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Authentic leadership theory: The case for and against

ABSTRACT

Scholarly and practitioner interest in the topic of authentic leadership has grown dramatically over the past two decades. Running parallel to this interest, however, have been a number of concerns regarding the conceptual and methodological underpinnings for research on the construct. In this exchange of letters, the cases for and against the current authentic leadership theory are made. Through a dialogue, several areas of common ground are identified, as well as focal areas where the cases for and against the utility of authentic leadership theory for scholars and practitioners sharply diverge. Suggestions for future theorizing and research that reflect areas of common ground are advanced, along with divergent perspectives on how research on authenticity and leadership should proceed. Despite their differences, both author teams found the dialogue in itself to be a healthy process for theory development, and encourage constructive future dialogue on other areas where theoretical perspectives diverge.

Letter 1

Is Authentic Leadership a Useful Construct for Leadership Theory and Practice?

by William L. Gardner and Elizabeth P. Karam

Dear Mats and Katja:

Nothing is so humbling as a good critique of one's ideas. As scholars who have written

about and see scientific value in the concept of authentic leadership, our reaction to your recent

article titled, "Warning for Excessive Positivity: Authentic Leadership and Other Traps in

Leadership Studies" (Alvesson & Einola, 2019), can best be described as a swift kick to the gut. However, as we have reflected on your criticisms, we have come to realize that while we agree with some points (indeed, we have made some in our own writing, as we note below), there are others that we consider to be ill-conceived and/or poorly supported. Hence, we welcome the opportunity to discuss with you the utility of authentic leadership theory, as we see such a dialogue as healthy for the theory's advancement, as well as leadership studies in general.

An insightful perspective on the process whereby concepts advance in the organizational sciences is provided by Riechers and Schneider (1990, p. 5) who argue for a "predictable, developmental sequence characterized by a series of definable stages." Jerry Hunt (1999) and other scholars (Cogliser & Brigham, 2004; Gardner, Lowe, Moss, Mahoney, & Cogliser, 2010) have applied their three-stage model to examine the field of leadership in general, as well as specific approaches within the field, including transformational/charismatic leadership (Hunt, 1999) and authentic leadership (Gardner, Cogliser, Davis, & Dickens, 2011). The three stages include: (1) concept introduction and elaboration; (2) concept assessment and augmentation; and (3) concept consolidation and accommodation.

In the first stage, the concept is introduced and scholars work to inform others about the newly developed or borrowed concept through publications. Initial findings provide evidence that the concept captures a genuine phenomenon. In the second stage, critical reviews appear that raise concerns regarding the definition and operationalization of the concept. Concerns regarding the validity of empirical results surface, and mediators and moderators are examined to clarify the processes that underlie the phenomenon, as well as boundary conditions. In the third stage, a consensus regarding the definition of the concept emerges, meta-analytical studies appear, and

the concept is employed as a meditator or moderator in more general conceptual models within the field.

Following a review of the authentic leadership literature, Gardner and colleagues (2011) speculated that the concept of authentic leadership may have moved from the initial stage of concept introduction and elaboration to the second stage of assessment and augmentation. Since this review, additional evidence of this progression has arisen, as meta-analyses (e.g., Banks, McCauley, Gardner, & Guler, 2016; Hoch, Bommer, Dulebohn, & Wu, 2018; Sidani & Rowe, 2018) and critiques (Algera & Lips-Wiersma, 2012; Cooper, Scandura, & Schriesheim, 2005; Diddams & Chang, 2012; Ford & Harding, 2011; Gardiner, 2011) have appeared, along with efforts to refine measures of the concept (Avolio, Wernsing, & Gardner, 2018; Levesque-Côté, Fernet, Austin, & Morin, 2018; Neider & Schriesheim, 2011) and identify mediators, moderators, and boundary conditions (Avolio & Mhatre, 2012; Cotter-Lockard, 2018; Karam, Gardner, Gullifor, Tribble, & Li, 2017; Ladkin & Spiller, 2013).

We consider your warning, Mats and Katja, regarding the "excessive positivity" of authentic leadership and "other traps in leadership studies" to be a constructive basis for the concept's refinement as part of the second stage in its development. Therefore, we will critique your critique of authentic leadership theory for the purpose of highlighting our areas of agreement and disagreement regarding the utility of this positive approach to leadership. To do so, we will discuss, systematically and sequentially, the main problem areas of authentic leadership that you identify in your critique.

In your critique, you describe what you see as three main problem areas regarding authentic leadership (summarized in Table 1 of your article) pertaining to: 1) the foundations of authentic leadership; 2) theory development; and 3) authentic leadership in practice. You also

suggest as a fourth problem area that many of the concerns you identify with respect to authentic leadership are symptomatic of positive leadership studies as a whole. In our response, we focus on the three main problem areas you identify with respect to authentic leadership, without considering the extent to which these issues are symptomatic of the positive leadership approaches in general. Note that due to space limitations, we do not respond to each specific point you make with regard to these problem areas, but instead concentrate on capturing the gist of your arguments.

1. Foundations of authentic leadership

1.1. Tension between job-based roles and the authentic self.

The essence of this problem, as you see it, is that the concept of authentic leadership, "while semantically appealing, does not offer a solid foundation for serious knowledge work" (Alvesson & Einola, 2019, p. 385). In making this argument, you point out that authenticity is a self-referential construct that involves *knowing* oneself and *acting* according with one's "true self", while leadership by definition involves *influencing others.* "Combining both, authenticity and leadership, in one concept becomes an endeavor only heroes from mythological realm can ever aspire to successfully overcome" (pgs. 384-385). The crux of your argument is that the job-related demands leaders encounter in work settings, including social and political conventions and norms, make it nearly impossible for them to achieve authenticity. You go on to point out that the concepts of authenticity and leadership appear to be incompatible since leadership involves both influencing and being influenced by others in ways that may threaten the ability of either or both parties to remain true to their core values and goals. Additionally, you note that as leaders strive to align followers' values with their own and convince them to pursue their vision and l goals, they may apply pressure to followers to compromise their own authenticity.

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We agree that there may at times be inherent tensions between job-based roles and authentic self-systems of leaders and followers. Nonetheless, we assert that there are benefits that can accrue for leaders and followers who strive to resolve these tensions in ways the enable them to express their authentic work-related selves. There are several assumptions of authentic leadership theory that provide the basis for this assertion. First, as you acknowledge, the attainment of authenticity and authentic leadership are aspirational goals which few of us will fully realize. This is something that those of us involved in advancing a self-based model of authentic leadership and followership have emphasized from the outset. For example, building on the work of Erickson (1995), Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May and Walumbwa (2005, p. 345). note that "authenticity is not an either/or condition. i.e., people are neither completely authentic or inauthentic. Instead, they can best be described as being more or less authentic or inauthentic. Hence, from our developmental perspective, we focus attention on the processes whereby leaders and followers experience growth by becoming more authentic." Viewed from this perspective, we argue that there is no reason why persons who occupy leader and follower roles cannot and should not strive to act in ways that reflect their core values and identities.

Second, because our self-based model is grounded in self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) it reflects an underlying assumption that humans achieve authenticity when their basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are fulfilled. Moreover, we draw upon the notion of flow, which Csikszentmihalyi (2003, p. 18) defines as "a subjective experience of full involvement with life" to argue that when one's capabilities and the challenges of one's work align to produce peak levels of performance, a sense of authenticity is achieved. That is, being true to oneself goes beyond being true to one's values to also encompass the utilization of one's personal strengths, including one's knowledge, skills, and abilities, in a

fulfilling fashion. Doing so helps individuals achieve a sense of authenticity because they are able to realize and validate their professional identities. For persons who incorporate the role of leader into their identity (DeRue & Ashford, 2010), efforts to enact this identity through social influence in a personalized fashion that reflects their values, motives, and abilities are consistent with their quest for authenticity. Hence, trying to be one's best self at work is not the sole province of mythical heroes; to the contrary, it is a goal toward which all persons, including leaders and followers, can aspire, while recognizing and accepting that they will often fall short. Rather than dismissing such attempts as naïve and counterproductive because they create idealistic expectations, we assert that organizational members who incorporate leader and/or follower roles into their identities can benefit from efforts to navigate the competing stakeholder expectations in a fashion that best utilizes their capabilities and aligns with their core values.

Your point regarding the potential clash between leader and follower attempts to achieve authenticity when they have competing values and goals is well taken. Algera and Lips-Wiersma (2012) take this observation a step further by noting that when such values and goal conflicts arise, the power imbalance between leaders and followers is such that the latter will acquiesce to the will of the leader and thereby experience feelings of inauthenticity (a point that you likewise observe in your discussion of authentic leadership in practice). While we agree that competing values among leaders and followers pose a challenge to the attainment of authenticity by both parties, particularly in light of power dynamics, the components of authentic leadership and followership (Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, et al., 2005; Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing, & Peterson, 2008) suggest mechanisms whereby such conflicts can be respectfully reconciled or, at a minimum, tolerated. First, we assert that self-awareness by leaders and followers of their motives, goals, and values provide them with insights that help them articulate their values in a

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way that may resonate and appeal to others. Consistent with Mary Gentiles (2010) *Giving Voice to Values* perspective, we contend that self- knowledge heightens one's ability to articulate such values to others in a compelling fashion. Second, relational transparency will facilitate the open exchange of ideas and hence heighten the appreciation of leaders and followers for the other party's point of view. Third, the balanced processing of information enables leaders and followers to actively listen to each other's viewpoints in a non-defensive manner, thereby increasing the prospects for achieving common ground. Finally, an internalized moral perspective incorporates basic values such as respect for others and justice that make it less likely that a leader striving for authenticity will seek to reconcile a values or goal conflict with followers by simply imposing his or her will.

1.2. Conflation of authenticity with honesty, sincerity and other words of common usage.

A second concern you raise regarding the conceptual foundations of authentic leadership contends that "[a]uthentic leadership theory tends to treat authenticity, honesty, and sincerity as synonyms" (p. 385). However, when advancing the self-based model of authentic leadership, Avolio and Gardner (2005) explicitly drew upon Trilling's (1972) book, *Sincerity and Authenticity,* to distinguish between these constructs As Trilling and you point out, sincerity is assessed by the degree to which the self is portrayed accurately and honesty to *others,* whereas authenticity involves the degree to which one is true to the self. Sincerity can thus be objectively assessed by ascertaining the extent to which one's outward behavior is consistent with one's public self-presentations. As such, "sincere" is synonymous with an "honest" or "true" presentation of the self to others. In contrast, because authenticity involves internal processes whereby one stays true to the self, it is hidden and difficult to assess by others.

We agree that the self-referential nature of authenticity makes it difficult for others to assess, and hence researchers to measure. However, this is true of many of the constructs that we study in organizational behavior, including motivation, attitudes, justice and cognition. Just because a construct is difficult to measure, does not mean that it does not exist. Bacharach (1989, p. 498; italics in the original) defines "a theory as a statement of relationships between units observed or approximated in the empirical world. *Approximated* units mean *constructs*, which by their very nature cannot be observed directly (e.g., centralization, satisfaction, or culture)." Hence, we see no reason why the difficulty involved in operationalizing the constructs of authenticity and authentic leadership should lesson the need to theorize about and study these constructs any more than is the case for other core constructs in our field.

1.3. Leadership as the savior.

The essence of this argument is that authentic leadership appeals to "mass audiences eager to learn from, be inspired by, or mimic those who are perceived as successful in business" (Alvesson & Einola, 2019, p. 383). Authentic leadership is "then the great savior – reflecting an evergreen in leadership studies about the great leader doing the right things and solving all or most problems" (p. 386). Unfortunately, "the Disneyland-inspired good leader, a moral peak performer, may not find most organizations a hospitable environment to begin with" (p. 383).

We fully agree that authentic leadership, like many other forms of leadership (e.g., charismatic, transformational) is too often romanticized by both its scholarly and practitioner proponents as a cure for organizational ills that underestimates the role of situational contingencies. When viewed from a developmental perspective, however, persons who strive to achieve authentic leadership and followership can be seen as everyday people who attempt to navigate the pressures and temptations of organizational life by sticking to a core set of values

and principles. To the extent that they succeed, others may be inspired by their example and likewise strive to achieve authenticity in their interpersonal dealings.

In our view, the notion that authentic leadership's popularity stems from a predilection for persons in organizations to seek overly simplistic explanations for complex causal relationship is a highly cynical view of organizational life. Yes, it is well known and documented that people have a tendency to romanticize leadership as they overuse it as causal explanation for organizational outcomes (Meindl, 1990; Meindl, Ehrlich, & Dukerich, 1985). At the same time, there are numerous examples of real-life leaders who exemplify authentic leadership and inspire followers to emulate their quest for authenticity. Based on interviews with 125 leaders chosen based on their reputations for authenticity and effectiveness, Bill George (George & Sims, 2007) presents in his best-selling book, *True North,* example after example of leaders who, through self-reflection and perseverance, have become aware of who they are and what they value and learned to live by those values and principles, at times at considerable risks to themselves. These are men and women from a wide array of racial, socioeconomic, and religious backgrounds and nationalities. They include CEOs and other leaders from profit and nonprofit organizations, as well as midcareer leaders and those who are just starting their leadership journeys. The key point is that they are real people in real organizations who, despite struggles and tribulations, have found a way to practice authentic leadership that others find inspiring a seek to emulate.

It's easy to dismiss those who idealize such leaders as dupes who find in such leaders overly simplistic answers to complex problems. But we think doing sells both the leaders and their follower short. People can recognize and appreciate a leader who is striving for, and despite inevitable setbacks, achieving authenticity. It is such encounters with real-life leaders who demonstrate authentic leadership that accounts, in part, for the construct's appeal. Moreover, we

see the fact that the notion of authentic leadership resonates with practitioners as a good thing. Indeed, all too often we read articles bemoaning the academic-practitioner divide (Latham, 2019; Tourish, 2020). From our experience teaching authentic leadership theory to executive and professional MBA students, we find that most embrace its principles for two reasons. One, many can readily identify one or more leaders that they have worked with who they see as practicing authentic leadership. Two, they themselves find value in reflecting on their core values, strengths, motives, goals and principles, and working to enact them in their relations with others. And, while we acknowledge limitations in the extant research on authentic leadership (Banks et al., 2016; Lemoine, Hartnell, & Leroy, 2019; Sidani & Rowe, 2018), there is sufficient empirical evidence of the positive effects on leader and follower well-being, as well as individual, team, and organizational performance (e.g., Gardner et al., 2011; Hmieleski, Cole, & Baron, 2012; Leroy, Anseel, Gardner, & Sels, 2015; Steffens, Mols, Haslam, & Okimoto, 2016; Weiss, Razinskas, Backmann, & Hoegl, 2018), to suggest that the appeal of authentic leadership to practitioners is justified.

2. Theory development

2.1. *Definitions of authentic leadership also include outcomes – cause and effect are lumped together.*

We agree with this critique. As Antonakis, Bastardoz, Jacquart and Shamir (2016) and van Knippenberg and Sitkin (2013) point out in their critiques of charismatic and charismatic/transformational leadership theories, respectively, and Sidani and Rowe (2018) directly in their critique of authentic leadership theory, the inclusion of antecedents and consequences in the definitions of these constructs creates conceptual confusion. This is so because relationships that should be posited as propositions and empirical tested are stated to

exist by definition. To remedy this problem, we recommend that the following definition

advanced by Walumbwa and colleagues (2008, p. 94) be edited to remove references to posited

antecedents and consequences, as indicated by the stricken phrases.

> We define authentic leadership 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~~.

Note that in the process of scientific advancement, alternative and refined definitions of a

construct are often proposed to achieve greater conceptual clarity, as in the case of

Antonakis and colleagues' (2016) creation of a new definition for charismatic leadership.

The point is that the necessity for such refinements does not negate the existence of the

focal phenomenon or suggest that study of the construct should be abandoned.

2.2. *The four constitutive elements of authentic leadership do not form a solid theoretical*

   construct and a logical whole.

As you note, the four components of authentic leadership were derived from Michael

Kernis' (2003) multi-component conceptualization of the construct of authenticity, which has

received substantial empirical support (Kernis & Goldman, 2006). Regarding the first

component, your correctly point out that current conceptions of the self (Leary & Tangney,

2012), view it as a multi-faceted and dynamic cognitive system that encompasses a host of

schemata to encode and store self-relevant information, as opposed to a singular and static entity.

