



U.S. Special Operations Soldiers conduct combat operations in support of Operation Resolute Support in Southeast Afghanistan, April 2019. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Jaerett Engeseth)

# Authentic Leadership

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**L**eaders are never entirely authentic or inauthentic. Instead, they are more accurately described as achieving levels of authenticity (Gardner, Coglisier, Davis, & Dickens, 2011). The role of a leader is challenging, requiring a high level of energy, motivation, resolve, and persistence. According to leadership researchers Shamir and Eilam (2005), “To find the motivation to lead and the energy to persist in the face of obstacles and setbacks, leaders need to operate from strong convictions and a high level of self-concept clarity” (p. 399).

## Authentic Leadership Theory

Authentic leadership (AL) theory is considered a root construct underlying all positive approaches to leadership, and it stresses the idea of leading by example (Avolio, Gardner, Walumbwa, Luthans, & May, 2004). Empirical evidence has associated AL theory

with openness of organizational climate (Henderson & Hoy, 1983); job satisfaction, organizational commitment, work happiness (Jensen & Luthans, 2006), satisfaction with supervisor, organizational commitment, job performance (Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Peterson, & Wernsing, 2008), psychological well-being (Toor & Ofori, 2009), trust in leadership (Wong, Spence Laschinger, & Cummings, 2010), team authenticity, teamwork behavior (Hannah, Walumbwa, & Fry, 2011), perceived leader effectiveness (Moriano, Molero, & Mangin, 2011), team trust (Walumbwa, Luthans, Avey, & Oke, 2011), and behavioral integrity (Leroy, Palanski, & Simons, 2012).

## Authenticity vs. Authentic Leadership

The dictionary meaning of *authenticity* is “not false or imitation,” “real,” “actual,” “true to one’s own personality, spirit, or character” (Authenticity, n.d.). Authenticity involves being true to oneself, and not others,

so it can be presumed that too much authenticity can result in self-promoting behavior that can be toxic to organizations. This contradicts the essence of AL theory, which is to sacrifice personal interests for group goals and interests.

Leadership is a process of social influence; therefore, to attain *authentic leadership*, it would be wise for leaders to hold back strong convictions that may not be in-line with organizational values such as neurotic and narcissistic tendencies, or political or religious orientations that can overshadow organizational goals like mission success. Alvesson and Einola (2019) state, “With ‘too much’ authenticity, workplace climate may be harmed, and conflicts emerge and escalate” (p. 388).

### Authentic Leadership Behavior

AL behavior should flow from the top of the organization down to the most junior subordinate. Authentic leaders view accomplishing tasks and developing subordinates as equally important. They regularly develop themselves so follower development is seen as being genuine and a regular part of the process.

Authentic leaders are guided by principles. These are values put into action, and represent an orientation toward doing what is right for the organization (George, Sims, McLean, & Mayer, 2007). A value such as *respect*, for example, can be translated into a leadership princi-

ple such as *creating a work environment where everyone is treated with dignity, opinions are valued, and talent is recognized*.

Authentic leaders remain cognizant of their vulnerabilities and openly discuss them with seniors and peers, so the leader can be sure he or she is headed in the right direction, simultaneously becoming more self-aware. Authentic leaders have the moral capacity to judge complex issues seeking multiple solutions without being viewed as disingenuous or shifting with popular opinion (Luthans & Avolio, 2003). Finally, authentic leaders are less likely to feel the need to take center stage or demand anyone’s attention—they are humble (May, Hodges, Chan, & Avolio, 2003). According to ADP 6-22:

“A leader with the right level of humility is a willing learner, maintains accurate self-awareness, and seeks out others’ input and feedback. Leaders are seen as humble when they are aware of their limitations and abilities and apply that understanding in their leadership. (Department of the Army, 2019, p. 2-11)”

*Humility* is a distinguishing factor of the most successful organizations; and therefore, has recently been introduced as a new *Army leadership value* (Weathers, 2019).



