

Enhancing Authentic Leadership to Address Organizational Challenges in Church Settings

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Abstract: Authentic leadership is a leadership approach characterized by four core values which are transparency, internalized moral perspectives, balanced relationship, and self-awareness. The 21st century world is yearning for such leaders who can straighten the moral compass in both the Church setting and in the secular world although such leaders are not easy to find because of the world's influence, human imperfection, and competitive environments. This paper describes and discusses how the approach is defined by different scholars, the benefits gained from exercising authentic leadership, obstacles to obtaining it, and ways by which authenticity can be enhanced. Lack of authentic leadership has proved to cause poor interpersonal relations, employee dissatisfaction, corruption, and organization ineffectiveness. Authentic leadership is expected to contribute effectively to one's leadership performance. A special emphasis in this paper is given on how authentic leadership applies to the Church settings.

Keywords: *Authentic leadership, moral compass, job satisfaction, self-awareness, Church settings, Christian perspective*

Introduction

Authentic leadership (AL) is a perspective which is highly on demand today, both in the corporate world and in non-profit organizations, including the Church settings. Those who lead with this approach are described by Hu et al. (2018) as people who are "self-confident, hopeful, optimistic, flexible, honest, and have a correct understanding of themselves" (p. 5). These are leadership qualities that can contribute positively

to an organization's performance whether it is in the private or public sector. According to Wulffers (2016), these leadership qualities are necessary especially in this world of complexity and much uncertainty. People's focus is now being directed on the search for leaders who are genuine, original, and who can be trusted (Laguna et al., 2019); that is, leaders who are authentic. With a closer look at these AL characteristics, one can discover that these are requirements and standards for any true Christian leader (Puls et al., 2014). Although, humanly speaking, they are not easy character qualities to possess and maintain. They are indeed an organizational challenge even in the Church setting because literature has shown that lack of authenticity tends to lead to poor interpersonal relationship, employee dissatisfaction, corruption, organization ineffectiveness, and members' lapse in church settings (Choe, 2012; Hannah et al., 2014; Kim, 2018)

Over the generations, authenticity has been expected in Church leadership settings. Church leaders like pastors, administrators, church elders, treasurers, and departmental directors at all church organization levels, are supposed to demonstrate integrity, transparency, honesty, and unquestionable character in their dealings as servants of God, based on how God Himself defines leadership (Downe et al., 2016). This is one of the distinctive characteristics of a Christian leader as opposed to a secular one. Unfortunately, leaders too are humans who are not automatically immune to the influence of this world. As a result, it is still possible to find corrupt, unreliable, selfish, and ingenuine leaders because of the influence of this sinful world. This condition is detrimental to the well-being of the Church and its role in the society as the light and salt of the world (New King James Version, 1982, Matt. 5:13-16). The purpose of this paper is to explore what authentic leadership truly is and to

discuss ways that may enhance authenticity in the Church leadership setting in order to contribute to the Church's effectiveness.

Furthermore, finding ways of enhancing authentic Church leadership may contribute to effective organizational leadership in the sense that it can help Church leaders to focus on mission, minimize negative Church politics, and have the courage to correct whenever wrong is done. When the Church has authentic leaders, many conflicts can be prevented or more effectively resolved. Additionally, the Gospel message to the world can be more effective because the messengers will be living the message which they are preaching—a component that wins people's trust in return (Howieson & Hodges, 2016). Once the hearers trust the messengers, they can therefore accept the Gospel message.

Finally, when our work on earth is ended, every church leader will desire to hear these words, "Well done good and faithful servant; you have been faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your Master's happiness!" (New International Version, 1982, Matt. 25:23). This can be a reality if only these leaders are authentic because they are true to their duty. Authentic leadership can help leaders become faithful servants. Addressing AL is today's urgent need particularly for both the Church and the society at large.

Authentic Leadership Defined

Throughout the ages, leadership has been a challenge to define and to venture in (Northouse, 2015). It is even more difficult because leadership is a complex concept which does not have a commonly agreed upon or straightforward definition (Adepoju, 2020; Einola & Alvesson, 2021). AL is also regarded as complex because it has some similarities with other relational leadership theories like transformational leadership (Johnson, 2019). This section attempts to present how some of the existing literature and different scholars define authentic leadership.