So, you ask, which self should leaders be aware of and true to? The answer is the work-related

self that is enacted in the situation. Indeed, these integrated self-systems are often job-related

identities, including leader and follower, that may be claimed by and/or granted during social interactions (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). As such, it is possible for socially astute leaders to respond to situational requirements in ways that invoke a situated self without violating their authenticity (Gardner & Cogliser, 2008). To do so, however, requires self-knowledge of one's personal strengths, weaknesses, values, goals, motives and emotions. To be true to one's (enacted) self, one must be aware of that self, as well as complementary selves, to avoid succumbing to role related pressures that violate core values that permeate multiple selves.

With respect to the second component, relational transparency, we likewise agree with you that the multi-faceted nature of the self and its social construction in the face of situational contingencies makes it tricky for leaders who strive for authenticity to gauge the appropriate level of transparency. Here, it is important to recognize that we are not saying that leaders striving for authenticity will recklessly engage in inappropriate self-disclosures to random audiences. Instead, we argue that they will help those who are close to them see both their positive and negative qualities as a basis for establishing intimacy and trust, while encouraging others to do the same (Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, et al., 2005). Moreover, we argue that such leaders will be transparent in seeking input from others in making decisions and explaining those decisions once they are made (May, Chan, Hodges, & Avolio, 2003). And, recognize that there may be times when such leaders are less than forthcoming regarding their thoughts and emotions, because doing so would jeopardize core values to which they are committed (Gardner, Fischer, & Hunt, 2009). For example, a leader who is forced to dismiss an employee for violation of corporate policies who declines to disclose the reason for the dismissal to co-workers could nonetheless be transparent by explaining that doing so would violate confidentiality protections. Alternatively, a leader who is anxious about an impending divorce may mask their anxiety by

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engaging in emotional labor to appear confident and enthusiastic during a product launch because doing so serves a higher value of demonstrating commitment to the organization's strategic goals. In sum, while we agree that relational transparency in organizational settings has its limits, we also see it as an aspirational form of conduct that leaders and followers striving for authenticity will pursue.

With regard to the third component, balanced processing of information, you correctly point out that the objective processing of information is not easy due to "politics, social considerations, and self-serving bias" (Alvesson & Einola, 2019, p. 388). Gardner and colleagues (2005) recognized these difficulties from the outset, which is why they changed the name that Kernis (2003) assigned to this component – unbiased processing – to balanced processing. Despite the difficulties involved, we argue that leaders and followers who strive for authenticity will attempt to be objective in processing potentially ego-threatening feedback as well as information in general. The reason why is that being open to feedback, be it positive and negative, leads to enhanced self-knowledge, as well as more informed decision making.

The inclusion of the final component of authentic leadership – internalized moral perspective – in the self-based model of authentic leadership (Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, et al., 2005), has been contested by a number of scholars (Shamir & Eilam, 2005; Sidani & Rowe, 2018; Sparrowe, 2005). You (p. 388) capture one of the arguments of such scholars in the following remarks:

> As most people having worked in organizations would agree (and using the word
> "authenticity" in its common language form), there are also those who may be
> characterized as authentic jerks, as well as managers whose "authentic"

engagement in decision making may do more harm than good, or solve surface

problems only to create bigger ones underneath (Tourish & Robson, 2006).

There are two reasons why we disagree with this commonly made argument that a "jerk" can be considered authentic. The first stems from the aspirational nature of authentic leadership. We think it is unlikely that a person who is consistently seen as a "jerk" will be striving to create higher levels of self-awareness, relational transparency, and balanced processing. The second is based on Kernis' (2003) theory of optimal self-esteem and explained in detail by Gardner, Avolio, and Walumbwa (2005b) and Randolph-Seng and Gardner (2013). Basically, Kernis argues that persons who achieve authenticity possess optimal self-esteem in that they accept who they are, including both their strengths and weaknesses. In contrast, persons with fragile self-esteem may present themselves as confident and secure, but when they are confronted with ego-threatening information their self-esteem crumbles. We argue that at their core, people who are seen as "jerks" often possess a narcissistic personality that is characterized by fragile self-esteem (Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006). Thus, just as fragile self-esteem is incompatible with the notion of authenticity as conceived and empirically validated by Kernis, it is likewise inconsistent with authentic leadership and followership.

Beyond Kernis' (2003) work on optimal self-esteem and authenticity, there are philosophical reasons why we consider an internalized moral perspective to be a core element of authentic leadership. Specifically, we assert that efforts to develop leaders should include attention to their moral development (Gardner et al., 2005b). As Ciulla (2014) observes, ethics lies at the heart of leadership because the actions of leaders have consequences for others. As such, efforts to develop leaders would be incomplete if they do not produce increased awareness of, and attention to, the ethical responsibilities associated with the leader role.

In sum, we disagree with your assertion that the four components or authentic leadership lack solid theoretical foundations and fail to form a logical whole. To the contrary, they are rooted in Kernis and Goldman's (2006) conception of authenticity, and consistent with theoretical and empirical evidence from the larger leadership literature.

2.3. *Authentic leadership moral washing of transformational leadership*.

While Bass and Steidlmeier (1999) introduced their construct of authentic transformational leadership prior to the advancement of the self-based model of authentic leadership, the latter was developed independently and shares little in common with the former other than the common focus on leadership and authenticity. Furthermore, as Avolio and Gardner (2005) note, authentic and transformational leadership theories share little in common. Indeed, the components of transformational leadership – idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration – differ markedly from the four components of authentic leadership. Hence, we are puzzled by and reject your assertion that authentic leadership is a "mere moral washing of transformational leadership" (Alvesson & Einola, 2019, p. 385).

2.4. *To measure authentic leadership is mission impossible*.

We agree that the measurement of authentic leadership is challenging. As previously noted, the fact that the quest of authenticity involves intrapersonal processes that are not directly observable by others makes it difficult to assess. But this is true of many other processes that we study in the social sciences, including cognition, motivation, and attitudes, to name but a few. We certainly have not abandoned efforts to measure these constructs because we conclude doing so is "mission impossible."

We also agree that there are inherent difficulties involved in using survey measures to assess authentic leadership (Randolph-Seng & Gardner, 2012). For one, who should be the respondent? If self-report measures are employed, potential social desirability biases may be operative (Paulhus, 1984) that reflect either impression management or self-deception on the part of the leader. Other reports are also challenging because it is obviously difficult for others to know if the leader is being true to an internal self. Despite these challenges, several survey measures of authentic leadership have been developed (Levesque-Côté et al., 2018; Neider & Schriesheim, 2011; Walumbwa et al., 2008), and subsequent research has provided additional evidence of construct and predictive validity (Avolio et al., 2018; Caza, Bagozzi, Woolley, Levy, & Caza, 2010; Rego, Vitória, Magalhães, Ribeiro, & e Cunha, 2013; Steffens et al., 2016). We also see promise in alternative approaches to the operationalizing authentic leadership, including life stories (Shamir & Eilam, 2005), implicit measures (Randolph-Seng & Gardner, 2012), and experimental designs (Steffens et al., 2016; Weiss et al., 2018). As the popularized television show and movie series "Mission Impossible", what often seems to be an impossible quest turns out to be attainable. We find there to be sufficient evidence from existing measures and promise with alternative measures to conclude that is the case with authentic leadership as well.

3. Authentic leadership in practice

In this section of your critique you identify problems that you contend arise from the practice of authenticity and authentic leadership in organizations (Alvesson & Einola, 2019, p. 391). Space limitations prohibit us from providing detailed responses to each of the concerns you raise. Nonetheless, we provide brief comments on a subset below.

3.1 Authentic leadership or authenticity in general is often unwanted.

When you talk about authenticity as involving "bad temper, poor social skills, neurotic and narcissistic orientations, intolerance, non-mainstream political or religious orientations, problems with the other sex, a dislike for certain professions and functions" (p. 391), we agree that these attributes, attitudes, and behaviors are generally unwanted. However, we also see them as being inconsistent with the notion that authenticity and authentic leadership are aspirational endeavors whereby one strives to be one's best self at work. They are also inconsistent with the internalized moral perspective that we have previously argued is an essential component of authentic leadership (Gardner, Avolio, & Walumbwa, 2005a). In contrast, we assert that efforts by leaders and followers to establish genuine, open, and ethically-grounded relationships with others are welcome in most organizations.

3.2 Being authentic may be an effective career-stopper in most organizational settings.

We agree that being authentic at work may lead to adverse career outcomes in some organizations. This is well recognized by Gentiles (2010) in her work on giving voice to values. Nevertheless, we also recognize from the literature on voice in the workplace (Chamberlin, Newton, & Lepine, 2017) the personal benefits that accrue to individuals who speak up. In many cases, when people find themselves in organizations where being authentic undermines their career progression, they may decide to move to another organization that places greater value on authenticity. Ample examples of leaders who have done just this and thrived are presented in *True North* (George & Sims, 2007), providing evidence that authenticity enhanced rather than inhibited their career advancement.

3.3 The ideal of being an authentic leader may invite and reinforce narcissism.

As our earlier discussion of fragile self-esteem indicated, we consider narcissism to be the antithesis of authenticity because narcissists, despite all of their grandiose claims and bluster,

are insecure and amoral at their core (Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006). Indeed, social psychological research (Rhodewalt & Sorrow, 2003) documents the inherent incompatibility of narcissism and authenticity. Hence, we totally disagree with your concern that being an authentic leader may foster narcissism within the leader. To the contrary, narcissists are likely to be disinterested or unable to lead in a fashion that involves fostering self-awareness, promoting balanced processing, exhibiting relational transparency, and adopting an internalized moral perspective. And to the extent that leaders, and followers, pursue these developmental goals, we expect any inclinations toward narcissism they possess will decline. We are unaware of empirical research in the extant literature that has examined the relationship between narcissistic leadership and authenticity and/or authentic leadership and narcissism, and hence, we consider this to be a particularly fruitful avenue for future research.

3.4 *Being authentic also means making oneself vulnerable.*

Your key point regarding this concern is that "[b]eing genuine at work and placing one's self and morality – rather than job role and work contingencies – in the center means everything tends to reflect back on the self and become personal" (Alvesson & Einola, 2019, p. 391). We agree that there is risk in pursuing authenticity in one's work and that expectations of one's job role may shield individuals from some of the adverse consequences that arise from one's work (e.g., "I'm just doing my job"). We also contend, however, that hiding behind one's job requirements and abdicating responsibility for one's actions can have adverse effects on one's well-being, as well as negative organizational consequences, as is well documented in the business ethics literature (Ciulla, 2003; Treviño & Nelson, 2017). Moreover, as extensive evidence from the literature on trust attests (Breuer, Hüffmeier, & Hertel, 2016; De Jong, Dirks, & Gillespie, 2016; Dirks & Ferrin, 2002; Mayer, Davis, & Shoorman, 1995), making oneself

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vulnerable is essential to the establishment of trust, and hence all of the beneficial outcomes that accrue from doing so. Thus, we contend that the rewards associated with making oneself vulnerable by pursing authenticity, authentic leadership, and authentic followership at work will outweigh the risks more often than not.

4. Recommendations for Future Research

You conclude your critique with the following recommendations for the study of authenticity and related topics at work: 1) studying struggles with contrasting ideals; 2) focusing on followers and leader/follower relations; 3) zooming on the self and its development; 4) studying when, why and how to be authentic; and 5) facing the negative consequences of authenticity. We fully agree with these recommendations. Indeed, some of the existing literature on authentic leadership already reflects a focus on leader/follower relations (Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, et al., 2005), the self and its development (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Avolio & Hannah, 2008; Avolio & Mhatre, 2012), and when, why, and how to be authentic (Gardner et al., 2009), although clearly much more work is required. As such, despite the extensive differences in our perspectives on authentic leadership, we see a surprising amount of common ground regarding what we recommend the field advancing. We are hopeful that this dialogue will be constructive in generating empirical efforts that reflect these recommendations and add to the study and practice of authentic leadership and followership.

Letter 2

Authentic leadership theory: A contradiction in terms

by Mats Alvesson and Katja Einola

Dear Bill and Liz,

Many thanks for your response – we are very glad that you accepted to engage in a conversation with us. We find your "critique of our critique" balanced, interesting and dialogue-oriented, and wish to take it from where you left. Our ambition is not to reach an agreement on every aspect, but to further articulate what the real points of contention are and where we actually can reach a common ground. Some issues are (and will probably need to remain) somewhere "in between". We are grateful for this opportunity to openly exchange ideas and constructively bring forward our differences. To us, this type of debate should be a natural part of academic life – but it seldom is. Critical scrutiny and debate are crucial for creating openings for new ideas, for screening out bad ones, and for sharpening our sensitivities.

Like you, we found it impossible to comment on "everything", so we structured our response according to themes we found most important in terms of moving our debate further.

1. Is there linear progression in the field of leadership studies?

You start your letter by discussing a process of how concepts advance in organizational sciences. The three stages include: (1) concept introduction and elaboration; (2) concept assessment and augmentation; and (3) concept consolidation and accommodation.

We are less convinced that there is that much progression in the field and we do not consider that the movement is necessarily linear either. That there is a large amount of studies on

a topic is not an irrefutable sign that a concept has reached a stage of maturity, but may only indicate conformity and the uncritical reproduction of assumptions. The leadership "industry" needs exciting-sounding new concepts to thrive on and to remain interesting to broad audiences. This may have very little to do with serious academic knowledge work, deep insights into organizational life and how manager/subordinate relations unfold in the field. There may be other stages as well, such as: (4) enter an escalation of critique, (5) discussion, and preparation for abandonment, and (6) most advocates move on to something else, perhaps something more fashionable, also very promising and/or unblemished by critique. Although you assume that AL is in stage (3), we assume that we are in (4), or perhaps in stage (5).

In our field, old, dubious theories do not get falsified, but they tend to linger in publications, textbooks, leadership folklore and consulting practice. The problem is that these concepts do not tend to evolve successfully – and there are great many of them left "hanging". How do you explain this heterogeneity to your students? After all, they should get a balanced view of the state of the field, but doing this is extremely challenging and leaves them as confused as we are. As it is, even trying very hard to stay open to accepting different views of the world, we would advise any PhD student to be very careful before moving into authentic leadership, at least the way it is currently defined and studied. We suspect that stage (6) is not that far away.

2. Is authentic leadership proven by practitioners?

Bill and Liz, you refer to practitioners who embrace authentic leadership and that "they themselves find value in reflecting on their core values, strengths, motives, goals and principles, and working to enact them in their relations with others". We agree that they probably do so, but want to nuance the underlying thoughts with regards to the concept *authentic leadership*.

2.1 Authentic leadership does not "exist" just because there are powerful stories by charismatic top executives others feel inspired by

That managers like to read and hear about authentic leadership is hardly surprising. We all like inspirational, feel-good stories of success like those in old Hollywood movies – but the reality underneath is never that straight-forward. A successful business leader's personal post-hoc account of "how they got there" explained through the lens of authenticity, does not amount to any evidence that there is a theoretical construct like authentic leadership at play. The empirical basis for these stories would be much more convincing if these (future) successful leaders would have recorded their own experiences, struggles and successes with authenticity candidly on the way – and to use that as research material. The best would be if researchers carefully followed people at close range over time.

The current hero worshipping-trend in leadership studies and the extreme leader-focus in particular in transformational, authentic leadership and other positive approaches has also led to extensive theoretical critique and the fairly low status of leadership studies among many academics outside the field (e.g., Alvesson, 2019, 2020; Learmonth & Morrell, 2019). Certainly, many managers and leader-wannabees are eager to identify with authentic leadership and its heroes. We too are human and understand these inclinations. We all want to see that the "good" overcomes the "bad" against the odds, and would like to have a role to play in that battle. As with any appealing story indicating that with the right straight-forward recipe or ambitious striving all the good things will be accomplished, there is an eager audience willing to listen. But there is not always a simple unambiguous happy ending in real life, and the muddling through in the swamp of daily organizational life with a broken compass must continue as unglamorous as it all may sound.

In general, we see leadership discourse as more of a resource for identity support, feel-good-exercises and legitimation of managers, than a precise description of, or recipe for actual work and relations (see also Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). As some commentators suggest, leadership researchers should stop being concerned with what they (and their fee-paying audiences) would like to see and instead study "what actually happens in leadership situations" (Sidani & Rowe, 2018, p. 4). Imagine an average middle manager and an avid reader of leadership self-help books, aspiring to go up the corporate ladder or just trying to do a good job, anxious about his or her performance or job security. How common is it for him or her to navigate through a mess and arrive at "authenticity" – whatever that would mean – and then manage to inspire others? We agree that this may happen, but think it is probably rare. People sticking to a core set of values and principles may create frictions and conflicts and may face severe sanctions – a common faith for whistleblowers (Jackall, 1988; Kenny, 2018).

