict an 'ideal' form of leadership nor does it imply that all topics are equally important to all managers.

RESULTS

Due to the focus of this paper, we outline only briefly the overall results and then zoom in on the topic that is at the center of the 'Swiss leadership landscape': the question of the self in the 'leadership-game' and the maintenance of one's integrity and authenticity. Figure 1 displays the overall landscape that incorporates five leadership topics.

Insert figure 1 about here.

We describe the outer topics because the centre's full meaning is only understood when its embedded ness in the context of the other topics is taken into account. However, the description of the topics A-D is short, i.e. we abstain from citing the original quotes and provide the latter only in the case of 'authenticity' (topic E) [2].

A. One's own position

Many narrations address the ability to clearly and independently state one's position in terms of having a mind of one's own or having a clear individual point of view as a central requirement for leadership. If the leader – together with others or via others – wants to start up something or actively create something, it is necessary to have a clear position that conveys individual causality. To have a clearly defined position is a requirement independently of the position's content and its enforcement. What matters is that the leaders express their point of view directly and unambiguously.

Similarly, if the manager's actions appear to be orders from above, the managers will be judged as 'executers' and not as 'leaders'. The perception of an independent judgment and an individual position is a substantial aspect of the leadership experience in the Swiss leadership landscape.

B. Binding commitment

The second region is termed 'binding commitment'. It suggests that in order to be relevant to the construction of leadership, one's own, unambiguous position also needs to be consistently put into practice and reflect itself in the leader's self-commitment ('walk the talk'). When hierarchical structures no longer suffice to legitimate leadership and where diversity prevails

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[2] A detailed description of the overall Swiss leadership landscape can be found in Endrissat, Mueller, and Meissner (2005).

over uniformity, when traditional norms and values lose their binding power and the rules of co-operation have to be reinvented repeatedly, the quest for a culture of commitment and accountability is prevalent. Thus, leadership is perceived to be effective if the leader means what he says, calls on it, and does not eschew resistance to achieve it.

To act according to one's position and being integer seem to be very basic and – at first sight - simple claims; but self-commitment and firmness can be difficult when it comes to, for example, laying off people (see below).

C. Relationship to the business

The leader's own position and the commitment that is demonstrated and generated by standing one's ground must also reveal a relationship to the business.

Many managers describe their task as personal challenge that needs to be mastered as an individual achievement. They display joy and delight in creating, shaping and framing. However, if the excitement relates mainly to the challenge as such and not to its content, the manager is not perceived as a member of the collectivity and might not be perceived as a leader. In order to be recognized as a leader in Switzerland, it is not enough to act as a professional manager who can deal successfully with any necessity of organizational life and who is successful in any kind of organization, irrespective of the specific branch, product, or service. A leader needs to have a personal (and emotional) relationship to the organization's purpose and product. This is important for the attribution of causality and for the perception that the manager is leading rather than executing professional procedures.

At the same time, the personal relationship to the business is an important aspect in defining the leader's individual position.

D. Social proximity

The personal commitment to the task is also described in the context of personal closeness in leadership relations. Between the commitment for the task and the interpersonal relationships exists a recursive dependency: Energy and commitment for an organizational task evolve from a strong community; the people inspire one another and engage in new tasks and projects. The commitment for tasks and projects, in turn, can foster close relationships among the members of a team or community.

Social proximity is a particularly prominent theme among Swiss managers who recount their careers as leaders. In many narrations, the managers are concerned with how much social proximity is possible, allowed, and functional in a leadership relationship. They address the challenge of establishing a personal relationship in the context of formal organizational structures. The managers want to be seen as individuals with whom a personal relationship is possible. They do not want to retreat to their formal positions but are concerned with having good relationships with their employees. "To have a beer" with them is an often used expression that reflects the search for a personal relationship and emotional closeness in different spontaneous or organized encounters beyond formal connectedness. These encounters are supposed to establish a 'direct line', to understand what 'the real problems' are, and to avoid the danger of being 'aloof' and above the people's reality. It is important to remain approachable and not to lose touch with 'the base'. Moreover, leaders receive high appreciation if they appear not to demonstrate their status power or to take advantage of their prerogatives.

E. Authenticity: to be oneself

All four topics that we have presented so far can be seen as leading to one central issue: The question of the self in the 'leadership-game' and the maintenance of one's integrity.

One hazard in this game is seen in formal leadership training. Swiss leaders often distance themselves from 'clever' leadership theories. The application of trained leadership concepts, instruments, or skills is interpreted as following instructions, yet leadership implies personal causality. The genuine characteristics of a person seem to be lost when standardized leadership concepts are applied. Also, instead of just copying other people's behaviors it is important to make sure that they fit and are in line with one's own convictions.