Academic and Biblical Worldviews of Authentic Leadership

While there are many definitions of AL today, one of the commonly accepted ones is that of Walumbwa et al. (2008) who defined AL as:

A pattern of leader behavior that draws upon and promotes both positive psychological capacities and a positive ethical climate, to foster greater self-awareness, an internalized moral perspective, balanced processing of information, and relational transparency on the part of leaders working with followers, fostering positive self-development. (p. 94)

This definition encompasses four critical elements recognized in the academic world—"self-awareness, internalized moral perspective, relational transparency and balanced processing" (Crawford et al., 2020, p. 116). An authentic leader monitors himself or herself internally to transform intentionally his or her followers for the purpose of the organization's sustainable performance. As the employees grow personally and professionally, they develop their organizational identification which in turn contributes significantly to the advancement of the mission of the organization.

In the academic world, AL is one of the contemporary theories of leadership which was first discussed in the 1960s (Johnson, 2019) and fully emerged in early 2000s as a combination of ethical leadership and other theories that are geared towards effective leadership (Wilson, 2018). Its intention was to fill the vacuum left by other leadership theories (Adepoju, 2020) as corruption and other unethical practices became a great burden of leadership (Johnson, 2019) in those days. Since then, it has received a lot of attention from different academic researchers and has been perceived as a positive type of leadership (Černe et al., 2013). AL does not focus on followers; rather, it focuses on leadership and how a leader relates with followers. Contrary to other leadership theories, AL does not end with how simply a leader does things or he/she pseudo-appears. It is about his or her being—who he or she really is (McDonald, 2019; Schuyler et al., 2014).

As Einola and Alvesson (2021) put it, AL stands as a combination of two phenomena which

are *authentic*—encouraging individual leader to examine him or herself—and *leadership* whose focus is on the individual’s outside environment, geared to influencing others. This means before a leader takes a move towards influencing others, he or she should be first well acquainted with him or herself in terms of strength, weaknesses, motives, and purpose. According to Howieson and Hodges (2016), various scholars may define AL differently but the core values like self-awareness, optimism, fairness, transparency, internalized moral perspectives, and consistence remain the same.

Copeland (2016) viewed authentic leaders as “those who had a deep sense of purpose, possessed ethical and solid values, understood their purpose, lead with their hearts, established connected relationships and demonstrated self-restraint and discipline” (p. 81). Wulffers (2016) adds that “Authentic leaders are experienced by their followers as true and natural leaders who have integrity, and who are ethical and trustworthy. They become empowering role models to followers as they lead in a manner that others recognize as authentic” (p. 200). In their research, Crawford et al. (2020) and Fusco (2018) concluded that AL can be identified through four behaviors which are self-awareness, transparency in relationships, internalized moral perspective, and balanced processing. McDonald (2019) takes it further by suggesting that no leadership style can avoid authenticity and expect any success. Each leadership style must involve the leader being true to his or herself and leading others with genuine authenticity. According to these definitions, one would say that a leader’s positive influence is expected to be an outcome of how real or authentic he or she is.

From the biblical worldview, AL is an old approach because God’s standard for leadership has always required uprightness of character (New King James version, 1982, Job 1:1; 1Tim. 3:2; Titus 2:6-8). Even when Adam and Eve sinned, nothing could stand to compromise God’s standards. From the biblical perspective, being inauthentic is regarded as doing wrong, and when it comes to wrongdoing before the eyes of God, the Bible clearly calls it *sin* (McDonald, 2019). According to the Bible, sin is lawlessness (New International version, 1984,

1 John 3:4). According to McDonald (2019), Jesus is regarded by Christians as the greatest authentic leader who has ever lived on this earth because He lived a flawless life, and He is the solution to the sin problem. Jesus was self-aware and true to Himself, a man of integrity who did not do things for the sake of status or recognition (Adepoju, 2020). Christ was regarded as a true representation of God’s required standards of leadership (New King James Version, John 8:28-29) and always wanted the good of all His followers. He intentionally empowered them for positive transformation.

From the Christian perspective, leadership is a service to mankind which is automatically translated as a service to God (New King James Version, 1982, Matt. 25:40). Being a Christian leader is more than just a position or prestige (Choe, 2012). Christian authentic leaders know that they are first accountable to God and seek to please Him before seeking to please human supervisors or followers. Such a leadership mindset is one of the best ways to worship the Creator and recognize His rulership (New King James Version, 1982, Colossians 3:23). God’s standard of leadership demands authenticity because He is perfect, holy, just, loving, and true. In this perspective, leadership becomes a platform of a Christian leader to express their faith in God and AL must be connected with biblical/ Christian values, moral and ethical principles. Thus, authenticity puts a leader in a better position of influencing others on being better citizens on earth and in God’s kingdom.