To us it looks like the leadership field is much inspired by Hollywood mythology and cowboy stories. Might the idea of authentic leadership be seeped in a swashbuckling-type North American culture? We wonder, are generic, universal theories of leadership even possible without imposing one's culture and value systems onto others? For global audiences, this anchoring of the entire field of leadership in the American culture and traditions is problematic as it crowds out alternatives. We believe that cultivating a diversity of perspectives is good for social sciences. In our view, this lack of diversity has also been a problem with *The Leadership Quarterly*, and we would like to see this change. There are other successful models of organizing, like the Scandinavian one that we represent, that traditionally at least focuses on more egalitarian workplace relations and where successes are considered more as the result of collective efforts than heroic deeds by single individuals, being superior on authenticity. Here the

idea of followership is not so popular either. People often dislike the idea of distinct followership and sometimes downplay their interest in leadership altogether (Blom & Alvesson, 2014). But also in the US, the Hollywood inspired notion of the great, morally superior leader doing all sorts of good things bringing about fine outcomes, may mainly reflect managers' wishes for positive stories and self-image and have little to do with their ability to enact ideas in their work practices.

2.2 Which notion of authenticity do people adhere to?

Authenticity *alone* without the tag-along "leadership" appears to be extremely difficult, perhaps the fuzziest and most elusive of all terms ever used in the leadership genre of academic studies. The problem with the term "authenticity" is that because it is anchored in many possible interpretations of what it means, it does not fit in any one of these and is left hanging loose, a clear warning sign when building constructs and theory. Authenticity is widely used as a synonym to sincerity and honesty in common language as well as in research, from which it differs in that sincerity and honesty are qualities that can be assessed by others - whereas authenticity pertains to the domain internal to each individual, a much more difficult and demanding terrain (Trilling, 1972).

The authentic leadership scholarship also explicitly links itself to the notion of authenticity in the 20th century philosophical schools of existentialism, phenomenology, as well hermeneutics. Existential philosophy in particular underlines the elusive (and often painful) nature of authenticity, and considers it as a personal endeavor thus incommensurable with any intent of exerting influence on others, a *sine qua non* condition for leadership. Most influential existentialists also firmly decouple the term from morality and consider that authenticity is by definition neither good nor bad. (For us an eye-opener as a strong text on authenticity in practice

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as viewed through an existentialist lens has been *The Stranger* by Camus). Yet, influential authors such as Sartre, Heidegger, and Ricoeur are routinely cited in literature in authentic leadership (see, for instance, Gardner et al., 2011 and Walumbwa et al., 2008). To present authentic leadership as a (measurable) *construct* that *builds on* the thinking of these philosophers, and to portray it as some sort of a modern-day advancement of their works, is misleading, at least in our interpretation of what is written in authentic leadership theory (and in Heidegger's, Sartre's and Ricoeur's work). We would like to see these two takes on authenticity severed and presented as fundamentally different to inform the reader of the existence of many very different ways to understand and study authenticity. The *purpose* of existentialism, phenomenology and hermeneutics is to study lived experiences of humans by humans, not to move on to statistical generalizations and building of observable, measurable behavioral models framed as scientific progress at some later stage.

Another what for us is a disturbing move, is to start using the word, the phenomenon, or the concept (an abstract idea) of authenticity, originally used by an author in a different field, as a synonym to a "construct" as if it had the same meaning. For instance, Gardner and colleagues (2011. p. 121), say on authenticity that (emphasis is ours):

*'The modern conception of the **construct** emerged in the past 85 years (Erickson, 1995)'*

Erickson in turn, in her original piece writes that,

'*While Weifert (1988) suggesst that the **concept** of authenticity took on its modern cast about 70 years ago, he notes that discussions of authenticity (and the closely related idea of sincerity) are centuries old.' (1995, p. 123)*

In her work, Erickson (1995) does not at all use the word construct, or variables/components it is or may be 'built of' or possible objectification or quantification of authenticity. In social sciences with multiple philosophies, epistemologies and methods in use, it is particularly important not to confound these two terms. To use the word "concept" or "idea" is philosophically neutral (all scholars need a vocabulary to talk about abstract ideas), but to use the word "construct" nudges the reader, or at least us, automatically towards positivism.

Instead, and in our view, it is more fair to say that authentic leadership (the construct) is based on, for instance, work by Kernis and his colleagues, and that it builds on positive psychology (see for instance Luthans & Avolio, 2003). However, so far, we are not aware of any causal evidence in consequential that authenticity can be linked to a process of leading others effectively, but would be willing to be challenged (and try to at least challenge ourselves!) and learn about such a study, its design and its methods.

Authenticity is also a term from our daily language – and its use has become fashionable in all kinds of contexts from marketing to personal branding giving it a buzzword like quality. As a guest in a restaurant in Little Italy in Montreal, we have listened to the owner of the place explain to us how to prepare an authentic tiramisu, and a fashion enthusiast once took a long moment to teach us how to tell if a second-hand Louis Vuitton bag is an authentic one. But how can we tell and conclude whether a person is really an authentic leader? Can anyone tell for sure? How to appear "authentic" may simply reflect skillful impression management.

A key issue here in part is the label "authentic" and the elusive idea of a person's core values and principles. On one hand, most people would without much doubt agree that being true to one's values and principles, should there be some fixed and immutable ones, is a good idea. On the other hand, no one is more true to values and principles than a fundamentalist and most

people appreciate people that are flexible and can deal with a range of situations and interests. What should we make of this dilemma? In real work life situations, outside the rather sanitized field of leadership studies, other representations are more likely to be in operation. "Authentic" and "true to values" are attributions we typically use when we think favorably of someone. However, attributions such as being rigid, disloyal, having a military mind, lacking a broader view, insisting on his/her way, being "holier than thou" … are more likely assessments for people who are eager to be their true selves at work, but who deviate from norms or refuse to adapt and conform (see Jackall, 1988 for excellent illustrations of what types of consequences people may face when they try to do the "right thing" in a corporate setting).

3. Authenticity is aspirational – but yet it is a "thing"?

We are in favor of the thought that you, Bill and Liz, also brought up that authenticity is an inspirational goal to strive towards rather than a fixed state. This aspect, we think, is under-represented in the authenticity theory development and empirical work. Also, we agree that authenticity is not an either/or condition, but rather something people are *more* or *less* at any given point in time and in different situations. For us, authenticity, if we should use the term, is a matter of self-awareness, self-development and an inner, almost spiritual quest some people, leaders or not leaders, may choose to engage in. For this, we do think we need to consider authenticity themes in a processual and context-sensitive way.

However, in most writings on authentic leadership, including your response, we find that there is a one-dimensionality of direction and qualities, and addressing authenticity as an "it". We do think that authenticity can be studied, but not as a fixed thing, a quantifiable measure where things are lumped together into an authentic leadership score to be correlated with other

good things. This modus operandi is perhaps appealing for some quantitative researchers, but theoretically misleading and empirically uninformative, because the definitions and measurement typically lead to predictable outcomes of questionable relevance. We want to highlight that this is not a question of methods – some quantitative researchers would *not* make this mistake, whereas qualitative researchers seeped in the current conceptualization would be equally misled by cases they seek and data patterns they explore.

Whereas no one can disagree with the positivity of a strive in a "good" direction, this direction is not so clear, consistent and unproblematic as it seems. The entire reasoning in the authentic leadership literature and also in other leadership studies inspired by positive psychology, reflects an idea that there is an "it" (authenticity) that can be moved alongside a simple trajectory to the arrival at the peak; for example, you write "the processes whereby leaders and followers experience growth by becoming more authentic". The metaphors used are varied, but all reflect various versions of one-dimensionality; from down here to the peak (upwards), from something small to something big (growth), something empty to full, weak to strong, etc. All are about worse to better, bad to good and highlight contrasts between these. The assumption is that there are clear, objective qualities that all agree upon, and can rank and measure, as if authentic leadership is an "it". Of course, "a subjective experience of full involvement with life" sounds better than an empty or half-empty involvement with life. It is pretty easy to foresee how respondents filling in questionnaires or answering to interview studies built with this logic are going to react.

Managers occupy various positions and have to tell different stories to senior and junior people (Sims, 2003). In order to fit into various situations, they need to process subjectivity, move between different versions of who they are, connect and disconnect to various values

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(espoused and enacted), and adapt without too much struggle. Sticking to *a* core set of values may be very difficult in practice. In addition to this fluctuation, there is the issue of change and development over time. With new jobs, duties, employments, increasing age and so on, most people need to develop and change, and revise rather than to stick to a specific notion of who they are (Ibarra, 2015). To be of leadership material in the 21st century organizations, seems to require more chameleon-like qualities than a strong and fixed set of values and principles.

We still agree with you, Bill and Liz, that it is fine if people can feel more like themselves at work, but this is a complicated matter and it is grossly simplified if seen as a one-dimensional fit and firmly placed as a matter of individual psychological properties, being reduced to a simple authenticity measure. It would be a good thing if jobs and people were in alignment but for the majority this is hardly possible. For many jobs and people, it may be more reasonable to accept and even promote a somewhat instrumental, distanced relationship to work – and not see the inevitable inconsistency between the self and one's job-based role as a problem to be solved by authentic leadership.

4. "Amalgam" thinking versus situation-sensitivity

We stated in our original article that *definitions of authentic leadership also include outcomes – cause and effect are lumped together.* You seem to agree with this statement at least to some degree. In our view, this is a fundamental problem in leadership studies, and authentic leadership is definitively not an exception. But we think that tautologies rule and explain much of the apparent "success" (Fischer, 2018; Sidani & Rowe, 2018; Tourish, 2019). There is a strong confirmation bias, where positive attributes lead to positive outcomes. We wonder what is point of doing all that empirical research, as the results are more or less given from the start?

4.1 The problem of amalgam thinking

We also stated that the four constitutive elements of authentic leadership do not form a solid theoretical construct and a logical whole. Here we are in disagreement. You write that "as you note, the four components of authentic leadership were derived from Michael Kernis' (2003) multi-component conceptualization of the construct of authenticity, which has received substantial empirical support (Kernis & Goldman, 2006)." We approach this from leadership-theory perspective – not from the point of view of psychology of self-esteem. A pattern in leadership theory seems to be that the founders, advocates and followers of a proposed theory find a lot of empirical support, whereas others are more uncertain. The field divides itself in what eerily resemble faith-based "camps" that hardly engage in any debate or discussion. In the area of authentic leadership, Avolio (2013) reveals that he never engages in or responds to critique. Why? We understand this behavior in social media, but is not formulating and responding to critique a *sine qua non* condition for advancement of science? The pattern in leadership studies seems to be that the fad prevails for a while and then the field moves on to something that better reflects the zeitgeist and can be sold to an audience eager to get the latest management fashion.

A problematic assumption of authentic leadership researchers, is that people scoring high on this measure also generally get recognition and appreciation. We are not certain that people at work can recognize, appreciate and assess what the leadership literature describes as components of authentic leadership: balanced processing, self-awareness, internalized moral perspective and relational transparency exhibited by an individual. There may not be any consensus among people around the so-called authentic person of his or her goodness or moral superiority either.

There are fundamental problems with what we call *amalgam thinking*. The recipe for positive leadership seems to be to combine four or five nice sounding, vague dimensions and let

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them form a style or type. They are formulated so that they per definition lead to favorable outcomes and operationalizations giving the respondent very strong clues for how to respond to questionnaires and for researchers to come up with confirmative results. But besides this problem, the combination of the four factors is deeply problematic. That Kernis combined the dimensions into a concept in his field and others used them in another field in a different way does not make the concept solid and proven for ever after. There is a huge gap between nice combinations of psychological factors, their outcomes and leadership challenges. A major problem of AL is the lumping together of quite different and probably unrelated qualities; there is no strong evidence of a higher order factor causing them to covary (see, for instance, Credé and Harms, 2015 for a critical review). Theoretically, what has ethics or morality to do with balanced information processing? In what way is relational transparency related to self-awareness? Are people with good relations necessarily much more self-aware than others? And can't one be introvert, shy, private, prefer being non-transparent – and still be self-aware? And above all: why should the four form a specific "it", authentic *leadership*? Can people not score high on some or all of the dimensions and not engage in leadership? What is the leadership element in all this authenticity? We pose these questions because we cannot grasp the essence of the logic of the theory; moreover, we cannot locate any definitive responses in the scientific literature. Also, some may defend the position that the factors hang together because they correlate well; however, that the factors correlate highly with each other can also be due to biases in ratings and general halo effects (for instance, see Hansbrough, Lord, & Schyns, 2015 for possible challenges with follower reporting when they are asked to rate leader behaviours using questionnaire measures).

4.2 The situated self

We want to further nuance what we see as unreconcilable tension between the notion of a consistent, transparent and unitary "self", and the real-life need for people to adjust to situations and adopt different roles. Here too, our understanding converges, at least partially, and we share the concern that the many roles the "self" needs to take is a challenge for being authentic. A person needs to constantly adjust to the environment and to other people, in particular at work. You say:

> So, you ask, which self should leaders be aware of and true to? The answer is the self that is enacted in the situation. Indeed, these integrated self-systems typically include job-related identities, such as leader and follower, that may be claimed by and/or granted during social interactions … To be true to one's (enacted) self, one must be aware of that self, as well as complementary selves, to avoid succumbing to role related pressures that violate core values that permeate multiple selves (p. 10)

"The self that is enacted in the situation" is an interesting theme. What do we mean by "the situation"? It appears that you think about a stable leader-follower relation, with fixed identities, for example, as a "leader"? But both situations and selves are perhaps better understood as much more dynamic and varying. Self is not fixed but processed in non-stable situations. During a work week a repertoire of different versions of the "self" may appear in the life of a specific manager: from professional (e.g. engineer), manager, subordinate, colleague, disciplinarian, bureaucratic policy-follower, therapeutic supporter, male, sexual being, Muslim and so forth. With different people, themes, situations and relations there may be different selves. There may be "integrated self-systems" - or less integrated, even conflicting or fragmented

modes of being, e.g., when a middle manager meets subordinates, superiors and key clients, when she enacts policies and is expected to show empathy. Self should perhaps be seen as a process rather than a fixed entity.

Let us suggest some counter-assumptions to your statement. Perhaps, whether managers or subordinates are more or less authentic, depends really *more* on the situation they find themselves in rather than on who they are. An anti-Nazi in Germany during WW2 may have felt inauthentic most of the time. A person who feels that his or her job is meaningless and is little valued in the organization and has limited employment opportunities elsewhere and a family to support, may feel very little authenticity at work. It is not so much the person as the contexts that matters. When authentic leadership locates the key issues in the fixed attributes of the person, there is the risk of a strong over focus on individual psychology, mirroring the psychological reductionism and context insensitivity dominating much of leadership studies, making it fundamentally unrealistic and irrelevant for understanding and dealing with organizational life.

It is of course laudable to recommend that all people in their work and other roles in life should strive towards becoming more authentic for personal satisfaction, well-being and a better quality of life. But this "work with self" is an uneasy fit with and very different from studying the dynamics of leaders and followers in their pursuit of corporate goals – and using "authenticity" as a tool to get there. Here, we may even enter an ethically and morally shaky terrain – would not imposing one's authenticity onto others as a result of a corporate hierarchy be some sort of manipulation or potentially even power abuse? Imagine, for instance, a conservative manager and a feminist subordinate. Is the idea that the former in her leadership should stick to her values and principles and have her subordinate comply? Acting in line with one's own values

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and principles have effects on other people, even strong ones if others are subordinates and expected to be compliant, a key element in followership.

For everyone to act according to one's "core values" and reach harmony and self-development may be very difficult in today's multicultural workplace. Whose values should prevail - the manager's? The manager's manager's? The CEO's? Those of the most morally righteous person's? According to which religious sect or philosophical school –and why? One could argue that all should stick to and enact their unique selves, values and principles but is this compatible with well-functioning organizations? One could imagine that all (non-conventional) people acting based on their true selves and principles would lead to endless frictions, misunderstandings and conflicts. Corporations have for long time tried to establish organizationally shared values to unite a heterogenous workforce and all levels of hierarchy, sometimes clashing with the values and principles of individuals. Should the latter insist on sticking to those at work place, after all? Finding employment in an organization that is fully in harmony with one's own orientations is sometimes a possibility, but this is far from being realistic most of the time. In most organizations, there are people and groups with diverse values and principles, making authenticity-for-all impossible. A reasonable level of harmony is facilitated by people refraining from too much authenticity and employees being rather relaxed about sticking to their ideals.

