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A New Research Direction of Authentic Leadership in the Field of Adult Education

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Abstract: This research encompasses authentic leadership and learning-related outcomes at workplaces from the perspective of adult education/learning. We provided a new insight and direction into the field of adult education/learning by utilizing authentic leadership as a facilitator.

Keywords: authentic leadership, adult learning, workplace

Purpose

Authentic leadership has captured the interests of many researchers and practitioners in the field of organizational leadership, management, and educational settings. Previous researchers have recognized the importance of authentic leadership regarding the two facets; first, the corporate and government malfeasance, such as the prevalence of unethical practice and fraudulence of leaders (Luthans & Avolio, 2003); and the limitations of traditional or mainstream leadership approaches (i.e., charismatic leadership and transformational leadership) that focus on purely accomplishing organizational performance by means of leadership. Rooted in moral basis and authenticity, authentic leadership has been regarded as a key to address ethical deficiencies and encourage organizations to build positive organizational climate and learning organization (Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, 2009; Crossan, Lane, & White, 1999).

However, previous researchers tended to examine the effect of authentic leadership on followers' performance based on a performance-oriented perspective rather than their learning or its outcomes (Walumbwa, Wang, Wang, Schaubroeck, & Avolio, 2010). For example, authentic leadership has drawn considerable attention from the field of organization in that it is intimately related to organizational performance, employees' job satisfaction, and work engagement (Yammarino, Dionne, Schriesheim, & Dansereau, 2008). Likewise, authentic leadership researchers have merely focused on the content of management and performance.

As the attentions on adult education shifted from the individual perspective of learner to the learner in context, workplace has been regarded as a fundamental source that practices the principles of adult education and an essential site for adult learning (Dirkx, 1996; Welton, 1991). Therefore, we assume that authentic leaders may have a critical role for adult learning in the workplaces. For example, authentic leaders are regarded as a facilitator to promote followers' learning in that they encourage followers and themselves to understand their strengths and weaknesses through self-reflection or being aware of self (Walumbwa, Avolio, Garder, Wernsing, & Peterson, 2008). Although authentic leadership encourages leaders' and followers' learning and fosters positive learning environments, it is mostly considered as a means of achieving the individual or organizational goals (Ilies, Morgeson, & Nahrgang, 2005). In other words,

authentic leadership as a learning facilitator has been underexplored, and thus it is necessary to identify the effect of authentic leadership in the workplace from the adult learning perspective.

In the field of adult learning, authentic learning and authentic environments have been studied for over the last two decades (Banas, & York, 2014; Herrington, Parker, & Boase-Jelinek, 2014; Herrington, Reeves, & Oliver, 2014; Pahomov, 2014; Lombardi, 2007). Authentic learning means a pedagogical approach that helps students to develop robust knowledge that transfers to real-world so that they can solve complex and realistic learning tasks (Lombardi, 2007). The authentic learning environments also support authentic learning experience and student cognitive learning (Herrington et al., 2014). Particularly, authentic learning includes the characteristics of self-reflection on their growing understanding about the subject matter and the conditions that assist their learning (Herrington et al., 2014). Therefore, authentic learning activities enable students to make choices and reflect on their learning as an individual, team, or community (Lombardi, 2007).

Recently, some researchers have attempted to provide guidelines to improve adult learners' learning capacity by applying the concept of authentic leadership in higher education (Starratt, 2004; Opatokun, Hasim, & Hassan, 2013). Especially, authentic leadership can be understood as an extension of authentic learning and authentic environments in the field of adult education. The major premise of authenticity that formed the basis of authentic leadership is related to 'doing our own thing', and thus authenticity in the learning is a central concept on a deeper level (Ashton, 2010).

On these premises, the characteristics of authentic leadership connect to adult learning, especially to authentic learning, as authentic leaders believe that continuous learning and development is important for followers and thus they support a learning environment for followers to share new knowledge (Kernis, 2003). Authentic leaders are also encouraged to learn and develop themselves through self-awareness, which allows them to strive harder to overcome their weaknesses (Glowacki-Dudka & Treff, 2016). Despite the important role of authentic leadership on adult learning, there has been no empirical or conceptual study to address the relationship between authentic leadership and adult learning in the workplace. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to understand a different perspective of authentic leadership based on a learning perspective background in addition to exploring the relationship between authentic leadership and adult learning/education and to further propose future directions.

Theoretical Framework

In this section, we illustrate the definition and four major components of authentic leadership and the relationship between authentic leadership and adult learning/education from the learning perspective.

Definition and Components of Authentic Leadership

Authentic leadership is defined as those who have an ethical and transparent behavior that encourages sharing the information needed to make decisions while accepting followers' inputs (Avolio et al., 2009, p.423). Dignan and Bhindi (1997) highlighted the basic assumption of authentic leadership as "authentic self, relationships, learning, governance and organization,

through significant human values, to leadership and management practices that are ethically and morally uplifting” (p. 208). Duignan also defined authentic leadership as leaders demonstrating clarity of moral purpose, values, a passion for their organization and its leadership, and a focus on ‘what happens within the learning environment and the quality of learning outcomes’ (2012, pp.141-142). According to these definitions, the concept of authentic leadership is relation to adult learning itself, learning environment, sharing information, and learning outcomes.