Positive Effects of Authentic Leadership

Discussing the positive impact of AL is trying to answer the question why it is necessary to promote AL especially in the Church setting. A very important question to be asked would be if AL does really make any difference. This section addresses these questions.

Increase in Productivity and Job Satisfaction

The difference between an effective organization and ineffective one lies to some extent in its leadership. Rahimnia and Sharifirad (2014) investigated the relationship between AL and employee well-being. The study

revealed that AL enhanced job satisfaction and stress reduction. Černe et al. (2013) assert that “authentic leaders raise authentic harmonic personalities in the followers, allowing the followers to satisfy their own needs, and develop and reach their own distinctive goals” (p. 457). In such a working environment, job satisfaction and high productivity are evident. Copeland (2016) agrees that when leaders are authentic, they tend to lead their organization successfully. Increased productivity and job satisfaction are desired in any organization and any leadership.

Inspiration for the Follower’s Positivity, Commitment, and Creativity

When leaders exercise authenticity, their positive attitude becomes contagious to their followers (Wilson, 2018). Positive psychology is characterized by hope, trust, optimism, openness to risks, flexibility, and resilience (Miller, 2013; Puls et al., 2014). In their study, Mubarak and Noor (2018) found that employees who work under authentic leaders tend to be creative in their work due to psychological empowerment and work engagement that they receive from their leaders. The suggestion from this study implies that AL has a significant effect on employee creativity. In the presence of employee creativity, one can expect organizational success. Authentic leaders inspire others to be good like them. They instill commitment, transparency, trust, job satisfaction, efficiency, and effectiveness (Wulffers, 2017) as a result of proactive behaviors that these leaders display (Hu et al., 2018). According to Wilson (2018), AL contributes to the overall organizational transformation due to leader’s and follower’s attributes of self-awareness and transparency. Fusco (2018) believes that AL has proved to produce competent, confident, and congruent leaders.

Authentic Leadership as a Society Game Changer

Someone would dare to say that the more authentic leaders there are in the society, the more positive difference they will make in that society. In the world, which is threatened by moral decay and distorted values even within the Church, authentic leaders who can straighten the moral compass are greatly needed. Those men and

women who can “stand for the right though the heavens fall” (White, 1903, p. 57) are becoming more and more scarce and thus highly in demand today. AL comes as a result of having authentic individuals. If such men and women exist in the Church, then the Church will be true salt and light to the world (New King James version, 1982, Mathew 5:13-16). Though not easy, the church’s mission to the world will be accomplished because those who normally question the lip-service messages will not be able to question the life lived. This is because authentic leaders do not just talk the talk, but they also walk the walk.

Effects of Inauthentic Leadership

Inauthentic leadership has several negative effects, which may include producing inauthentic followers and causing threat to employee retention. Additionally, it may lead to paralyzing the mission of the Church to the world.

Inauthentic Followership as a Result of Inauthentic Leadership

Although AL does not necessarily guarantee authentic followers, this type of leadership tends to produce good leaders just as ethical and good leaders produce good and ethical followers. In the absence of AL, one can expect the opposite outcomes. Normally, leaders desire to have employees who are morally upright, but studies show that it is impossible for any leader to promote moral uprightness, unless he or she possess a high level of moral character (Hannah et al., 2014). This means that inauthentic leaders tend to produce immoral, inauthentic, and sometimes corrupt followers. In such environment, there is no employee satisfaction; instead, individuals suffer from stress, conflicts, depression, fear, and other similar negative effects (Kim, 2018). In such a climate, employees do their work just for their own professional and financial survival, but their commitment is most likely negatively affected. They are inauthentic followers. Such inauthentic employees are quite likely to leave the organization as soon as a new opportunity shows up because they do not have the feeling of belongingness.

Inauthentic Leadership as a Threat to Membership Retention

In the Church setting, members especially new converts, leave the Church because of various reasons, one of them being leadership challenges (Choe, 2012). Some of the leadership challenges may include members being disappointed by leaders who promote behaviors they do not possess. In the presence of unethical and ingenuine leadership, Church members may lose trust and spiritual infants are misled because they are tempted to emulate what leaders do. Some new converts doubt their faith wondering if the leader cannot do what he or she speaks, maybe what they once believed in is not worth following. This lack of trust may lead to conflicts, insecurity, frustration, negative Church politics, enmity, and ineffectiveness.