In our view, there are perhaps many other reasons why people need to be careful when they act in ways that reflect their true core values and identities – these may backfire like many people who have tried to be authentic have experienced. Imagine a company where nepotistic systems prevail: Will someone pointing at the problem be glorified or become marginalized if the prevailing culture has been tolerant of this type of behavior in the past? Is it not much easier

for a company owner to be authentic than for a team leader or another junior manager – or for anyone whose views on gender, politics, religion, work ethic, sexual orientation, environmental issues and so forth, are clearly different from those of the dominating organizational or occupational class?

5. Problems with measurements and life stories

We seem to be in an agreement in that many phenomena are difficult to describe and assess – and in particular measure. We also agree with you that a construct should not be abandoned just because its measurement is challenging – better measurements, or perhaps qualitative (or archival) assessments, should be developed. You are optimistic and see a range of promising developments, including implicit measures. We have no comment on the use of implicit measures in the field of psychology, but are unsure how, for instance, tapping into a person's self-esteem with implicit measures would be helpful outside the field of psychology, that is, in leadership studies, especially when trying to establish links to leadership outcomes.

You then suggest that in order for us to avoid conflation, we should simply accept that the current measure is an imperfect effort to capture the complex phenomenon of authentic leadership, and that we should move on. We acknowledge that an understanding of AL being aspirational and by definition, hard to measure, is an improvement. Our position, however, is that the construct of authentic leadership rests on such a shaky ground overall that we should spend our efforts as scholars measuring – or studying regardless of the method – something else. Nothing really changes if the measurement stays the same – or if AL is reduced to something fixed and measurable. Also, few would argue against the fact that *any* attempt to capture complex social phenomenon is based on imperfect efforts – but when is the right time to accept that measurements are fundamentally problematic and abandon a research program and move on

to something, perhaps more productive? Of course the answer to this question is elusive, subjective, even ideological, and depends on the lenses through which we choose to, more or less consciously, contemplate the social world. It has to be left open.

The idea that authentic leadership should be seen as an aspirational goal for individuals is a poor match with its current measurement as a static individual difference variable assessed by others. Theory and its measurement have now drifted too far away to be meaningful in our view. Recognizing people for the "right stuff" may not be easy. As Tourish (2019) writes, "the self-awareness of leaders is largely assessed by responses obtained from followers, who generally don't possess the gift of mind-reading" (p. 183). Followers can, at best, be affected by impressions of authenticity. Researchers with the clumsy and (mis)leading questionnaires do not get anywhere close to the phenomenon of "authenticity". Where is the observable evidence that a person is driven by his or her true values or principles and does balanced information processing, enacts her true self or is engaged in transparent relations? On one hand, it would be conceptually best to use self -reports – but then you suggest the use of other-reports to reduce bias, when also referring to practitioner endorsement and testimony to prove that the concept is empirically grounded. This reasoning leaves us perplexed.

We agree with you that life stories may be inspiring but they easily become moral storytelling and may mirror how executives or others selected for the position of an authentic leadership oracle like to see or present themselves. Perhaps, most people would like to sincerely believe that they are highly authentic at work. For instance, all ten subjects in our interpretative study (and hence with no intentions to provide generalizable findings or proposition for hypothesis testing) who we studied in depth, seemed to believe so (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016). However, reality may be different in many cases. We have nothing against people being

inspired by stories told by successful people. But as researchers, we are much more skeptical, partly because the entire construct is so notoriously vague and beyond what is really known or even knowable. A person may sincerely *believe* that s/he is "authentic" – similar to most of Milgram's (1974) subjects who probably did not anticipate that they would be prepared to insert very hurtful electronic chocks on innocent subjects in what appeared to be a pedagogical experiment. Certainly, those who bully whistle blowers (people who stick to their values) most likely would not anticipate that they ever would become bullies – or even see themselves as such.

We also do not understand why there is so much emphasis on measurements of complex phenomena – like hierarchical relations at work places (i.e. "leadership"). A more balanced use of multiple epistemologies and research methods, including mixed methods, ethnographic work, experiments, in-depth interpretative and critical studies *alongside* with, or instead of, survey studies, would make for a much more vibrant and inclusive field. Irrespective of what to study, ticking a few boxes on a questionnaire on difficult to grasp issues appears superficial and often irrelevant to us (Einola & Alvesson, 2020), in addition to introducing a host of other statistical biases (Antonakis, 2017). Complex and ambiguous phenomena would call for more careful work than in almost all research projects repeating the same: defaulting to taking a set questionnaire as the gold standard for doing meaningful research and automatically assuming that doing so will lead to sound indicators. Reflective subordinates, peers and other close contacts who over a long time apply a combination of distance and closeness and have good judgment and psychological insightfulness, may be able to make insightful observations on leader authenticity. Of course, such informants are hard to find and to assess, making empirical work much more demanding than collecting survey responses or even experiments (often studying students in simplified and

artificial settings) and typically calling for time-consuming qualitative work and careful source critique.

6. The problem of elitism and ethics in authentic leadership

Much leadership thinking by default assumes the superiority of leaders over followers. You indicate that an authentic leader is a person capable of improving others, perhaps coming close to a high point on an authenticity "ladder". On relational transparency you state that:

> … [authentic leaders] will help those who are close to them see both their positive and negative qualities as a basis for establishing intimacy and trust, while encouraging others to do the same… we agree that relational transparency in organizational settings has its limits, we also see it as an aspirational form of conduct that leaders and followers striving for authenticity will pursue. (p 11).

We have problems with the simplicity of this thinking. Does it have to be the leader who helps the follower see his or her positive and negative qualities – and not the other way around? Perhaps "followers" may counter the "inauthenticities" of their managers through more or less explicit feedback. And if so is the case, are they really best described as "followers"? Are not all at a workplace influencing others, for both good and bad? Perhaps sometimes "leaders" are career-oriented, politically astute managers being less "authentic" than other mortals? Why this infantilization of followers and assumption that leaders are by default in a position to be some sort of *Übermensch*, more moral or authentic human beings than their subordinates? Why authentic leadership and not authenticity struggles at work?

On a related note, on the theme of superior people, we cannot agree with you in that people with considerable negative traits or signs of fragile self-esteem are somehow exempt from being authentic. You say:

…fragile self-esteem is incompatible with the notion of authenticity as conceived and empirically validated by Kernis and colleagues (see Kernis & Goldman, 2006), it is likewise inconsistent with authentic leadership and followership.

So being aware of and revealing low or fragile self-esteem would be at odds with authenticity? Authenticity is only for the strong ones, for the superior people? Here, we get an impression that the "authenticists" are elitists – and cannot agree. Do you really mean that this leadership theory is not for the average person, with some distance to optimal self-esteem and who perhaps at times conceals weaknesses for the benefit of smooth workplace relations and to retain employment or respect of others? Does having a fragile self-esteem (and perhaps being aware of it and working on the problem) mean that authenticity is a no-possibility? Or maybe, after all, a person's capability to acknowledge his/her fragility is a sign of authenticity-work at play?

Of course, a person consistently seen by all as a "jerk" may indicate a complete social failure and few persons would think of the person as "authentic". But there are many people admired by their followers and seen by these seen as authentic that others would see as jerks. Steve Jobs and Donald Trump are examples that come to mind – but even Mother Teresa has had her critics. Who gets to decide? Irrespective of these examples, most people have both positive and negative features and may need to carefully balance and selectively show their authenticity in order to create the appropriate response – including attributions of "authenticity". This attribution may call for the hiding of rather than being openly narcissistic, neurotic, having low self-esteem, being very insecure, disliking certain people or ethnic or professional groups (Muslims, whites, lawyers, consultants, truth-tellers, vegetarians, and the list goes on…). Of course, some acknowledging of and demonstrating of modest and unharmful imperfections is

probably appreciated by others, and "showing awareness of weaknesses" is up to a degree at least, a good thing, but most persons aspiring to a leadership position and getting others into followership, probably need to domesticate "authenticity", in order to be perceived as a credible leader. Perhaps people from minority groups more so than those from privileged, dominant groups.

You write about:

basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are

fulfilled. Moreover, we draw upon the notion of flow, which

Csikszentmihalyi (2003, p. 18) defines as "a subjective experience of full

involvement with life" to argue that when one's capabilities and the challenges of

one's work align to produce peak levels of performance, a sense of authenticity is

achieved. That is, being true to oneself goes beyond being true to one's values to

also encompass the utilization of one's personal strengths, including one's

knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs), in a fulfilling fashion. (p.4)

That basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are fulfilled sounds very positive. For us, this vocabulary you use is highly seductive and very hard to resist – at least for people who are willing to accept the underlying assumptions and who are easily persuaded. Apparently, a lot of people in workplaces and jobs do so. But this may reflect the rhetorical appeal, rather than the intellectual soundness of the argument. It all sounds like Maslow's old idea of self-actualization. How is this different? Because self-actualization is on a higher or more advanced level than lower-level needs, we all hail the better. But what does this

have to do with leadership and mobilizing resources to get a job done? Are our needs really that simple to nail down?

We are disturbed by the underlying thought implicit in your argument that authentic people are both a) privileged in the sense that their higher order needs are fulfilled, and b) morally superior and psychologically stronger than non-authentic ones. Are privileged people really morally better than less privileged ones? Does it make sense to lump all positive qualities together with a high level of authenticity and AL? One assumption is that all good things go together, another is that it is a cognitive and ideological mistake to assume so.

All "needs" are complicated and not just there as psychological properties. Being true to oneself and being into the utilization of one's personal strengths, including one's knowledge, skills, and abilities, is fine. But it calls for, a) a strong job commitment and b) a job that allows for such utilizations. Here the world appears to be full of Maslowians, being into or aspiring to peak performances. An average employee – a worker at McDonald's, a bus driver, a nurse, a government bureaucrat, a sales man or a research assistant – may not have these orientations and aspirations, nor work in jobs or for companies where there is much space for this type of fulfillment. One may believe that in the "knowledge economy" non-routine, demanding jobs with development potentials are common, but most people still work in the low-level service sector or in the distribution industries (Sweet & Meiksins, 2008) and many find their jobs far from satisfying and even meaningless (Graeber, 2013; Paulsen, 2014). Also, many supervisors and middle managers have routine jobs and work in these industries. Many so-called leaders spend most of their time doing managerial work, much of which is of an administrative and operational nature. Being authentic at work may imply to see work as wage labor, slightly alienating, sometimes moderate on low on meaningfulness, trying to create some healthy

distance to the job. Many may see the idea of becoming more authentic at work as a bad joke. Not all can easily move jobs and become a columnist at New York Times, an independent poet or a philosopher at Oxford. Still, a level of authenticity and ability to utilize competence are probably wished for by many, but a good income, safe employment and having time and energy for leisure activities may account for more. And here smiling to customers and agreeing with the boss and pretending to be a good follower may be part of the job reality, also for managers not only or mainly being "leaders", as the great majority are subordinate managers and not CEOs.

Then there is the issue of ethics. You write that:

ethics lies at the heart of leadership because the actions of leaders have

consequences for others. As such, efforts to develop leaders would be incomplete

if they do not produce increased awareness of, and attention to, the ethical

responsibilities associated with the leader role. (p. 13)

Yes, we all agree on the goodness of ethics, it is hard to not do this, but most managers are supposed to create effective organizations and profit for shareholders. Being ethical to different subordinates, colleagues, superiors, the function, profession, to different customer groups, to citizens, shareholders, to animals, to the environment etc. may mean radically different things. To conceal all this variety under the simple label "ethics" is to trivialize and idealize the subject matter. And as some have pointed out, you may be very authentic in some respects, but not necessarily have any specific ethical agenda (Eilam-Shamir & Shamir, 2013). Or one may twist ethics in any direction one desires, to fire people for the good of the company or engage in (what could be seen as) nepotism as one wants to support one's favorite

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subordinates and honor social ties, to rigidly follow rules as one believes in the supremacy of bureaucracy, or strongly retaliate against whistle-blowers as they are disloyal and betray the organizational community. A lynch mob can claim that they do the right thing. As Grint (2010) points out, also the followers of Hitler and bin Laden thought their leaders were ethical. Ethics sounds so easy, but unless reduced to trivialities, it all is very complicated in practice, unless defined as complying with local social norms.

7. The difficulty of authentic leadership in practice

You seem to acknowledge, to a certain degree at least, problems with practicing authentic leadership, but mainly argue "that efforts by leaders and followers to establish genuine, open, and ethically-grounded relationships with others are welcome in most organizations".

We agree with you that ethically grounded, genuine and open work relations are probably everyone's espoused ideal and no one would argue against that – in principle. However, in real life there are clashes, misunderstandings and misalignments between people, goals, and interest groups. On a similar issue you argue that "trying to be one's best self at work is not the sole province of mythical heroes; to the contrary, it is a goal toward which all persons, including leaders and followers, can aspire, while recognizing and accepting that they will often fall short". Here we wonder: What do you mean by "one's best self"? Does this imply achieving full personal integrity and autonomy, being a loyal follower to top management, or a person prioritizing the interest of subordinates, or optimizing one's own learning and development, or showing optimal results on KPIs? Or just putting on a nice surface, concealing a "non-best self". Yes, as formulated, no one would object. Few would welcome people establishing false, closed and immoral relationships. But in reality, again, the good versus the bad thinking is not so simple.

You bring up the question of *voice* and giving voice to values, and mention that "the personal

benefits that accrue to individuals who speak up." We find this to be an interesting topic for research, but want to call for caution as this voice or being authentic may backfire at work. There are most likely very different outcomes of speaking up – some good, some bad, some mixed. Doing so in a politically clever way may help (Courpasson, Dany, & Clegg, 2012; Jackall, 1988). Whistle blowers often face severe sanctions (Kenny, 2018). We think there is considerable variation here and that we doubt that there is any law-like pattern in terms of speaking up leading generally or on average to favorable outcomes for the person who is speaking up. Our experience is that few people do.

Then there is the question whether focusing on becoming an authentic person may invite and reinforce narcissism or not. We still think that if a person in a managerial role focuses excessively on the self, the development of the self and transforming others to mimic his or her self (instead of focusing on the tasks and the group), may lead to problems associated with excess individualism. You "consider narcissism to be the antithesis of authenticity because narcissists, despite all of their grandiose claims and bluster, are insecure and amoral", and write:

> Hence, we totally disagree with your concern that being an authentic leader may foster narcissism within the leader. To the contrary, narcissists are likely to be disinterested or unable to lead in a fashion that involves fostering self-awareness, promoting balanced processing, exhibiting relational transparency, and adopting an internalized moral perspective.

Here you seem to take the view that narcissism is pathological and a strong deviation from how people normally function or should function. Yes, there are pathological disorders, but there is also normal or normalized narcissism, unavoidable and perhaps even healthy but it may

be easily exaggerated. Narcissism can also be seen as a dominant orientation in our contemporary society – also feeding into the emergence of theories like authentic leadership, where the self of the key person is viewed as the core around which the admiring social world is assumed to rotate. We live in a culture where many people – not necessarily because they are extremely insecure and amoral – are eager to receive attention, and get instant gratification and support (Foley, 2010; Lasch, 1978; Twenge & Foster, 2010). In social media, "likes" are counted as a sign of popularity and a measure of success. We have title and grade inflation, branding of everything, symbolic upgrading of what people are and do, all this reflecting heated wishes for confirmation and fueling at least moderate narcissism (Alvesson, 2013). As anyone on Facebook, Instagram or LinkedIn can confirm, many people are into image and painting their place in the world in bright colors. Many groups are in the narcissism-reinforcing industries, including major parts of leadership studies, dominated by a leader-centric focus, and full of leader-celebrating knowledge claims, including versions inspired by positive psychology.