> "Leadership is something that needs to be the expression of the personal character. All these trainings and seminars - this is leadership and that is leadership – the whole approach is nonsense. Leadership needs to emanate from within a person, it needs to be authentic." (IP 26)

> "What might be more important than training courses is probably the influence of a person with a strong character. When he or she passes on an idea or an approach. Especially as a young manager, you observe others and you might try one or two things for yourself. But very often I have witnessed that it doesn't work, it doesn't work if you just copy someone's behavior. At the same time you might be able to identify some rules or principles that really work for yourself and then it is okay to adopt them."(IP 6)

The sceptical attitude towards training courses also concerns role-playing as a means to learn leadership. Simulating a situation does not help to do leadership because one can not act naturally. But it is the latter that is essential for leadership.

> "I started to take management classes but I was not really excited because the classes were very basic and we had to do role-plays. I do not like to play roles because you have to pretend to be someone else and you can not be natural". (IP 24)

As a leader, one shouldn't play a role that doesn't fit. Every person needs to find his or her own way of doing things; his or her own style that is genuine and true and that doesn't follow a popular fashion.

"Leadership is not working anymore once your employees realize that you are not authentic, that you are not yourself, that what you are doing does not correspond to your actual style. This is something people realize very fast; they are very susceptible to inauthentic behavior". (IP 1)

"You should not follow a fashion (…) but instead diversity should be encouraged. I think diversity in leadership is positive. If all of us follow the fashion, it isn't good. The most important thing is that people remain who they are. I don't think you can pretend to play a 'role' for a very long time. But at the same time, many bosses are forced to play roles that do not really fit them. So I think instead of doing what someone else tells you to do, you should remain honest to yourself". (IP 26).

People's self-concepts evolve in a specific cultural, societal, and historical context. This becomes evident when expatriates or managers who operate globally are faced with a different cultural and societal context than they are used to. They often face the dilemma that on the one hand, they want to be authentic – also have to be – in order to attract leadership attributions. On the other hand they have to adapt to other cultures in dealing with power, order, and personal distance. Yet, by doing this they tend to alienate themselves and their personal position becomes diffuse. It is therefore necessary to find a balance between adjusting to local customs and drawing a line, respectively keeping up values that are important to oneself.

"Now with all these different cultures, we know what kind of values they have – and we do make compromises. I also adapt to some customs. I follow these because I know how important they are to the locals. But at the same time I draw a line and I remain myself. I am still Mr. Brown, the Swiss, and I am who I am" (IP 6)

"Of course, every leader wants to be liked. You want that people like you and consider you a good boss. And it is because of this demand that you have to

watch out that you don't overdo it. You somehow turn into a chameleon. But I think everything has a limit". (IP 6).

It is important that one can justify one's own behavior before one's own conscience. Leadership will be successful if one is honest and true to others and oneself and if the leader acts according to his or her beliefs.

> "What is important is that at the end of the day you can 'look at yourself in the mirror'. If I can still look my mirror image in the eyes, then I have no problem. And you always have the alternative to quit your job and do something else. (…) If it gets worse and worse, you reach a point where you can't support it anymore, and then you are not authentic anymore, you are no longer a credible leader. And this is when you have to quit, when you have to go on and do something else. You have to be consistent and you shouldn't pretend to be somebody you are actually not". (IP 1)

> "Everyone gets ahead in this company – you don't need to constantly represent something that is not you. Instead, everyone admits if there is something he or she does not feel comfortable with or needs help with. This way we really have a working climate where we are complementary partners". (IP12)

> "It is essential to have genuine respect for your co-workers. I had many experiences in company Y where fakeness prevailed. Where leaders would compliment their employees but then would say to me and others 'Gosh, they are so….'. I experienced this many times and this is why today, I try to avoid this. I really try to be myself, and try to be straight to the people. You don't have to be offending, but try to be authentic". (IP 12)

> "I am now 47 years old and I have never been so 'authentic' in my job. Maybe in 10 years I will say I am even more authentic. But when I look back on my career as it has developed so far, I must say that the authenticity, the originality has increased. For example, instead of pretending to know everything I simply say: 'I don't understand this or that, could you please help me out and explain it to me?'". (IP 12)

> "This is my experience: If you remain authentic you will never have a problem arguing for your position. (…). Another experience is that if you are always open and honest, success is not necessarily reached immediately; but in the long run it is definitely the better alternative". (IP 26)

Since 'authenticity: to be oneself' represents the centre of the Swiss leadership landscapes it features various connections to the other four leadership topics. Some of these interconnections are outlined hereafter.