Inauthentic Leadership as a Threat to the Church's Mission to the World

According to Miller (2013), the Christian perspective demands leadership at any level to be morally sound and ethical to achieve any success in influencing the globe according to the command of (New King James Version, 1982, Mathew 28:19-20) and what other authors affirm (e.g., Friedman & Friedman, 2019). Leaders' spiritual discipline is required before they can go to the world. When this is missing, the Gospel can lose its power. It is for that reason that White (1948) admonishes leaders to preserve integrity at all costs, stating that, "In our business connection with the work of God...Honor, integrity, and truth must be preserved at any cost to self" (p. 447). If the Church had authentic leaders and authentic members, so much can be accomplished because everyone would be true to the mission, and everyone would live a truthful life. Various kings of Israel and Juda such as Solomon, David Jeroboam, Hezekiah, and Saul is an example of how followers tend to step with the leader when they turned toward God. God brought His favor and blessings to the entire nation but when they had moral failure, they affected followers, brought calamity, and jeopardized God's mission (Friedman & Friedman, 2019; Ko, 2018). Likewise, if leadership is morally upright there is a higher likelihood that every office, home,

neighborhood, business, and church would be a platform to advance God's kingdom.

Obstacles to Authentic Leadership

Every good thing in this world experiences obstacles that stand in the way of its success. Obstacles that hinder authenticity in a leader have both internal and external factors. The external source is the world's influence and competing environment. The internal source lies within the leaders themselves as humans who are fallible and far from being perfect. This section discusses both external and internal factors that are obstacles to AL.

World's Influence

In this generation and world of competing values, many things are changing and have changed. It is a world where moral decay, individualism, materialism, secularism, and social expectations get in the way of how Christian's perceive God's voice. Amidst all this chaos, it has become difficult for the Church to have confidence and to raise its voice against what is endangering the mission of the Church (Dodds & Davies, 2011). Apostle Paul admonishes the Church not to conform to the pattern of this world (New International Version, 1982, Rom. 12:2). On the contrary, this is exactly what is happening, and authentic leaders have become victims of all different types of compromising practices. While leadership is a capacity to influence, on the other hand, the everchanging world seems to influence leaders as well. While the power of God is greater, it is obvious that the evil one exerts constantly his influence on the world.

Human Imperfection

Leaders are human, and humans are far from being perfect (New International Version, 1984, Rom. 3:23). This means that leaders too can fall and experience different struggles with authenticity. They can also be stressed and discouraged in difficult times. As they sail on their leadership journey, their moral stamina can be shaken. No wonder Christians are admonished to have God as their anchor and standard of moral excellency. They should strive to emulate Jesus because He alone is perfect in order for them

to invite others to emulate them as the Apostle Paul did (New King James Version, 1982, Heb. 6:19; Matt. 5:48; 2 Tim. 3:16-17; 1 Cor 11:1). Uprightness of character is God's invention and not a human's might.

Competitive Environment

Due to unhealthy competitions that surround leaders and their working environment, leaders may engage in such competitions to the extent of compromising their moral ethics for the purpose of winning. In other words, one would say that, in the process of leaders striving to search for excellency, they are caught amid worldly means for success which most often are crooked ways. One way of reducing such kind of competitions would be to create a room for healthy competitions which are beneficial to both employees and the organization because such competition promotes high performance. Examples of creating health competitions would be like giving specific rewards, equal treatments of employees, transparent evaluation process etc. (Forbes, n. d). As long as Christian leaders remember who they serve, they need no negative competition because it is not them leading but God leading through them.

Fostering Authenticity in Church Leadership

One of the world's important challenges is not the lack of skilled leaders, but rather a lack of authenticity in their leadership practice. Leadership is influence and leader's capacity to influence begins with character (Downe et al., 2016). Christian leaders are expected to act with integrity, do what is right to the world around them if they are to influence it. They are called to swim against wave of this world's corruption. It is this desired character that needs to be fostered or enhanced in Christian leaders.

The good news with AL is that it can be learned and developed as long as there is willingness because it is a skill (Fusco, 2018; Northouse, 2019; Wulffers, 2016 and everyone has a potential to become one (Gardiner, 2017). Further, Puls et al. (2011) insists that there is always room for growth and for deepening AL qualities within an individual. Enhancement of AL affects people at both the organizational and personal

levels, which means that there are intrapersonal processes and interpersonal processes involved. Wulffers (2017) believes that it takes a leader to lead himself or herself and others towards the journey of discovering who they are and being able to regulate the new discovered person.