Apart from appealing to grandiose fantasies, authentic leadership also encourages a strong self-focus among managers, giving prime importance to their *self*, e.g. through optimizing self-awareness, thus moving subordinates, contingencies of work life, role requirements and the pressure to carry out work tasks and perform, into the periphery. This very strong leader-centric thinking, with sometimes an almost exclusive focus on the "leader" as the only star in a solar system, contributes to managerial narcissism, also creating problems for these managers, lacking role- and self-distance and thus being vulnerable to non-confirmation (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016). To expect the world to be prepared to respect and adapt to each and every person's wishes to express their true selves and values, and the world responding positively to these sets of values and principles, is unrealistic as a matter of definition. Imagine any large organization of tens of

thousands of employees, with people needing to carefully coordinate their actions, adapt to a wealth of requirements and demands, as well as to flexibly adjust to others … being populated by employees and managers insisting on expressing and demonstrating their authenticity at work. How would this work out?

8. Where does this discussion leave us?

We may be cynical, like you indicate, Bill and Liz, but the critical issues we have raised in this text are something that we and many others see surfacing, much more often than we personally would like to, in our empirical material, as well as our observations and experiences of organizational life. Unsubstantiated positivity-boosting in which we find tones familiar from faith-based discourses, is not what we feel comfortable engaging in. We think it is important to highlight that the many problems in leadership/organizational practice that do not seem to be going anywhere despite a massive effort in research on the topic, are interlinked in a loop with leadership theory (Alvesson, 2020; Fischer, 2018; Gottfredson, Wright, & Heaphy, 2020; Van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013). In fact, we doubt that there can be progress unless we take a hard look at what is really going on in the fields of leadership studies and workplaces, and try to find new angles and ways to look at organizational life, including manager/subordinate relations and the way things get done (or don't) in organizations.

We do not suggest we all should stop studying authenticity at workplaces, but rather that we change the course on how we do this. Lemoine and colleagues (2019) write that one way to understand authenticity is to associate it with virtues of a person in the Aristotelian sense – taking self-awareness and understanding seriously. This implies less focus on leader behaviors, leadership styles and leadership outcomes. Mills (1940) suggested that we can't access people's motives, but we can study the vocabulary of motives. Over different times, in different settings

and in different situations, motive vocabularies differ. They are employed in different ways and the culturally established and legitimate language in a specific context may also drive people, sometimes in the direction of a loose coupling between the espoused and the enacted. In a similar way we may relax ambitions to study "authenticity" as such and instead be interested in people's discourses on the subject matter. Or just study in-/authenticity at work – without coupling it with "leadership". What about "in-authenticity" in employment as a research topic?

We find authenticity as a way of being that some people have in them more and others less but that this quality (or lack thereof) also vary between situations. This is perhaps not so helpful for leadership studies or development, at least not if one wants to addressed fixed qualities or a uniform movement from less good to more good. It is hard for a middle-aged middle manager all of a sudden, after a dose of authentic leadership theory and training, to convert from a career and task-oriented instrumentalist into a self-reflecting, humble individual striving towards a high moral ground and noble ends in his or her work (and other) life. These inclinations develop early in a person's life and to change, stronger triggers than attending a well-branded and expensive leadership development course would be needed for a genuine conversion to take place. Work with self is a life-long quest some individuals are more inclined to engage in than others and under certain conditions. It requires a strong intrinsic motivation. We agree with Tourish (2019) and others on the theory-practice gap, but advocate empirically grounded and insightful research to bridge that gap, rather than attaching our research on upbeat concepts that practitioners and other audiences may find rhetorically appealing but that lack much substance (Alvesson, 2020; Fischer, 2018; Learmonth & Morrell, 2019).

We do seem to share the concern, after all, that we researchers can have a role to play in improving work life and battling against some of the dark sides of managerial practice. This can

be our shared umbrella. We can then perhaps simply accept that we espouse a cynical and you a romantic view, but that we both share the same dance floor and that is ok. Engaging in this dialogue is not easy for us any more than it is, perhaps, for you. It would be more pleasant to spend a Saturday morning writing about a new theory or concept rather than this letter. But we still think this type of dialogue is necessary, even if some personal discomfort is involved – we are researchers by choice, and debates are (or should be) an important part of what we do. We feel that we need to be better at facing our differences and leaving our niches of like-minded people to have some difficult but necessary conversations with those whose views are different from ours. Our general impression is that people tend to duck or dismiss far-reaching critique (Avolio, 2013). We do not have an antidote nor simple answers. Leadership exists in our organizations, partly because our culture – and a huge and expanding leadership industry, offering a wealth of recipes – made it a reality. But the practice of it can also be dangerous and unproductive. With the amount of leadership theory written, extensive education and consultancy assignments delivered, we could expect that many problems of organizations would have been if not solved, at least dramatically diminished. But this is hardly so. Often "solutions", like idealistic views on leadership may be source of new kinds of problems.

Letter 3

Seeking common ground and acknowledging divergent perspectives on authentic leadership

by William L. Gardner and Elizabeth P. Karam

Dear Mats and Katja:

We, too, sincerely appreciate the opportunity to engage in this constructive conversation. In fact, we would like to echo and amplify your comment that "this type of debate should be a natural part of academic life" (p. 1). Your remarks have prompted us to consider elements of authentic leadership theory, research, and methods that we feel are important for moving the field forward. In fact, we would like to begin this letter by highlighting our points of agreement (see Table 1 for a summary of our Common Ground) before we respond to individual comments where we will, perhaps, have to agree to disagree. Our hope is that by documenting our common ground in this table, which we invite you to co-create and revise with us, we will encourage more rigorous and interesting research into authentic leadership using diverse methodologies and contexts. Moreover, we hope to demonstrate how researchers with divergent viewpoints can work constructively together – a key takeaway that we think can be broadly applicable to all of our lives, particularly at this time.

Insert Table 1 About Here

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1. Common Ground

Let us begin by summarizing the seven areas where we seem to (at least partially) agree.

1.1 Authenticity is an aspirational goal, rather than a fixed state.

In our Letter 1 and your Letter 2, we both stated that "[a]uthenticity is not an either/or condition" and point out that people can be more or less authentic at any point in time and across situations. We acknowledge that authenticity can occur on a continuum and can be affected by multiple factors, an important consideration in identifying common ground.

1.2 Individuals possess multiple selves that are integrated into a self-system; contextual

       factors invoke the "situated self."

A second area of common ground pertains to our conceptions of the self. In both of our letters, we described the self as being dynamic and multi-faceted and situated within a particular context. You indicate that "a repertoire of different versions of the 'self' may appear in the life of a specific manager" (p. 9). We describe integrated self-systems that "typically include job-related identities, such as leader and follower, that may be claimed by and/or granted during social interactions" (p. 10). Given that self-awareness provides the foundation for authenticity, our general agreement on the structure and operation the self is encouraging.

1.3 Individuals are more or less authentic across time and within different contexts.

We agree that the process of situating one's self and identity at work is challenging, and that people, including leaders and followers, find it difficult to achieve authenticity in many settings. On this point, where our perspectives diverge is with respect to how challenging we view the organizational hurdles one must surmount to achieve authenticity. You state that "[p]erhaps, whether managers or subordinates are more or less authentic, depends more on the situation they find themselves in than who they are" (p. 9). You go on to observe that a "person who feels that his or her job is meaningless and is little valued in the organization and has limited

employment opportunities elsewhere and a family to support, may feel very little authenticity at work" (p. 9). We fully agree with these observations, but we also assert that there is ample evidence that some organizations purposefully, and often at the behest of their leaders, create cultures that encourage and facilitate authenticity among members. For example, Zappos describes one of their core values as "Create Fun and a Little Weirdness," and they further indicate that this is achieved through behaviors that have an authentic sense of self ("Zappos Insights," 2020). Thus, as we both recognize the importance of person-situation interactions to the attainment of authenticity, you view organizations as being composed of strong situations that provide limited opportunities for individuals to experience authenticity. In contrast, we contend that, given supportive contexts and a well-developed and strong commitment to an internalized moral perspective, leaders and followers will encounter situations where they experience feelings of authenticity in their work and ethical conduct.

1.4 Diverse methodologies would enhance findings in authentic leadership and leadership research more broadly.

In our opinion, much has been learned about *perceived* authentic leadership through the development and application of several survey measures of the construct, including the Authentic Leadership Questionnaire (Avolio et al., 2018; Walumbwa et al., 2008), Authentic Leadership Inventory (Neider & Schriesheim, 2011), and the Authentic Leadership Integrated Questionnaire (Levesque-Côté et al., 2018). From your Letter 2, it is apparent that you are highly suspect of such measures. In our Letter 1, we acknowledged the inherent shortcomings of survey measures of authentic leadership, pointing out that self-report measures may be impacted by social desirability and impression management motives, whereas other reports are limited because it is impossible for the respondent to fully access the leader's inner thoughts and feelings

to ascertain if he or she is being true to self. Still, evidence in support of the posited nomological network for authentic leadership suggests that these perceptual measures may serve as reasonable proxies for capturing perceived leader authenticity. Additionally there appears to be value in measuring perceptions of authenticity and authentic leadership, as these measures are associated with a host of variables of interest, including leader and follower well-being, interpersonal trust, identification, empowerment, engagement, organizational citizenship behaviors, and follower, leader, and organizational work performance (Gardner et al., 2011; Gill & Caza, 2018).

In searching for common ground, it is noteworthy that we agree that more diverse methodologies are required to better assess leader and follower authenticity. In recognition of this need, a recent Call for Papers from *The Leadership Quarterly* seeks to promote the development and use of alternative methodologies for studying leadership, including laboratory, field, and quasi-experimental methods, direct observational methods and real-time measures of behavior, neurophysiological measures, archival data, and randomized response protocols. The good news is that a review of the recent literature on authentic leadership (discussed in a subsequent section) suggests that there has been some movement in this direction. Nevertheless, these alternative methods were by far the exceptions, rather than the rule, and more progress in this direction is clearly required.

1.5 Some forms of leadership research are too often romanticized as a cure-all for
   organizational ills.

In both of our initial letters, we noted that leadership is too often romanticized by scholars and practitioners (Meindl, 1995), as is far too common in discussions of transformational, spiritual, servant, ethical and, yes, authentic leadership. We agree with you that there is a need for more nuanced theory and research that recognizes and examines more fully

the role of that the follower and contextual forces play in the social construction of leadership. We are hopeful that one outcome of your critique and our subsequent dialog will be a less romanticized and more realistic examination of the complexities involved in authentic leadership and followership, as well as leadership in general.

1.6 Moral perspectives in leadership should receive more attention in leadership research.

Although our letters reveal sharp differences in our perspectives on leader and follower authenticity, it is also apparent that we both see value in examining the role that ethics play in the practice of leadership.

1.7 Critiques and debate are important in academic research.

We are also in full agreement that constructive dialog among scholars with competing points of view is a natural and healthy element of scholarship that should be promoted within the field of leadership.

We are encouraged by the numerous areas of common ground noted above. From your original critique (Alvesson & Einola, 2019) to this exchange of letters, we all seem to have moved toward articulating a greater understanding of and direction for how the study of authenticity and authentic leadership theory can progress. Nonetheless, there are still several remaining points of disagreement that we discuss below.

2. Divergent Perspectives

2.1 Progression of authentic leadership research.

In our Letter 1, we made a case that authentic leadership theory was progressing through what Reichers and Schneider (1990) describe as a process whereby concepts advance in the organizational sciences. Specifically, we argued that authentic leadership research appears to be moving from the first stage, "concept introduction and elaboration," into the second stage,

"concept assessment and augmentation," where critical reviews, such as your own (Alvesson & Einola, 2019), emerge. You challenge this assertion:

> We are less convinced that there is much progression in the field and we do not consider that the movement is necessarily linear either. That there is a large amount of studies on a topic is not an irrefutable sign that a concept has reached maturity, but may only indicate conformity and the uncritical reproduction of assumptions" (Letter 2, p. 1).

We understand and appreciate the reasons for your skepticism, as there is a tendency for conceptual "fads" to emerge in the field leadership, which tend to linger, rather than progress.

In light of your alternative assessment of the stage of authentic leadership research, we decided to conduct a selective review of the published research to ascertain the extent to which progress is apparent. Doing so proved to be very productive and informative, as there has been much activity since the last comprehensive review nearly a decade ago (Gardner et al., 2011). Note that without conducting an exhaustive search, our literature review revealed 128 scholarly articles that have been published since 2010, which represents an increase over the 91 articles identified by Gardner et al. (2011). It's also been conducted using samples from a diversity of cultures (e.g., Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Peoples Republic of China, Germany, Greece, New Zealand, the Netherlands, Pakistan, Portugal, Serbia, Slovenia, and Taiwan), and across varied domains (e.g., business, education, medicine, military, politics, and sports). In addition, whereas survey research methods are most commonly employed, other methodologies are used, including laboratory (e.g., Braun & Nieberle, 2017; Braun & Peus, 2018; Cianci, Hannah, Roberts, & Tsakumis, 2014; Nichols & Erakovich, 2013; Randolph-Seng & Gardner, 2012; Steffens et al., 2016), field (Nübold, Van Quaquebeke, & Hülsheger, 2020; Oc, Daniels,

Diefendorff, Bashshur, & Greguras, 2019), and quasi-experiments (Baron, 2016), experience sampling (Fladerer & Braun, 2020; Weiss et al., 2018), diary studies (Yeung & Shen, 2019), qualitative methods (Kempster, Iszatt-White, & Brown, 2019; Legutko, 2020; Liu, Cutcher, & Grant, 2015, 2017; Nyberg & Sveningsson, 2014; Painter-Morland & Deslandes, 2017; Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2014; Stewart, Verbos, Birmingham, Black, & Gladstone, 2017), simulations (Baron & Parent, 2015; Sendjaya, Pekerti, Härtel, Hirst, & Butarbutar, 2016; Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2014) and meta-analyses (Banks et al., 2016; Hoch et al., 2018). To be clear, whereas most of this research is supportive of the self-based perspective of authentic leadership we endorse, some of it reflects alternative approaches (e.g., Kempster et al., 2019; Nyberg & Sveningsson, 2014; Painter-Morland & Deslandes, 2017). So, we agree that a large number of studies on a topic does not necessarily reflect concept maturation; however, to us, the study of authentic leadership across multiple methods, perspectives, and contexts, and the emergence of critical reviews (e.g., Algera & Lips-Wiersma, 2012; Alvesson & Einola, 2019; Diddams & Chang, 2012; Ford & Harding, 2011; Iszatt-White & Kempster, 2019; Sidani & Rowe, 2018), looks a lot like the stage two of "concept assessment and augmentation" described by Riechers and Scheider (1990).

 2.2 *Evidence of authentic leadership from practitioners.*

In Letter 2, you included a section titled, "Is authentic leadership proven by practitioners?" and a subsection titled "Authentic leadership does not 'exist' just because there are powerful stories by charismatic top executives others feel inspired by" (p. 2). We agree with you. In our Letter 1, we pointed to the stories presented by Bill George (George & Sims, 2007) in *True North* as examples of real leaders who experienced real struggles in their careers and were perceived by others to exemplify authentic leadership. However, as you point out, a

"successful business leader's post-hoc account of 'how they got there' explained through the lens of authenticity, does not amount to any evidence that there is a theoretical construct like authentic leadership at play" (p. 2). So, we agree that uncritical acceptance of the retrospective accounts of successful executives on the secrets to their success is not good science.

But the contributions of practitioner reflections, such as those provided in *True North,* to our understanding of leadership extend beyond the stories themselves. The reason why is that such insights can create the impetus for a research process that Andrew van de Ven (2007) describes as "engaged scholarship", in that they stimulate subsequent theory development and testing. Indeed, the inspiration for the decision of faculty and students at the University of Nebraska to embark in 2003 on a research program focused on authentic leadership arose from our direct interactions with leaders from the business, educational, medical, military, sports and other communities (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Gardner et al., 2005a). For many of these leaders, we were struck by what we came to recognize as their authenticity. As Shepherd and Suddaby (2017, p. 62) note when discussing engaged scholarship in their excellent review of the theory building process, "[c]ollaborating with practitioners provides the academic access to a different perspective as a basis for identifying complex real-world problems."