Additionally, authentic leadership consists of four components – self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced processing, and an internalized moral perspective (Walumbwa et al., 2008). Self-awareness is a leader's awareness of the impacts their internal views have on situations and on others (Walumbwa et al. 2008). Specifically, it implies that leaders with more self-awareness continuously seek to learn and develop themselves because they know their weaknesses through self-reflection and introspection (Glowacki-Dudka & Treff, 2016). Relational transparency refers to presenting one’s genuine self to others instead of a distorted self (Walumbwa et al. 2008). Since relational transparency encourages leaders and followers to have the willingness and openness for inspection and feedback, as a fundamental components in the learning process (Popper & Lipshitz, 2000), it could foster learning for adults. Third, balanced processing or unbiased processing of information refers to the analysis of all relevant information objectively in decision-making process by avoiding overstating one’s internal knowledge and externally generated information (Gardner et al., 2005). Lastly, the internalized moral perspective refers to establishing behavioral integrity and consistency between values and actions based on internal moral norms and values (Walumbwa et al., 2008).

Social Learning Theory as a Springboard for Authentic Leadership to Adult Education

To understand authentic leadership in the new light and in the field of adult education/learning, we utilized social learning theory. Social learning theory is founded on the notion that individuals are able to observe interactions in social settings and through these observations the individuals is able to learn, improve, and their future actions are guided by their prior observed experiences and behaviors; an ideally social learning environment (Bandura, 1977). In other words, the observation of each action and behavior of each authentic leader will provide followers the basis for learning ideal behaviors and can process information that is relevant to their own qualities and needs. Out of the observed behaviors, an observer can create a new plethora of behavioral options including new personalized responses based on social learning experiences. The leader thus naturally becomes a role model and provides numerous social learning experiences for the followers (Ilies et al., 2005). In this sense, the role of an authentic leadership will be critical for the learning environment for all individuals in the workplace. Therefore, we propose that social learning theory can be a unique basis for understanding the characteristics and qualities of authentic leadership in the field of adult education.

Relatedness of Authentic Leadership with Adult Education

In addition to being one of the four key components previously depicted as characteristics of authentic leadership, self-awareness also can be understood as a part of self-reflection that is a fundamental aspect of authentic learning in the field of adult education (Gardner et al., 2005).

Leaders who possess the quality of self-reflection can take an introspective attitude and consistently assess their own individual “identity, emotions, motives and goals” (Gardner et al., 2005, p. 347). As originally defined, self-awareness refers to an attention state that the individuals pay their attentions to understand the aspect of self (Duval & Wicklund, 1972; Hannah, 2005). When comparing the qualities of self-awareness and self-reflection, there are overlapping traits. Thus, authentic leaders, who are defined to have such self-awareness, should also possess the ability to improve their individual qualities by learning and overcoming their weaknesses. The competence to reflect and learn from their daily experiences is a critical necessity of a leader to develop into being authentic.

Next, the capability to process information in an unbiased manner is critical for the learning environment of leaders and followers. The ability of leaders to make clear decisions in an unbiased means without exaggerating or distorting information further develops the leader to solve future conflicts and arguments after habitually practicing this set of skills. After combining these problems solving experiences, the leader further can learn from their own thought processes as well as the outcome and impact the followers and groups. In addition, by experiencing the leader’s ability to introduce new ideas and perspectives from unbiased processing, followers are able to understand and learn ideas that they have previously been unexposed to. These experiences spur followers to seek out challenging situations and maximize their learning potential by the quality of unbiased processing of an authentic leader (Ilies et al., 2005).

Thirdly, the quality of relational transparency is a vital component of the leader-follower relationship and the learning experiences (Mazutis & Slawinski, 2008). By being transparent with oneself despite the weaker qualities of the leader, a follower fosters a learning experience by giving feedback to the leader (Popper & Lipshitz, 2000). Through these interactions, the leaders are able to continually grow and develop as a person, and the followers can learn even more by emulating the positive qualities of the leaders and taking advantage of the positive learning environment created by the relational transparency of the leader (Ryff & Keyes, 1995).

Although there is no empirical research on authentic leadership in the field of adult learning in the workplace, we could assume that the characteristics of authentic leadership could enable adults to continuously and respectively learn through self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced processing, and an internalized moral perspective.

Conclusions and Implications

To sum, authentic leadership has been extensively examined in a different way to accomplish organizational performance and effectiveness. However, through this research, we are able to discover some shared attributes between authentic leadership and adult learning/adult education. Social learning theory provides the critical lens to understand authentic leadership in a learning perspective, particularly authentic learning and adult learning in that followers’ learning processes are occurred by observing and emulating leader’s behavior and attitudes as a role model.

Furthermore, we found that the four major components of authentic leadership can contribute to shaping the connections between authentic leadership and adult learning from the learning perspective. We hope that this research could provide a guideline to understand the role

of authentic leadership on adult learning/education in the workplace, even though few empirical or explicit studies exist. Especially, as the workplace is recognized as a vital learning place that practices the principles of adult learning/adult education, authentic leadership research has to be understood and conducted in a learning perspective. In other words, it should be considered as a catalyst for facilitating leaders and followers learning in the field of adult learning/adult education. Future researchers can focus on authentic leadership on adult learning in the workplace by using our conceptual basis or rationale because authentic leadership enables adults to create a learning environment and help them grow individually. In organizations, more employees are learning necessary knowledge and skills through informal learning or following their leaders' behavior. Practitioners can use inclusive authentic leaders as a role modelling by demonstrating their supportive behavior, thereby facilitating perceptions of a positive and inclusive work climate for learning. Based on this paper, we hope to provide a new insight on authentic leadership in the field of adult learning at workplaces.

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