In order to remain authentic (topic E), leaders consider themselves to be facing a tightrope walk across the topic A (one's own position), B (binding commitment), and D (social proximity). On the one hand, the perception of the leader's individual position along with its authentic, self-committed expression enables the staff members to establish a firm relationship with the leader because he/she acts comprehensibly and is reliable as well as predictable.

> "I am someone who leads in a very transparent way. As a consequence, the people in this company trust me. They know that what I say and think is what I will also do. I am thus predictable." (IP 7)

On the other hand, a clear individual position always connotes delineation and demarcation which might result in a loss of personal closeness and possibly implies loneliness. The balance between 'distance' and 'closeness' or between 'being empathetic" and 'defining one's viewpoint' is often experienced as a dilemma.

> "This is somehow like walking a tightrope, I would also like to be popular (…) In the beginning I had difficulties with this, because I am more an outgoing, spontaneous person. But in the business, in my work environment, I try to be a bit more distant. Actually, I have to. Since I am more an emotional person, I sometimes have to keep a distance. I sometimes have to say that I am not interested [even though I actually am]." (IP 4)

The narrators realize the danger of establishing too close relationships with staff members: If they become too close, leaders might lose their independence as well as their firmness in standing their ground. But these attributes are often essential in order to remain committed to a task. One manager describes the dilemma as follows:

> "I noticed very early that it is sometimes necessary to put decisions consequently into practice. If you accept too many exceptions, you might get caught up in your net of relationships. (…) This is not always easy, because if you like someone, you are often more willing to regard one person's expense report with more favour than someone else's. Of course, this is unacceptable. You have to be consistent…" (IP 6)

Personal relationships always imply relational obligations that tend to soften the firm assertion of rules and structures as well as the uncompromising task-oriented commitment of the leader. This dilemma is most evident when staff members to whom the leader has a good relationship have to be downgraded or laid off.

> "We also have some ex-McKinsey's working for us. It is interesting to see how much trouble they have in laying off team members. You have to coach, assist, and do all kinds of things with them. These are the same McKinseys who have had no problem to advice companies and to say 'Sorry. 1000 people can be laid off'. This is very interesting to see". (IP 11)

This dilemma between executing what's perceived as necessary on the one hand and being loyal to close staff members on the other hand preoccupies many managers and it recurs in the narrations. One way of coping with this situation is to emphasize the inherent necessity of the action by (re)defining reality. Leaders declare and thereby convince themselves that they have no choice. Performance and competitiveness are the issue, not the merits of the case, fairness or justice.

> "It is not as if we would have the alternative: reduction of jobs, yes or no. It has to be done in either case. The question is only, how to do it. But we have no option but to act. We simply don't have one." (IP 11)

In order to sustain personal relationships, most managers dissociate task (object) and relationship (subject). The message is: "It is nothing personal" and "It does not reflect on you". This dissociation of the world of merciless necessity from the world of loyal personal relations is a common pattern within the current leadership landscape. It allows establishing the proximity needed to feel valued and respected without giving up the identification with the task. Thus leaders can remain committed to their staff members and to the business at the same time. However, such dissociative processes make it difficult for leaders to be 'ONEself' and authentic.

DISCUSSION

The results of our empirical study show leadership as it is constructed by Swiss leaders. Authenticity is *not* seen as a natural quality or a set of attributes but reflects a collectively and implicitly held notion of 'good leadership' in its specific cultural context. It receives its full meaning only in its context with the four other leadership topics, which are 'one's own position', 'binding commitment', 'relationship to task', and 'social proximity'.

Challenges to authenticity

Authenticity articulates and manifests itself as an important topic by being constantly challenged in every-day-(leadership)-life. Among the challenges are: a) the necessity to conform / comply with the leadership principles, organizational norms and attitudes respectively structures in order to be successful, b) finding a balance between the quest for social proximity and the need to stand one's ground, c) the experience of different expectations in different cultures.

Some of the challenges are discussed in the literature. For example, Hewlin (2003) points out

that some people feel the need to suppress their own values and pretend to embrace organizational values in order to succeed. Reward structures (i.e. salary increases, stock options, promotions, and bonuses) often enforce behaviors and attitudes that are consistent with organizational beliefs and values (Litzky, Eddleston & Kidder, 2006) but not necessarily with one's own. By climbing the career ladder employees potentially risk psychological, relational, and emotional distress (Hewlin, 2003, Roberts, 2005). Harter (2002) argues that people who report true-self behavior usually experience higher self-esteem, more positive affect and more hope for the future (2002: 389). As a consequence, personal and organizational values should either be compatible or organizational norms (including the reward structure) should value diversity so that employees dare to express their view.