Whereas practitioner reflections on authentic leadership provided the inspiration for our research program, the evidence in support of the phenomenon is far more extensive. As we stated in Letter 1 and in the common ground section, we agree with you that survey measures of leadership have serious limitations. Nonetheless, evidence for the construct validity of survey measures of *perceived* authentic leadership, including the Authentic Leadership Questionnaire (ALQ: Avolio et al., 2018; Walumbwa et al., 2008), Authentic Leadership Inventory (ALI: Neider & Schriesheim, 2011), and the Authentic Leadership Integrated Questionnaire (AL-IQ:

Levesque-Côté et al., 2018) has accumulated (more on this in the next section). Indeed, at this point meta-analyses (Banks et al., 2016; Hoch et al., 2018) demonstrate that, despite some empirical redundancy of authentic leadership with other forms of leadership, including transformational, ethical and servant leadership, it still explains unique variance in key work outcomes, including group and organizational performance and organizational citizenship behaviors. Note too, that, given that authentic leadership is conceived as the "root construct" underlying other positive forms of leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005), it is not surprising that it correlates positively with these forms of leadership. Here, the basic argument is that transformational, and servant leadership will be enhanced when it is driven by authentic leader values and motives. Moreover, given an internalized moral perspective, one would expect leaders who strive for authenticity to uphold high ethical standards and practice servant leadership. Hence, the positive associations among these measures provide evidence of convergent validity.

Nevertheless, it is important to reiterate that evidence in support of the authentic leadership construct is not solely reliant on these survey measures. To the contrary, as previously noted, survey measures and alternative methods, including field surveys, laboratory, field, and quasi-experiments, experience sampling, simulations, diary studies, ethnographies, and content and discourse analyses, have been used in combination and separately to map out the nomological network for authentic leadership. Further, authentic leadership has been positively linked to desirable work outcomes including follower trust, leader and follower well-being, job satisfaction, employee voice, organizational commitment, work engagement, empowerment, organizational citizenship behavior, and employee, team, and organizational performance; it is negatively related to turnover intentions, antisocial behavior, and burnout (Gardner et al., 2011;

Gill & Caza, 2018). Support for posited mediators, including basic need satisfaction (Leroy et al., 2015), self-concordance (Hirst, Walumbwa, Aryee, Butarbutar, & Chen, 2016), and trust in the leader (Clapp-Smith, Vogelgesang, & Avey, 2009), as well as the moderating variables of ethical climate (Fladerer & Braun, 2020) and value congruence (Williams, Pillai, Deptula, & Lowe, 2012), has likewise been obtained. To summarize, emergent research mapping the nomological network has been largely consistent with the tenets of authentic leadership theory, providing evidence of construct validity.

In Letter 2, you state that "[m]any (most) people sincerely believe that they are highly authentic at work (for instance, all of our ten subjects studied in depth in Svengingsson and Alvesson [2016], but reality may be different in many cases)" (p. 12). This remark prompted us to read your book, *Managerial Lives: Leadership and Identity in an Imperfect World,* in which the research you describe is presented. We found this to be a very rewarding experience, as you provide a fascinating description and analysis of the work lives of the managers you studied. We were also struck, however, by what we perceive as the consistency of the quotations you present, as well as some of your own insights, with the central tenets of authentic leadership theory. For example, you state that the "man or woman does the job, rather than the other way around. It is their inner self, rather than expectations and demands or the need to think through their impression management carefully which is central. They stress that it is not possible to fake it or play a role as a manager" (pp. 144-145). Moreover, we found evidence that appears to us to support of the four-component model of authentic leadership, as comments made by you and the managers you studied align well with the definitions of leader self-awareness, balanced processing, relational transparency, and an internalized moral perspective, as illustrated in Table 2.

Now we recognize that you make a persuasive argument, both in your letter and in your book, that such remarks by leaders should be interpreted with caution. "You do not have to be a cynic to have some doubts about whether it can be such a good thing and so straightforward" (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016, p. 147). We also recognize that you have made a convincing case for applying a reflexive approach to interpreting interview data to yield more nuanced insights than can be gained by taking the respondents' words at face value (Alvesson, 2003). Nonetheless, all research methods have their limitations. Whereas the qualitative methods you employ provide a rich, insightful, and contextualized perspective on the lives and work of managers and leaders, they are also inherently subjective, by design. Moreover, your findings are based on a relatively small sample size, which raises concerns about generalizability. Indeed, it is worth noting that a qualitative study with such a small sample size would not be acceptable for publication in many peer-reviewed journals, including *The Leadership Quarterly,* as the following quotation makes clear.

> It is very important to first establish some sort of externally verifiable construct validity to ensure reproducibility and replicability, both with respect to using the submitted data, or analysis of data from similar settings….Thus, authors may wish to consider other journals that might be more suitable to modes of qualitative inquiry that do not meet the above standards, such as those reflecting a more critical, interpretivist, of discursive point of view." (Antonakis et al., 2019, p. 6)

Given the inherent subjectivity of your conclusion that inconsistencies between the leadership reflections offered by the managers and their subsequent remarks and behaviors draw their claims of authenticity into question, we suggest an alternative interpretation that we consider to be equally plausible. Revisiting our common ground agreement that no leader or follower is 100% authentic and that the extent to which one achieves authenticity depends on the situation, we propose that the inconsistencies you observed reflect this reality. This does not mean, however, that such leaders do not aspire to be authentic, find such strivings to be valuable in establishing trust with their followers, and realize tangible benefits for their own and followers' well-being and performance as a result. Thus, whereas we agree with you that accounts of authentic leadership made by practitioners, be they the leaders described in *True North* or *Managerial Lives,* should be critically examined, we don't think they should be discounted entirely, especially when triangulated with more rigorous evidence provided by multiple and complimentary researcher methods.

2.3 Validity of authentic leadership as a construct.

In Letter 2, you revisit a key point of your critique (Alvesson & Einola, 2019), by arguing that "the four constitutive elements of authentic leadership do not form a solid theoretical construct and a logical whole" (p. 7). You go on to argue that "[t]here are fundamental problems with what we call *amalgam thinking*…. A major problem of AL is the lumping together of quite different and probably unrelated qualities; these is no higher order factor causing them to covary" (p. 8). In Letter 1, we spelled out our arguments as to why the four components reflect complimentary dimensions of authentic leadership. Here, we elaborate on how the dimensions interact. Self-awareness provides the foundation for the other components. A leader who aspires to be authentic by living in accordance with core values and personal strengths, can hardly do so

if he or she is unaware of those values. Moreover, relational transparency with others, including existing or potential followers, requires self-knowledge about one's values, motives, strengths and weaknesses as a prerequisite for authentic self-disclosure. Balanced processing of ego-related information by a leader or follower is facilitated when he or she is aware of and owns personal strengths and limitations. And, of course, an internalized moral perspective requires knowledge of the values and principles one seeks to follow. Note, too, that balanced processing and relational transparency can enhance one's self-knowledge, demonstrating the interconnectedness of these components into a coherent whole.

Your argument "that there is no higher order factor" is also at odds with the conclusions of several studies that tested for such a model, although the research evidence is admittedly mixed (Avolio et al., 2018; Credé & Harms, 2015; Rego, Sousa, Marques, & e Cunha, 2012). Indeed, our review of the quantitative research on authentic leadership from the past decade identified 17 articles that presented confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) results for the reported measurement model that support the four-component model of authentic leadership as measured by either the ALQ or the ALI (e.g., Braun & Peus, 2018; Gill & Caza, 2018; Oc et al., 2019; Peus, Wesche, Streicher, Braun, & Frey, 2012). Additionally, 12 articles present CFA results for the ALQ or ALI that the authors interpret as providing reasonable, though not unambiguous, support for a higher order model (e.g., Avolio et al., 2018; Braun & Peus, 2018; Credé & Harms, 2015; Fladerer & Braun, 2020; Steffens et al., 2016; Weischer, Weibler, & Petersen, 2013). Thus, on the hand, there is conceptual and some statistical support for the four-component higher order model of authentic leadership. On the other hand, there is your opinion that "there is no higher order factor." Of course, you are certainly entitled to your opinion, yet it is nonetheless

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inconsistent with the much of the extant empirical evidence that has been vetted by the editors and reviewers of multiple peer-reviewed management journals.

2.4 Elitism and ethics in authentic leadership.

In Letter 2, you stated that "[m]uch leadership thinking by default assumes the superiority of leaders over followers" (p. 13) and you interpret our perspective on leadership as reflecting this assumption. You go on to ask a series of rhetorical questions, the implied answers to which affirm your conclusion that we too see authentic leaders as being inherently superior to followers. There is a lot to unpack in addressing your questions, and we welcome the opportunity to do so as we think our answers will show that some of our views on the relations among leaders and followers because they are manifest across situations are not so different from your own. For others, there is less agreement, but we see benefit in identifying where they diverge. As such, we present some of your questions below, with brief responses that we hope will clarify our thinking about authentic leadership and followership.

Question: "Does it have to be the leader who helps the follower see his or her positive and negative qualities – and not the other way around?" (Letter 2, p. 13)

Answer: The answer to your question is, no, it does not have to be the leader, and yes, followers may help leaders to see their positive and negative qualities. From the outset, we have argued for the development of an authentic leader-follower relationship (Gardner, Avolio, Luthans et al., 2005), whereby the leader and/or the follower may provide the impetus for greater transparency. Indeed, Hinojosa, McCauley, Randolph-Seng and Gardner (2014) explicitly discuss processes whereby followers may model authenticity in their relations with leaders, and when the leader is receptive to such influence, promote more authentic leader-follower relationships. It is also important to recognize that we see the roles of leader and follower as

fluid, with one party claiming and being granted a leader identity in some situations, and a follower identity in others, and the roles shifting back and forth depending on the parties' motives, expertise, and the context (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). So, it makes little sense to view one party as superior to the other, when both may assume leader and follower roles across situations. Finally, we subscribe to the views espoused in the emerging literature on followership, which stress the criticality of followers to the leadership process (Carsten, Uhl-Bien, West, Patera, & McGregor, 2010; Shamir, 2007; Uhl-Bien, Riggio, Lowe, & Carsten, 2014).

Question: "Do you really mean that this leadership theory is not for the average person, with some distance to optimal self-esteem and who perhaps at times conceals weaknesses for the benefit of smooth workplace relations and to retain employment or respect of others?" (Letter 2, p. 13)

Answer: Here again, the answer is, no, that is not what we mean. As we stressed in Letter 1 and our preceding discussion of our common ground, we view authentic leadership and followership as aspirational processes, whereby leaders and followers strive, with mixed levels of success depending on personal attributes and situational constraints, to follow their core values and play to their strengths. So, there is no reason why a person with less than optimal self-esteem cannot work to achieve greater authenticity.

We also think it is important to recognize that there are well-documented benefits of authenticity for both leaders and followers, as it is associated with higher levels of well-being, engagement, job satisfaction, and performance (Gardner et al., 2011; Gill & Caza, 2018). Here, the findings of a recent article by Gino, Sezer, and Huang (2020, p.

83) are particularly informative. They report the results of one pilot study, one field study, five online experiments, and two laboratory studies that compared what happens during first meetings (e.g., job interviews) to persons who cater to the interests and expectations of a target audience to make a good impression and secure a positive outcome (e.g., a job offer), rather behaving authentically. For instance, a field study in which entrepreneurs pitched ideas to potential investors revealed that "catering harmed investors' evaluations, while being authentic improved them." An online study showed that "[p]eople experienced greater anxiety and instrumentality when they cater to another person's preferences than when they behave authentically." Two lab experiments demonstrated that, "[c]ompared to behaving authentically or to a control condition, catering harms performance because trying to anticipate and fulfill others' preferences feels instrumental and increases anxiety." The point is that whereas we recognize there will be times when a leader or follower "conceals weaknesses for the benefit of smooth workplace relations and to retain employment or respect of others," the perceived benefits of such inauthentic conduct will often go unrealized, as she or he would have been better off acting authentically.

Question: "Does having a fragile self-esteem (and perhaps being aware of it and working on the problem) mean that authenticity is a no-possibility? Or maybe, after all, a person's capability to acknowledge his/her fragility is a sign of authenticity-work at play?" (Letter 2, p. 14)

Answer: Again, we adopt an aspirational perspective of authenticity and authentic leadership, so, the answer is, no, having fragile self-esteem does not preclude one from striving for and achieving authenticity. However, whereas authenticity involves "owning

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one's personal experiences, be they thoughts, emotions, needs, preferences, or beliefs, processes captured by the injunction to know 'oneself'" (Harter, 2002, p. 382), the self-esteem of a person who comes to know and accept him or herself would, by definition, no longer be fragile.

Question: "We are disturbed by the underlying thought implicit in your argument that authentic people are both a) privileged in the sense that their higher order needs are fulfilled, and b) morally superior and psychologically stronger than non-authentic ones. Are privileged people really morally better than less privileged ones?" (Letter 2, p. 15)

Answer: We are a bit puzzled by your question here. Note that a basic premise of self-determination theory is that *all of us* possess certain basic needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The theory goes on to posit, and substantial empirical evidence confirms, that people who succeed in fulfilling their basic needs experience higher levels of felt authenticity, vital engagement, and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Moreover, Leroy and colleagues (2015) found that followers predisposed to acting authentically who worked in a unit where the manager was rated as more versus less authentic experienced higher levels of basic need satisfaction and subsequent work role performance. So, to our minds, and consistent with the available evidence, fulfilling one's basic needs is a good thing. In a sense, one could look at such individuals as "privileged"; they are certainly fortunate. But we are not saying that they are inherently superior to other persons or that others could not likewise achieve such privilege by striving for authenticity within a context that supports their quest for basic need fulfillment.

With respect to your question, our answer is, yes, leaders and followers who experience "privilege" through basic needs satisfaction and the attainment of a relatively high level of authenticity are more likely to possess and pursue high standards of ethical conduct than those who do not. This assumption is apparent from the inclusion of an internalized moral perspective as a core component of authentic leadership and followership. It is also supported by empirical evidence that authentic leadership is associated with higher levels of moral reasoning (Sendjaya et al., 2016), behavioral integrity (Leroy, Palanski, & Simons, 2012), and ethical leadership (Hoch et al., 2018). And, we see nothing unusual or disturbing about this perspective, as we suspect most people would likewise perceive leaders and followers who try to do the right thing by aligning their actions with a set of deeply held ethical values as being morally superior to those who do not.

2.5 Difficulty of authentic leadership in practice.

As noted during our discussion of common ground, we agree with you that organizations can sometimes create strong situations that make it difficult for leaders and followers to achieve authenticity. However, we disagree about the pervasiveness of such constraints on authenticity, with you being relatively pessimistic and us being relatively optimistic in this regard. Your pessimism is apparent in the following remarks:

> Finding employment in an organization that is fully in harmony with one's own
> orientations is sometimes a possibility, but this is far from being realistic most of
> the time. In most organizations, there are people and groups with diverse values
> and principles, making authenticity-for-all impossible. A reasonable level of

harmony is facilitated by people refraining from too much authenticity and employees being rather relaxed about sticking to their ideals. (Letter 2, p. 10)

On this point, it appears that we will have to agree to disagree. Both of our perspectives have merit. There are certainly many examples of highly Machiavellian organizations (e.g., Enron) and situations (e.g., call centers where interactions with customers are highly scripted and geared towards extracting maximal revenue; Yagil & Medler-Liraz, 2013) where the attainment of authenticity is likely to be fleeting or futile. At the same time, a recent article by Fladerer and Braun (2020, p. 325) obtained evidence in two studies that principled "ethical organizational climates emerged as a contextual resource for authentic leadership." Here, we wish to re-emphasize Gino and colleagues' (2020, p. 83) conclusion that "refraining from too much authenticity" by catering to the expectations and interests of others "creates undesirable feelings of instrumentality for the caterer, increases anxiety, and ultimately hinders performance." To us, such evidence that an ethical organizational climate, when combined with a personal commitment to authenticity, can enable leaders and followers to be their best selves at work, justifies our optimism.

We have enjoyed this collaboration and appreciate your constructive participation in this exchange.

Sincerely,

Bill and Liz

Letter 4

Authentic leadership: The need for a reality check

by Katja Einola and Mats Alvesson

Dear Bill and Liz,

Much has been said in our exchange of letters about authentic leadership. We really appreciate your generous and friendly attitude and ability to take at times sharp views in a good spirit.

In Letter 3 you point at both common ground and divergent views – we find this exercise very valuable. We have realized that at times, when taking a closer look, we are not at all in disagreement but just express our thinking in different ways and use different vocabularies. Some of our contentions are trivial, bringing much needed nuance into our understandings. An example of this *nuancing* is the lively discussion we have had over multiple, situated and changing selves and the idea that authenticity is merely an aspirational goal, a moving target. There is no final destination or a fixed "state" for authenticity, calling for studies of people engaged in aspirations and struggles with authenticity – over time and in different situations. This would mean research on process rather than states or stable qualities. Another topic for nuancing is the discussion over practitioner experiences and to what extent people are able and willing to be their true selves at work – and with what consequences. We suggest that the inevitable answer to this question is: *it depends*! (on the company, the person, his or her role, position in the hierarchy, the situation, the nature of the issue at hand, the moment in time, the corporate culture, person-group value congruence, and so on).