Intrapersonal Process

At the intrapersonal level, a leader goes deeper in evaluating his or her worldview and his or her internal moral stamina and points them to the proper direction. When this is done, it ushers in some significant transformation. In a Christian context, this condition takes a personal encounter with God to realize who he or she really is before a reformation and transformation is experienced (New King James Version, 1982, Isa. 6:5-8; Ex. 3: 1-6; Acts 9:1-22; Jn. 8:1-11). Therefore, one way of enhancing AL for a Christian leader is by seeking God's wisdom through prayer and the reading of the Word of God for a personal encounter with God. Christian leaders who wish to become truly authentic must be willing to live the life of surrender to His will as He leads them towards the new and better direction.

Interpersonal Process

At the interpersonal level, a leader cultivates authentic characteristics among the employees within the organization. The leader can achieve this by providing followers with the knowledge of authentic leadership, living an exemplary life, and being consistent in the authentic leadership growth process.

Providing followers with knowledge.

A leader can provide followers with knowledge through coaching and mentoring the followers in the required skills. Leaders may need to offer some intentionally organized training, mentor, and nurture of employees in words and actions towards achieving the culture of authenticity within the organization (Kim, 2018). Through mentoring, training, and nurturing, followers are directed to understand themselves and know well their values and purpose. This requires a leader's self-sacrifice for the wellbeing of both the employees and the organization.

Living an exemplary life.

Another way of enhancing authentic leadership is by living an exemplary life. Here, a leader practices behaviors and values expected from the followers and the colleagues (Northouse, 2019). Authenticity is lived out. It is a part and a parcel of the authentic leader as McDonald says it, "When leaders move from doing to being, they set themselves as an example that inspires and motivates others, displaying something different than what others might expect" (p.11). The Bible admonishes shepherds to be a good example to the flock through abstaining from dishonest practices by exercising fairness and serving with eagerness (New King James version, 1982, 1Pet. 5:2-4). Altman et al. (2011) suggest that leaders are expected to say what they mean and mean what they say in order to cultivate transparency and construct a positive working environment. Therefore, to build a foundation of trust, the change should begin with the leader. In turn, followers will feel encouraged to exercise authenticity.

Demonstrating Consistency

Consistency in the renewal or daily conversion in the life of Christian leaders is another way that can enhance authenticity in leaders and followers (Miller, 2013). Uprightness of character is not a one-day event but rather a process of growth. A leader needs to know that this is a daily battle which needs a daily victory. It is a daily commitment. Firmness of character is a requirement of every Christian that needs to be cultivated daily. When addressing young people, White (2002) had this to say, "The lack of firmness and self-denial in your characters is a serious drawback in obtaining a genuine religious experience that will not be sliding sand. Firmness and integrity of purpose should be cultivated" (p. 437). Now if this is required of ordinary Christians, evidently it is required from anyone in a Christian leadership role.

Conclusion

Authentic leadership (AL) is a critical need of the society today. Today's world is in crisis of finding authentic leaders (Northouse, 2019) who will be able to curb corruption, straighten society's moral compass, and minimize conflicts both in Church settings and in the secular environment. Authentic leaders lead with integrity. They have self-awareness, and they are consistent in their dealings. They have internalized moral values and are positive. In short, these are genuine people who walk the talk.

AL has proved to contribute positively in inspiring followers to be authentic as well. It creates a trustful environment within the organization. It leads to employee job satisfaction and creativity. On the other hand, lack of AL has been the main cause of conflicts, frustration, poor production, corruption, poor Church growth, decline in membership, negative Church politics, and distrust. In some cases, it can lead to quick employee turnover and to backsliding in the Church.

Finding authentic leaders is not easy even in Church settings because of worldly influence, human fallibility, and competitive environment. One encouraging point though is that anyone can learn, develop, and improve their own authenticity in leadership. Leaders can help in developing authentic followers and leaders through training, mentoring, nurturing, and coaching to provide knowledge on authenticity. By living an exemplary life and exercising consistency in the desired behavior, leaders can maintain authenticity, and they can become game changers in society. For Christian leaders, it is good to know that although human nature is prone to falling short of God's standard of uprightiness, His grace is sufficient for leaders who are willing to surrender to His guidance.

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