As illustrated in the results, the dilemma between 'one's own position' and 'social proximity' also challenges authentic behavior. Harter (2002) mentions a similar dilemma namely that of coping with the dichotomy of autonomy and independence versus relational connectedness. She concludes "a number of contemporary theorists have argued that a healthy *combination* of autonomy with connectedness is most conducive to healthy outcomes, including authenticity" (Harter, 2002: 389). However, the author does not provide any suggestions on how to achieve this 'healthy combination'.

The need to adapt to different roles, for example, as a leader in different cultural contexts is another challenge. Even though our interview partners clearly express that they 'limit their adjustment to local customs' it could still be that they are starting to question how true they are to themselves when they realize they are actually turning into 'social chameleons' (Harter, 2002: 384). Gergen (1991) argues that the creation of multiple selves across different relational contexts may compromise the idea of having a 'core' self that is authentic. Jordan (1991) and Miller (1974) abandon the idea of a static or core self in favor of a relational self.

Harter (2002: 389) summarizes their position as follows: "The deepest sense of a true self is continuously formed in connection with others and is inextricably tied to growth within the relationship". In other words: relationships bring clarity and authenticity to the self[3]. Authentic behavior is therefore possible, even though different roles are acted out.

Relating the leadership landscape to theoretical concepts

In the following figure (see figure 2) we have combined the Swiss leadership landscape (see figure 1) with theoretical concepts taken from the literature (especially Gardner et al's conceptual framework of authentic leadership, 2005 and Harter's comments on authenticity, 2002). By relating these two 'positions' we try to understand to what extent the theoretical concepts match the practitioners' leadership understanding of authenticity. The concepts written in grey and italic are the leadership topics, the concepts written in boxes are the theoretical concepts.

Insert figure 2 about here.

The 'healthy combination' of autonomy and connectedness and its equivalence in form of the experienced dilemma between 'one's own position' and 'social proximity' has already been mentioned. Also, the importance of relationships for authenticity has been pointed out (reflected in the connection between authenticity and 'social proximity').

Self-awareness which is claimed to be one of the central antecedents in authentic leadership models (see e.g. Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Gardner et al., 2005) can be seen as having a connection to 'one's own position'. If one knows one's values and one's voice, it can be

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[3] See Sparrowe (2005) and his reference to Ricoeur's concept of narrated self for a detailed response to the dilemma of stable identity versus multiple selves.

argued that this reflects 'one's own position'. The relation to 'social proximity' is also given: It is through the relationship with others, the active reflecting and mirroring, that the individual can find one's voice and gets to know one's own values and beliefs[4]. Role models might be particular helpful in this process. Shamir and Eilam (2005: 411) point out that "leaders may gain self-knowledge and self-concept clarity from reflection on their role models: people whom the leaders believes have influenced him or her or whom he or she perceived as worthy of emulation and identification".

Besides self-awareness, self-regulation is claimed to be another important antecedent for authenticity (e.g. Gardner et al., 2005). Self-regulation implies that the behavior is consistent with the true self, the inner thoughts and feelings. This concept can be related to our findings that leaders do not only have to have an individual position but also need to act accordingly ('walk the talk') – reflected by the leadership topic 'binding commitment'.

Consequences of authenticity are only found in the theoretical models. They were not explicitly mentioned in the stories by our interview partners. The issue of consequences provides yet a good example of the fundamental difference between the results of our empirical study and the conceptualization of authentic leadership in the theoretical models.

The theoretical models are marked by the idea of causality, by general 'law-like' causes and effects. Authenticity is a result of variables (causalities) and in turn, is the cause for specific positive outcomes (the consequences). It can be argued that authenticity in this sense is seen as a means to a desirable end (e.g. follower well-being, follower performance, organizational performance). Our leadership landscape, on the other hand, does not comprehend causes and effects but illustrates the context specific understanding of authenticity. It does not suggest that 'one's own position' or 'social proximity' will eventually lead to authenticity but that

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[4] See, for example, Cooley's (1902) concept of the 'looking-glass-self' in which individuals see themselves in the responses of others.

these aspects are constitutive elements in the quest for authentic behavior. The other leadership topics can challenge authentic behavior (see dilemmas above) but at the same time are inextricably connected to authenticity. In the understanding of Swiss practitioners, authenticity is the central feature of leadership.