The rest of our last letter will address the areas where we have to agree to disagree.

1. Authentic leadership theory – still a confusing package

One unresolvable problem is the combination of what for us are two distinct phenomena, authenticity *and* leadership in a package called authentic leadership theory. These two concepts point at two different directions: authenticity *inwards*, towards reflecting on and examining the self and leadership *outwards*, towards organizational goals and other-directed behavior. The way this theory is framed, still remains for us an incoherent concept intellectually, logically and theoretically speaking (and despite your changed definition of the term authentic leadership).

In particular, we think that the multiple, confusing, contradictory and mixed meanings given to the word authenticity is in itself an unresolvable problem making it difficult to restore 'authentic leadership' as a credible theoretical concept studied as part of an independent academic discipline, *leadership studies*. For sure, authenticity (the word) is sort of a victim of its own, spectacular popularity and the many meanings given to it historically. Based on our sensemaking at least, it is used to capture a millennial, almost spiritual quest to understand what it is to be human – but also to describe the way we portray ourselves (or not) in our selfies on Instagram. It is used in common language (as a synonym to genuine, honest or sincere), the field of psychology (with its well-anchored operationalization(s) as a self-measure and with individual level outcomes), philosophy (that in contrast establishes authenticity as unknowable, shifting and unmeasurable even from the inside of a person), literature (where characters who are depicted as authentic often struggle or get in trouble) and even religion (where heroes experiencing authentic faith are able to do great things). *Which* interpretation of authenticity do we mean when we talk about authentic leadership? In our readings of the body of literature on the topic, all these interpretations seem to be more or less present as in a mosaic but not as in a

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coherent whole. To us, the whole concept is just too confusing to qualify as a building block for a theory that has ambitions to be testable.

Then there are the engaging, autobiographical stories by senior leaders that we all like to pick up in the bookstore and read as a source of inspiration and that served, as we have understood, as a trigger to establish what become, right or wrong, a very prolific field of *authentic leadership theory*. We are astonished at the amount of references you have used in our exchange to strengthen your argument. We are skeptical of the implicit assumption that masses cannot be wrong – because they can. A telling example is transformational leadership, again and again 'proven' to be correct by very large number of researchers but now loosing much of its credibility (Van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013; Alvesson & Kärreman, 2016). We find there is an untraversable abyss between translating senior managers' talk on being authentic (no matter how skilled, successful, rich , highly ranked, good, genuine, sincere, ethical, law-abiding, charismatic, humble, moral, sincere, genuine, honest these individuals *really* are,) into a concept (or construct if you prefer) that we should qualify as being scientific or theoretically relevant. Besides, there are other dangers with only studying accounts of success when the aim of the study is to produce findings generalizable across populations—for instance the well-known selection bias problem (Denrell, 2005).

There are other problems that reflect a general problem in this theory: to use it seems that it all starts and ends with circular reasoning. For instance, you argue that "the self-esteem of a person who comes to know and accept him or herself would, by definition, no longer be fragile." (p. x). Once again, we see expressions of the assumption that good things go together, which we doubt that is always or even typically the case. A person may know but not necessarily accept him or herself. And perhaps you can accept that you are an alcoholic, workaholic, have mental

health problems or have failed in your career or family life and generally feel fragile and vulnerable. Why can't weak or vulnerable people be authentic? Why should self-awareness necessarily mean not being fragile? Surely fragility may be an outcome of, for instance, traumatic experiences and stress, and perhaps more so if you know yourself. One could actually argue that if you know and accept yourself, you realize that life is fragile – and so are you.

2. Measurement of (perceived) authenticity

For us, to study such a slippery and hard to grasp phenomenon as authenticity quantitatively is a futile exercise, in particular when assessed from the outside as 'perceptions of authenticity', and when applied to the field of leadership implying observable, behavioral and organizational outcomes. Perceptions of authenticity of a person one may know only superficially *together* with implicit measures (one remedy suggested in your letter 1) do not get anywhere near the phenomenon. How could we possibly implicitly measure something from the outside that we can only access as a perception to begin with? What would this measure be like? Here, unlike when assessing someone's racial prejudice, for instance, it is not so that an authenticity-assessed person is unable or unwilling to report on an attribute or disposition for a conscious or unconscious desire to present oneself in one way rather than another to the outside world. We maintain that authenticity by nature is private and intimate, something that requires self-reflection and introspection and the phenomenon can only be examined (not fully captured or measured) by the person him or herself. In this light, complementing surveys with, for instance, observation-based measures (e.g., Eden & Leviathan, 1975) is not helpful.

Also, how can we ever know that "authenticity" is the motor that is running in multidirectional, multiple and simultaneous leader/follower relations, in the mess of every-day organizational life, changing situations, contexts, audiences and constantly shifting and adjusting

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selves, all calling for different degrees of authenticity? This problem seems insurmountable to us, beyond the 'normal' challenges with factoring in all possible causes influencing or explaining leadership outcomes. Generally speaking, and from methods perspective, we find *The Leadership Quarterly*'s ongoing call for papers for its special issue *Beyond the ritualized use of questionnaires: Toward a science of actual behaviors and psychological states* (see Fischer, Hambrick, Sajons, & Van Quaquebeke, 2020) an interesting opening. However, no method improvement can address, in our view at least, the inherently immeasurable, fluctuating and unobservable nature of authenticity.

Moreover, "authentic" and "true to values" are common-language attributions we typically use when we think favorably of someone. The positive valuation is already in the description of authentic leadership and the outcomes or correlations are more or less given (Fischer & Dietz, 2020). And to what end would we even want to study *perceptions* one person has about another's authenticity when our field is about such things as using power, position and persuasion to influence others to get organizational tasks done? We are skeptical about a very strong reliance on psychology in leadership studies, which we think easily leads to reductionism. However, we did find the study by Gino and colleagues (2020) you referred us to very interesting to read. But here, the focus is the individual who takes part in an experiment, no other-direct behavioral or leadership outcomes are theorized, authenticity (the word) is used very broadly, sometimes using genuine and sincere as synonyms, and the studies rely on simple and superficial one-time self-assessments. However, we do agree here that self-assessments are the only possible way to access a person's authenticity.

Why not just use the concept as it is understood in psychology and not try to extend it to *also* include leadership outcomes by engaging in this peculiar theoretical piggybacking, so

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typical of leadership studies? Or why not embrace the significant body of knowledge left to us by influential (albeit dead) philosophers suggesting that authenticity represents an eternal quest that happens to a certain degree *inside* a person depending on that person's will and inclination to work with authenticity, but with no ambitions to making others go one's way or do what the organization mandates?

3.   What are social sciences about? different worldviews

We have examined the thought that perhaps our differences in part at least are due to the fact that we as researchers find ourselves in what some think of as opposite camps of the methods spectrum and study social life from different philosophical vantage points. The lenses through which we observe organizational phenomena are of different color, so to say. We are not against positivism, survey studies, or any other of the many methods, philosophical orientations and belief systems researchers rely on within social studies, but rather try to stand for intellectual and methodological pluralism. We need all the tools available to us researchers to reveal different aspects of our social world to us. Being open to difference, even if it may make us feel uncomfortable and insecure at times, can also enrich our own lives as researchers.

We just deplore what seems to us a wide-spread present-day unreflective use of methods in research, both qualitative and quantitative (our own research is of course an equally legitimate target of this critique). Often, we as researchers seem to be keener on publishing papers fast and citing others like us in our narrow research tribes, rather than getting to know a phenomenon out in the field, trying out different approaches, broadening our theoretical and methodological repertoires and genuinely engaging with our empirical domains to come up with new ideas and challenge the old ones. In the case of authentic leadership theory we took as an example, it is particularly the use of questionnaires and reliance on what seems to us poor research design that

is the problem, especially when making truth claims of objectivity, causality and generalizability. When following this and other similar recipes, much of the quantitative research that is published in leadership and management studies, even if using sophisticated methodologies, mathematical models and advanced statistical tools, risks being uninformative or misleading. Here, and without further commenting on a method we ourselves are not experts in, we concur with Antonakis and others who have repeatedly pointed out, for instance, at issues of bad research design and of an incorrect use of estimators (e.g., Antonakis, Bastardoz, & Rönkkö, 2019; Antonakis, Bendahan, Jacquart, & Lalive, 2010; Fischer, Dietz, & Antonakis, 2017) .

For us 'authenticity' together with 'leadership' is one of these impossible-to-model combinations. With an excessive focus on one research philosophy and method, so much wisdom and possibilities *to know* are inevitably left out. Social sciences cannot be like natural sciences and we just need to live with permanent ambiguity and uncertainty involved in studying human subjects and people in organizations. Some of the most influential theories within social sciences use metaphorical language, reflect imaginative ideas or even ideologies and may even become self-fulfilling prophecies. They do not even seek to establish themselves as replicas of a truth 'out there' like in the field of physics where newer, better theories replace the old ones once they are proven to be superior. We have yet to see proof for (or refutations of) Cohen, March and Olsen's garbage can model, Maslow's hierarchy of needs, Freud's structure of the mind or Smith's invisible hand. We do not bring these theories up here to discourage or disapprove of serious efforts to do better research, but rather as a motivator to try harder to use those methods we are experts in the best we can and to complement them with others, even experimental ones (like you suggest in letter 1). And perhaps, a call for more modesty and for being humbler with the truth claims we make is also in order.

In the particular case of authentic leadership, we suggest it is better to invest our efforts to either study something else that better lends itself to modelling and quantification, or to use close-up studies, direct observation in situ, repeat interviews (with leaders and followers) and qualitative approaches capable of grasping at least some of the situational contingencies and sensemaking individuals inevitably engage in when they face workplace authenticity dilemmas. The purpose here is to enhance understanding in the phenomenon rather than provide straight-forward generalizations. Here too, of course, new methods are needed.

4. Working differently with the empirical world

We were happy to learn that you took the trouble to read *Managerial Lives* (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016). Like you, we are in favor of working closely with practitioners. Here, we have to face the differences in the ways we engage with the empirical world, our material ('data') and methodologies we use. These differences are important because they inevitably lead to different readings of our research material and influence how we understand the phenomena we study. Whereas you use mainly surveys, seek generalizations and rely on deductive modes of inference (a way of working that is to our understanding at least currently being critiqued in this journal, please see Fischer et al., 2020), our empirical work is almost without exceptions qualitative and we like to work with different interpretations people have of their work environment. Instead of deduction we use abductive or inductive reasoning shifting between theory, our practical work experience and empirical observations in our fieldwork, and conduct interpretative studies, ethnographies, and critical studies. Sometimes we follow an unexpected clue we capture when we conduct our fieldwork. At times, this way of working leads us to conduct single case studies, where we may be able to reveal difficult to surface issues or ideas

not discoverable when conducting a research project that has been carefully modelled and planned ahead of time like in hypothesis testing.

True, our type of empirical research has not typically appeared on the pages of *The Leadership Quarterly* like you pointed out, and with time, even fewer such studies are being published in this journal that now demands that studies must be reproducible (from the same data) and replicable (in other contexts). It is not a universal truth about what studies are valuable or what methods are legitimate or capable of producing new insights. Ideas can surface from anywhere – but perhaps more likely so from experiments and in-depth exploratory studies than from survey projects based on extending existing theory, hypothesis testing and gap-filling. And as many voices that are getting louder each day are pointing out – organization studies is a field that is presently in a dire need of new ideas.

5. Supportive evidence?

Referring to your Table 2 (page x) where you have chosen excerpts from *Managerial Lives* to present what you call *supportive evidence* for the four components of authentic leadership, in three out of four we see something else. We just want to demonstrate here how differently we could go about reading the same data (although no real interpretation can be done based on analysis of random phrases by one respondent, taken out of their empirical contexts and featured in a book for another purpose). In the authentic leadership literature 'self-awareness' is key to authenticity. We too see at least an interest in 'self-awareness' in the quotation you have chosen from the book, "*The managers describe themselves here as managers who have reflected over themselves as managers and who act with honesty and integrity*".

Let us now consider what you call the leader quality 'balanced processing' in *"I don't have a problem changing my mind in the short term, I'm pretty fearless and I don't mind*

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admitting I've made a mistake. In that respect, I'm an easy person to deal with". We would

categorize this as a 'expressed capability to admit to making mistakes'. We have no idea whether

the person here processes ideas in his mind in a balanced (or unbiased) way or not. Either way,

we should aim to know the person better, talk to him in different points in time and also

interview/survey his subordinates and other colleagues to get confirmation for or against this

statement.

What you call 'relational transparency' in "*We can joke with each other. Leadership is

built on being able to stand by what you say, having principles and backing up your employees.*

If they've made a mistake, you sort it out, nice and calm, face to face. That builds trust, and it

takes a number of meetings to find the right way and know where you stand so they dare to open

up", we would categorize as an 'expressed interest in being fair and approachable'. To say

anything about relational transparency, we would also need to talk to the subordinates and do

more work to understand the person.

What you see as an 'internalized moral perspective' in "*What I say has to be based on*

what I really believe and not what I think is best in a particular situation. There are two things I

think I've learned: to act in a way which is not political and actually to have the courage to

stand up for what I really believe in. I don't shake in my shoes, I have the courage to stand up

for what I believe", we see as 'sense of integrity and courage'. We are uncomfortable with the

concept of 'internalized moral perspective', because most influential thinkers on authenticity

tend to consider authenticity as morally neutral. We are even unsure what internalized moral

perspective means (and what would be its antonym?) – or how we would fill in a Likert scale

question regarding the degree of internalization of *our* morality at work. In a professional context

assessing and qualifying whether we follow the good or the bad, the right or the wrong would be

difficult… most of our organizational life seems to evolve around compromises, adjustment and competing priorities. Moreover, the foundation for our morals develops in our childhood and is contingent on our socio-cultural environment, much less to be influenced during a leadership development course paid by our boss and commercialized by a business school. In brief, we would keep morality and ethics out of our study of authenticity and leave it all neutral – and acknowledge that it is up to the person to define his or her authenticity in a value neutral way. This does not mean we think morals, ethics or authenticity are not important in life or worthy topics to study– we are just keen on keeping them separate. There is enough complexity in 'authenticity' alone and we are worried about what sound eerily like faith-based normative undertones our organizational theories at times take, just like in authentic leadership.

Moreover, we are not certain that people at work can recognize, appreciate and assess in others what the leadership literature describes as components of authentic leadership: balanced processing, self-awareness, internalized moral perspective and relational transparency exhibited by an individual. By reading the excerpts in Table 2 and categorizing from bottom up inductively like we did as an example, we would not be able to say that being self-aware, fair, approachable, admitting to making mistakes and having courage and integrity would amount to *authentic leadership*. This is, however, something that you seem to have taken as a given based on your chosen reference for theoretical anchoring, an established line of research in the field of psychology that you extended to leadership studies. For us, this interdisciplinary 'jump' represents a leap of faith too large for us to believe in.

We believe that interpretation (by both the research subject and the researcher) cannot be removed from social studies -- it is there, more or less implicitly or explicitly, regardless of our method. Which questions do we choose to ask? Which method or combination of methods do we

decide to use? Which theory to explore or test? How does the respondent interpret the questions? Do the different respondents interpret our questions differently? What phenomenon do we choose to study? How do we interpret the answers -- or reactions? How do we apply the findings in another context...? This inevitable interpretation is generative and useful at best, but at worst it makes for a poor study and leads to misinformed real-life applications.

6. The importance of reality checks

Bill and Liz, you further cite *Managerial Lives* (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016) for saying that the "*man or woman does the job, rather than the other way around. It is their inner self, rather than expectations and demands or the need to think through their impression management carefully which is central. They stress that it is not possible to fake it or play a role as a manager*" (pp. 144-145). But this is how the subjects in the study describe themselves in an interview, possibly reflecting a dominant Western social myth. Self-serving bias, defense mechanisms, impression management and the general tendency that people follow social scripts when producing accounts (or filling in questionnaires) affect data. Close up studies over time – *Managerial Lives* also included several interviews with both managers and people around them and in some cases even observations – give a rather different impression. Here the complexities and imperfections of organizational life make it difficult for managers to live up to their espoused ideals and aspired identities. An overall finding is that people believe they are authentic, but their self-awareness, at least in the context of managerial positions, is often rather weak, and far from always confirmed by their subordinates or colleagues (or our field observations).