U.S. Army Paratroopers assigned to the 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment, 173rd Airborne Brigade, provide security as part of exercise Rock Klesman at Pocek Range in Slovenia, Feb. 25, 2020. (U.S. Army photo by Paolo Bovo)



U.S. Army 1st Lt. Russel Davis and Spc. Shannon Fletias with the 101st Airborne Division, Fort Campbell, Ky., demonstrate teamwork in dragging a sked with a simulated patient during a Best Medic Competition held in Erbil, Iraq, April 6, 2019. (U.S. Army photo by 1st Lt. Alison Carr)

### Organizational Alignment

According to Avolio et al. (2004), “It does not matter what type of leader you are. Authentic leaders can be directive or participative, and could even be authoritarian” (p. 806). What is essential is that the leader adapts to the circumstances and people around them so they can be effective and influential. This often requires an adjustment in behavior, and for the self to be moved to the backstage (Alvesson & Einola, 2019). To drive this point, Algra and Lips-Wiersma (2012) put forth that authentic leaders “are not only capable of dealing with organizational, societal and personal challenges, but they also have the capacity to do this without a desire for status or personal rewards” (p. 123).

Building and aligning personal values with an organization’s mission is the most important responsibility of AL. Leaders that express organizational values and aspirations are more likely to be effective. Attributes (character, presence, intellect) and competencies (leads, develops, achieves) outlined in the Army Leadership Requirements Model (Department of the Army, 2019), are core values that resonate with team members throughout an organization.

### Authentic Leadership Development

Since AL is considered a root construct and underlies all positive approaches to leadership, including transformational and servant leadership theories, it could be beneficial to add it to the existing lead-

ership curriculum in both officer and noncommissioned officer education systems. Authentic leadership development is not a “learning leadership in a day program;” therefore, formal education early in one’s career is needed. In addition to formal education, improving one’s AL, as well as self-awareness, will require a continuous commitment to development.

Soldiers tend to imitate or model leaders they aspire to be like. Team leaders, for example, try to be like their favorite squad leader. Platoon sergeants want to be like the best first sergeant in the battalion, and so on. “Authentic leadership development is how both positive and negative moments and events can trigger deep change in an individual’s self-identity, bringing into clearer focus alternative ‘possible selves’ that eventually may replace the current individual’s ‘actual self’” (Avolio, et al., 2004, p. 812).

With each experiment with “possible selves,” Soldiers do it authentically. They genuinely believe that is who they are until they come to realize it is not. Then they try another “possible self.” Finding one’s true self takes a lifetime of experimentation and reflection because a life story is continually changing. The way one frames their life story has a significant impact on who they think they are (Shamir & Eilam, 2005).



Soldiers with 1st Battalion, 27th Infantry Regiment “Wolfhounds,” 2nd Infantry Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division evacuate a simulated casualty during a fire support coordination exercise at Pohakuloa Training Area, Hawaii, Nov. 18, 2019. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Thomas Calvert)

## Conclusion

Leadership involves modeling the way for others. Followers transform because they believe their leader authentically cares about the development of their subordinates and the success of the organization. Leaders will retain trust so long as they are transparent, predictable, have a clear morality, stay flexible, are willing to comply

and make compromises, fulfill role requirements and job expectations, and remain loyal to the group rather than having a strict personal agenda. *Authentic leadership* can have a fundamental and positive impact not just within an immediate organization, but also future organizations as subordinates are mentored to become *authentic leaders*. ■

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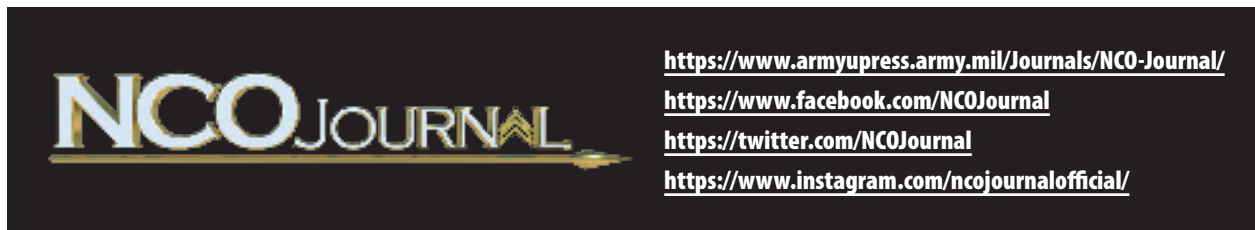
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