Conclusions

Cooper et al. (2005) have argued that the introduction of new constructs is only justified if they help to address questions that can not be answered with the existing constructs. They (rhetorically) challenge the concept of authentic leadership and wonder if the leadership field could not gain the same insights by referring to, for example, the moderating role of self-awareness on transformational leadership or the role of hope and confidence on various leadership styles. Yet, they also note that "if rigorous empirical research reveals that this construct is unique and associated with outcomes that are important for organizational effectiveness, then this will attest to the appropriateness of introducing and using this construct in future leadership theory and research". Even though our data does not reveal a link to outcomes that are decisive for organizational effectiveness, the data clearly show that the concept of authenticity claims an important and unique location in leadership thinking of the practitioners. We have illustrated its central role and encourage more research on aspects of authenticity. However, authenticity should *not* be equated with ethical, transformational, or any other existing leadership form because equating it would make it a redundant construct. Our data reveal its specific understanding which is distinct from any of the aforementioned leadership forms.

Our empirical data provide a rich description of what authenticity actually means to leaders. We therefore answer Sparrowe's (2005: 434) argument that "understanding authentic leadership cannot proceed effectively without a clear understanding of what it means to be an

'authentic' self". Our examples and descriptions are 'rich' because they take the context into account. This seems adequate because authentic behavior is claimed to be context-dependent (Cooper et al., 2005). As a result, our examples provide more concrete manifestations. For example, while Harter's idea of finding a healthy balance between autonomy and connectedness sounds rational, the reader only catches a glimpse of how difficult this balance actually is to achieve by reading the stories that deal with balancing 'one's own position' and 'social proximity'.

By providing a contextually rich illustration of the issues the interview partners were addressing as well as delineating the interrelationships among the leadership topics, we hope the reader has gained a deeper understanding of the contextualized meaning of authentic leadership. Yet, this understanding comes at a price. As we have already mentioned, because authentic behavior is context-dependent it is reasonable to assume that the value and meaning of authenticity varies across cultures (Shamir & Eilam, 2005). Our data illustrate the meaning Swiss leaders in the German-speaking part of Switzerland attach to authenticity. We can not say to what extent this meaning is shared by leaders in other cultures. We therefore encourage more research that focuses on uncovering the meaning of authenticity and its role for leadership from the point of view of practitioners.

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FIGURE 1

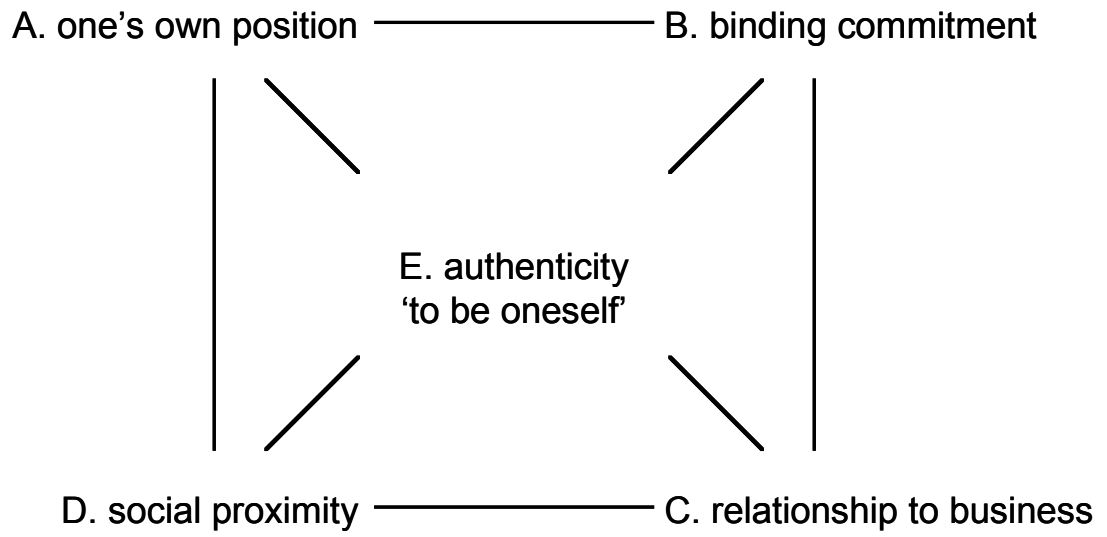The Swiss landscape of leadership topics

A. one's own position ——————— B. binding commitment

E. authenticity
'to be oneself'

D. social proximity ——————— C. relationship to business

FIGURE 2

Relating the leadership landscape to theoretical concepts