The following case of a CEO illustrates the problems of authenticity and leadership (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2016). The CEO emphasizes the importance of authenticity and claims a very high moral position:

"You have to be authentic in your management, or you won't be credible. You can't fake an interest in people because they'll see through you."

The subordinates far from always recognized this in the CEO's behavior. They thought he frequently adapted and subordinated himself to the interventions of the owners, seeing him as a yes-man. They also felt that he often gave praise to people without much thoughtfulness or distinction, doubting if his demonstrated appreciation was genuine. In this case all involved seemed to be positive about reliability and honesty as well as confirming others, but co-workers did not understand him to generally be or act in line with the former ideals. Another senior manager thought of herself as a leader and eager to work with cultural change and strategic issues, and had problems of adapting to requirements to work with administrative and operational tasks, feeling that being expected to be a "janitor" was out of tune with herself, creating great frustrations. A third felt that he was a coaching leader – not an authoritarian one – but his subordinates did not want coaching all the time but preferred clear answers and gradually found the coaching time-consuming, unclear and even manipulative, leading to a breakdown of trust. All other managers in the study faced broadly similar problems in functioning in line with the authentic leadership ideal. Reality checks in the form of in-depth understanding can be useful for nuancing and guiding further quantitative studies, and to take us where one-sided focusing on superficial measures, correlations and deduction cannot take us.

We must leave this discussion here, incomplete and inconclusive. Each method is imperfect in its own way – and there is both good and bad research using every method, most of our work

probably falling somewhere in between. Induction (starting from empirical raw data like we just did) and deduction (starting with existing theory like you did) work in different ways and give different end results. None of these methods we need to choose between is free from subjectivity and interpretations. It may be equally difficult to pass from general to particular than from particular to general. We need all the epistemological and methodological help and all the tools we can get to sort out what it is to be human.

We, researchers, following the pattern of our times, have a lamentable tendency to form sects and flocks of like-minded people. In all honesty, we are 'guilty' of this behavior, too. In fact, one personal decision this *exchange of letters* has triggered is to broaden our theoretical understanding by reading more broadly and to seek to participate in other exchanges like the one we have had here.

7. Where is the leadership in 'authentic leadership'?

Bill and Liz, there is not much distinctly about leadership in your *letters*, nor in the authentic leadership literature as a whole. We find it important to ask: why should the four components form a specific "it", not only to capture authenticity but also authentic *leadership*?

There are two problems: 1) to consider the "it" of authenticity as a package (style, type, form), and 2) to consider this "it" to be a central element in leadership. Close up studies tend to reveal that the "all the good things box"- thinking may be problematic. As some have pointed out, managers and entrepreneurs may feel that they are very authentic in some respects, but not in others. Studies indicate that leaders may claim to be themselves at work but do not have any specific ethical agenda (Eilam-Shamir & Shamir, 2013), that the relational transparency means the "setting up expectations of emotional behavior that are often incompatible with role performance" (Kempster et al., 2019, p. 333) or that producing one representation of self is often unrealistic and problematic,

given the dynamic and varied expectations and demands (Painter-Morland & Deslandes, 2017). The authentic leadership package then is an example of just lumping too much together.

Leaving the problem of the authenticity amalgam aside, we still have the issue of what has this concept to do with leadership. Can people not score high on some or all of the dimensions and *not* engage in leadership? Or followership for that matter? One could argue that the more focus there is on the authenticity stuff, the less focus there is on leadership. The attention is more on the self and less on the task and others. One could even say that leadership is about the partial suppression of authenticity ambitions, a strong focus on others and tasks, and even being aware of impressions and controlling one's image. Such a persona does not need to be pure fake and pretense, but includes a mix of "genuine" authenticity, false consciousness (e.g. people genuinely believing they are highly self-aware but not really knowing themselves that well at all), and impression management/role playing. Certainly, all people are into this, but more or less so. A person in a senior position needs to be more careful than most others and aware of how people perceive him or her in order to be effective. We do not really see what the *leadership* element is in all this discussion about authenticity.

Being leadership psychologists, we understand that you are inclined to place authenticity within the roles, identities and traits of people being either leaders or followers. You write that "*It is also important to recognize that we see the roles of leader and follower as fluid, with one party claiming and being granted a leader identity in some situations, and a follower identity in others, and the roles shifting back and forth depending on the parties' motives, expertise, and the context*." This inclination of leadership studies to place people as leaders or followers reminds us about The Good in the Western *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*. Here The Good, played by Clint Eastwood, wants to force his partner to do the hard work. "*There are two kinds of people,*

people holding a loaded gun and people that dig. You dig!" So true that under specific

circumstances people lead or follow, but often they do not, and rather do other things instead,

including engaging in horizontal or equal interactions.

People may be genuine in their roles and act "authentically" as employees, professionals,

organizational citizens, team members, colleagues or whatever. Life is a mix of pretense, role

playing, constraints, following policies and instructions, and so on. Organizational cultures tend

to prescribe ways of being or acting. Senior people may be more influential, but much

authenticity is not necessarily an outcome of leader or follower positioning. It is rather a matter

of general orientation, interpersonal relations and cultural norms. Authenticity issues – self-

awareness, feedback, morality, and so forth – should perhaps not be plugged primarily into

leader-follower roles. We may be more or less authentic at work, but not primarily as leaders and

followers. Most people are probably most authentic outside these roles or positions.

One cannot influence people directly through being self-aware, aiming for balanced

processing, and other ego-focused activities. Leadership is not so much about the manager's (or

informal leader's) self, it is about subordinates and tasks: what to do, how to understand tasks,

how to understand other people and be effective in influencing them. Of course, self-awareness

and being perceived as authentic is a plus – in the same way as being perceived as intelligent,

knowledgeable, hardworking, fair, committed, nice, good-looking, having humor, being

interested in others (more than self!). But authenticity cannot be *the* major element in this

influencing.

8. About Zappos, Pepsodent and selfies

For any person phenomenologically interested in authenticity, just observing the news

feed is painful. This morning we saw a commercial where a famous singer explained how he

finally could express his authenticity with his *Pepsodent* smile. On LinkedIn, a successful career woman showed the world her profile picture *before* (photoshopped, glossy) and *after* (natural, without filters) she changed her look, inspired by what she called principles of *authentic leadership*. This type of examples of non-authenticity the purpose of which is to show off, look good, to boost one's self-image and impress the world keep on coming in.

Whereas we all agree that 'authenticity' in one sense or another, is laudable – it is actually defined in such a way that it is difficult to argue otherwise – and that some organizations and jobs may create difficulties for people being much into authenticity, you indicate that this is the (rare?) exception. You suggest that "there is ample evidence that some organizations purposefully, and often at the behest of their leaders, create cultures that encourage and facilitate authenticity among members". You then referred us to Zappos as a company promoting authenticity of its employees. We went to their website and indeed, they like their employees to exhibit *little weirdness* – but not too much! Apart from being suitably weird, they also have other nine *rules*. This is an expression of corporate culture that guides recruitment (to find the right profiles) and aims at regulating employee behavior. If you are not suitably weird – you are not welcome. This is yet another example of anti-authenticity. The company prescribed a template – and is likely to influence people to try to form themselves accordingly. This is similar to *authentic leadership theory*, likely to function as a standard that may encourage leader-wannabees to try to mold themselves into fitting it, making the (in-)authenticity issue that inevitably follows paradoxical and problematic.

Another illustration, problematizing the Zappos example, is a case of a call centre where managers tried to create a positive, playful climate with the 3F slogan*: focus, fun, fulfilment*. The expectation was that "*young people find our culture very, very attractive, because they can just*

be themselves" (Fleming, 2005, p. 1478). This seems very close to Zappos' ideal of having fun and being weird and framing this type of culture in positive ways from the outset. However, many subordinates in this company felt uncomfortable with a kind of 'enforced authenticity', for example when they were asked to come to work dressed as their childhood favorites. They did not want to be treated like children expected to play and did not like to be encouraged to participate in what they saw as a workplace turned into a kindergarten (Fleming, 2005).

An organization genuinely promoting authenticity in people would do it on the terms of each and every employee—and thus be extremely diversity friendly, tolerant and de-centralized. There are some for sure – but they are definitely not many and not the ones in the main stream. To be of 'leadership material' in the 21st century organizations, seems to require more chameleon-like qualities than a strong and fixed set of values and principles. Processing of ego relevant information in order to maximize impression management, including how to appear to be 'authentic' in the prescribed way, seems beneficial. A problem with authenticity as an aspirational goal is that it competes with other ideals and aspirations, including *not* to insist on being true to one's self but to work with multiple selves, cultivate situational sensitivity and develop revised selves with new jobs, social contexts and relations over time.

Interested people (including those in managerial or leadership roles) could improve their self-awareness (and perhaps indirectly actions) by reflecting on their own, very intimate states and processes of authenticity – but as an exercise of guided or independent self-development, not with the primary intention to help them advance their careers and lead the troops to a certain organizational goal.

9. Summary

We appreciate all efforts to improve workplace relations and organizational functioning and find authenticity to be a relevant topic. But we do need to resist the 'all the good things in one box'- thinking (Einola & Alvesson, 2019). Much work within authentic leadership seems to be stuck in this mode of thinking. We find it problematic to lump so much into authenticity, to link this with leadership, and to then too easily 'prove' all the good effects. We agree that whereas some degree of even perceived authenticity is often welcome, there are plenty of competing moderators or ideals and norms pointing in other directions, like being diplomatic, flexible and holding back strong opinions. Protecting selves through some social distance and role-acting – curbing too much authenticity – may also be important for avoiding vulnerability and to enable coping (Sennett, 1977). There is a risk of yet another ideological, romantic version of the good leadership leading to all the good outcomes -myth being cemented, making leadership studies a nice source of wishful thinking, but not particularly useful for people wanting valuable knowledge and intellectual inspiration for dealing with managerial lives and organizational reality.

Personally, we have learned a lot during our exchange of letters and read studies we would have never read if not for your recommendations. Most important for us is the discussion. We cherish the process over the result, the debate itself over the outcome. Breaking our ideological bubbles, looking beyond our sects of like-minded researchers for knowledge and ideas would help us take a huge leap forward if what we all genuinely want is to enhance our personal knowledge and collective understanding of this hugely influential topic of leadership.

We fully agree that more genuine, sincere, authentic, true-to-themselves and ethically behaving leaders, followers, managers, subordinates and human beings in general are badly

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needed. But we cannot accept *authentic leadership* as a formal *theory* in its current framing. We suggest that we, the students of leadership, go back to our collective, metaphorical drawing tables.

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Table 1
Common Ground in the Conversation on Authentic Leadership

Topic	Gardner & Karam	Alvesson & Einola
Authenticity		
Authenticity is an aspirational goal, rather than a fixed state	• "Authenticity is not an either/or condition, i.e., people are neither completely authentic or inauthentic. Instead, individuals are best described as being more or less authentic or inauthentic" (quotation from Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, et al., 2005, p. 345). • "[T]here is no reason why persons who occupy leader and follower roles cannot and should not strive to act in ways that reflect their core values and identities" (p. 4).	• "[A]uthenticity is not an either/or condition, but rather something people are *more* or *less* at any given point and in different situations. For us, authenticity, if we should use the term, is a matter of self-awareness, self-development and an inner, almost spiritual quest some people, leaders or not, may choose to engage in" (p. 5)
Individuals possess multiple selves that are integrated into a self-system; contextual factors invoke the "situated self"	• "[C]urrent conceptions of the self (Leary & Tangney, 2012), view it as a multi-faceted and dynamic cognitive system that encompasses a host of schemata to encode and store self-relevant information, as opposed to a singular and static entity... these integrated self-systems typically include job-related identities, such as leader and follower, that may be claimed by and/or granted during social interactions" (p. 10)	"But both situations and selves are perhaps better understood as much more dynamic and varying. Self is not fixed but processed in non-stable situations. During a work week a repertoire of different versions of the 'self' may appear in the life of a specific manager: from professional (e.g., engineer), manager, subordinate, colleague, disciplinarian, bureaucratic policy-follower, therapeutic supporter, male, sexual being, Muslim, and so forth. With different people, themes, situations and relations there may be different selves" (p. 9).
Individuals are more or less authentic across time and within different contexts	• "[T]here may at times be tensions between job-based roles and authentic self-systems of leaders and followers" (p. 3) • "Competing values among leaders and followers pose a challenge to attainment of authenticity for both parties, particularly in light of power dynamics" (p. 5).	• "We need to consider authenticity themes in a processual and context-sensitive way" (p. 5). • "There may be 'integrated self-systems' – or less integrated, even conflicting or fragmented modes of being, e.g., when a middle manager meets subordinates, superiors, and key clients, when she enacts policies and is expected to show empathy. Self should perhaps be seen as a process rather than a fixed entity" (p. 9).

Topic	Gardner & Karam	Alvesson & Einola
Authentic Leadership Nuanced research questions and alternate methodologies would enhance the findings in authentic leadership	• "[W]e see no reason why the difficulty involved in operationalizing the constructs of authenticity and authentic leadership should lesson the need to theorize about and study these constructs any more than other core constructs in our field" (p. 7). • "We also see promise in alternative approaches to operationalizing authentic leadership" (p.15).	• "A more balanced use of multiple epistemologies and research methods, including mixed methods, ethnographic work, experiments, in-depth interpretative and critical studies *alongside* with, or instead of, survey studies, would make for a much more vibrant and inclusive field" (p. 12).
Leadership Theories (broadly) Some forms of leadership research are romanticized as a cure-all	• "We fully agree that authentic leadership, like many other forms of leadership (e.g., charismatic, transformational) is too often romanticized by both its scholarly and practitioner proponents as a cure-all for organizational ills that underestimates the role of situational contingencies" (p. 7).	• "Greater emphasis should be on examining actual work and relations between leaders and followers" (p. 3)
Moral perspectives in leadership should receive more attention	• "Efforts to develop leaders would be incomplete if they do not produce increased awareness of, and attention to, the ethical responsibilities associated with the leader role" (p. 13).	• "Ethics is important to examine but can be very complicated in practice" (p. 16).
General Critiques and debate are important in scholarship	• "Dialogue as healthy for the theory's advancement, as well as leadership studies in general" (p. 1).	• "This type of debate should be a natural part of academic life – but it seldom is. Critical scrutiny and debate are crucial for creating new ideas, for screening out bad ones, and sharpening our sensitivities" (p. 1).

Table 2

Evidence of authentic leadership components from Sveningsson and Alvesson (2016)

Authentic Leadership Component	Component Definition	Supportive Evidence
Self-awareness	A leader's understanding of how she or he derives meaning from the world, and how this process of meaning-making influences her or his perspective of the self in relation to the world over time.	"The managers describe themselves here as managers who have reflected over themselves as managers and who act with honesty and integrity" (Svengsson & Alvesson, 2016; p. 146).
Balanced processing	The evaluation of ego-relevant information, whether positive or negative, in a relatively unbiased manner.	"I don't have a problem changing my mind in the short term, I'm pretty fearless and I don't mind admitting I've made a mistake. In that respect, I'm an easy person to deal with" (Comments by Gary Gardener, Department Manager, Advanced Technology, Ltd; p. 143)[1]
Relational transparency	The sharing of a leader's genuine thoughts and feelings openly with close others, while maintaining dignity appropriate to the context and workplace.	"We can joke with each other. Leadership is built on being able to stand by what you say, having principles and backing up your employees. If they've made a mistake, you sort it out, nice and calm, face to face. That builds trust, and it takes a number of meetings to find the right way and know where you stand so they dare to open up" (Comments by Benjamin Book, CEO Big Publishers Inc.; p. 145).
Internalized moral perspective	A leader's demonstration of commitment through words and deeds to core values, principles, and standards as a matter of personal choice.	"What I say has to be based on what I really believe and not what I think is best in a particular situation. There are two things I think I've learned: to act in a way which is not political and actually to have the courage to stand up for what I really believe in. I don't shake in my shoes, I have the courage to stand up for what I believe" (Comments of Carol Courage, R&D Department Manager, Global Pharmaceuticals Ltd; p. 152).

[1]The manager's names and those of the companies they work were changed to disguise their identities.