Exploring the Connections between Authentic Leadership and Evangelical Christian Leadership: Framing Practice to Achieve Authenticity in Leadership

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Abstract

The aim of this chapter is to explore the construct of authentic leadership from an evangelical Christian perspective and illuminate the potential for an authentic leadership construct to inform faith-based educational leaders and teachers. This chapter critically reviews the literature on authentic leadership and determines the common components from each proponent. The chapter provides an overview of an evangelical Christian view of leadership and ethics to inform a view of authentic leadership. The aim is to progress a new framework for evangelical Christian leaders in faith-based educational leadership contexts where consideration needs to be given to: (1) personal identity and the transformational work of the Holy Spirit in leading us from the "old" and to a "new" identity in Christ; (2) belief as it impacts behavior, particularly in ethics and morality; (3) how personal identity and an ethical framework shape the leadership of others and the wider community to serve the common good under Christ.

Biography

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Peter has worked in education and ministry contexts for almost twenty-five years, having trained as both a Primary and Secondary Teacher. He holds a Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of

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Introduction

Leadership is undergoing somewhat of a crisis in Australia. Recent sporting scandals have

raised questions about on-field unethical practices. Royal Commissions have uncovered

institutional failures, and political parties are undergoing endless leadership speculation and

changes. All of these have helped to reinforce misgivings in the Australian public towards

anyone in positions of power and authority. Leaders who were once seen as stable forces in

our community are now perceived as having limited moral standing, or a limited ability to

provide the leadership that the Australian public desires. But this evaporation of trust in

leadership is not just an Australian phenomenon. It seems to be a trend worldwide, and, more

startlingly, a scourge that has affected the perception of educational institutions and of those

who work in and lead them.

It is unfortunate that educational institutions have not been immune from this rising

suspicion and distrust of leaders. It would seem the trend in wider society has crept through

the gate of Christian institutions, be it real or imagined. What is true is that questions are

emerging about the nature of service and whether a common good is being held in view by

leaders. As one commentator remarked, the "rise of individualism erodes the idea of public

good." Leaders of institutions are now being questioned and having to defend their motives

and intent, both within and from outside their organizations. The perception is that many

leaders are self-seeking rather than acting as servants of their constituency. Research in educational institutions that has measured levels of trust, both institutional and relational, has shown a widening gap between the perceptions that leaders have of each other. This will continue to impact churches and educational institutions until a new paradigm is forged that enables leaders to develop and establish themselves as trusted leaders, held in the highest esteem by their staff and the wider community.

Investing time, energy, and effort in cultivating authentic leadership may be the antidote to this burgeoning malaise towards leaders, particularly those in churches and in educational institutions. More pointedly, for those leaders in faith-based educational institutions—including evangelical Christian churches, schools, and tertiary institutions—authentic leadership provides the means for leaders to express genuine and lived-out Christian faith, while expressing a sincere care of and rightful concern for those with varied backgrounds who are a part of the leader's community.

In the pursuit of becoming an effective leader, practitioners need to be wary of relying on off-the-shelf solutions for leadership development. Rather, effective leaders need to be self-aware, realizing that the art of leadership is a highly personal journey. They need to be able to draw down on a whole suite of skills. In this respect, authentic leadership offers a unique approach to leadership, one that is highly personalized and reliant on an individual's moral and value frame.

Background

The intent of this chapter is to explore the potential for authentic leadership among faith-based educational leaders. More specifically, my aim is to address the question: "What should characterize authentic leadership in practice for educational leaders in evangelical Christian educational contexts?" This chapter explores how evangelical Christian educational

leaders can frame their practice to achieve authenticity in their leadership, along with understanding the measures of successfully applied authentic leadership.

In order to explore these questions, a critical review of the literature on authentic leadership is required, as is an exploration of the distinctive view of leadership in evangelical Christian institutions. In my opinion, an evangelical view of leadership and authentic leadership are not at odds with one another but operate to complement and strengthen each other. While Authentic Leadership is an emerging category of recognized leadership systems, what sets it apart is its focus on the interior life of the leader. Avolio, Gardner, Walumbwa, Luthans, and May offer a tidy definition of the frame when they say, "we conceive of authentic leaders as persons who have achieved high levels of authenticity in that they know who they are, what they believe and value, and they act upon those values and beliefs while transparently interacting with others." While the framework offers no grounded or guiding center-point—the individual is left to self-determine what is right, ethical, and true—this enables evangelical Christian educational leaders a frame to grow and develop their leadership skills without fear of compromising their deeply held beliefs; in fact, it provides an opportunity to place Christ at the center. More than this, by approaching leadership from an authentic frame, leaders are able to consciously enact their faith to shape their practice as leaders. They will be empowered to encourage the same in others. This approach provides them with resources to lead faith-based educational institutions with integrity, being certain that the tenets and practices of their faith can sustain and grow their leadership capacity, no matter the context.

This study has emanated from my experience of and exposure to various church organizations and faith-based educational institutions. In these churches and institutions, many leaders and teachers express distrust for those around them. Some of the distrust is in the perceived effectiveness of a leader or the perceptions surrounding their intent. In many

circumstances, faith-based teachers are uncertain how faith can be enabled in the practice of teaching and learning, let alone within leadership. In some cases, educators—particularly those involved in theological education—are concerned that many of the approaches to leadership in the "marketplace" encourage practices that do not accord with an evangelical Christian faith, and they are left wanting for direction on how faith and leadership practice can be homologous. An exploration of the literature around authentic leadership and a synthesis with an evangelical Christian theological understanding of faith and leadership will provide a means for faith-based leaders to understand the qualities of authentic leadership, frame their practice, and see potential for its success from a distinctly Christian point of view.

Recurring Themes and Ideas

Academics consider authentic leadership as a recognized leadership category, albeit in its formative stages. The concept of "authenticity" has a long history within the academy. However, it has struggled as a focus of study, in part, due to the lack of evidence-based measures to verify its validity, and because of an overwhelming focus on the intra-personal understanding of the leader. Despite these weaknesses, there is a consensus emerging as to the core qualities and characteristics of authentic leaders and the actions that mark their behavior. Table 1 provides a summary of definitions of authentic leadership.

Table 1: Definitions of Authentic Leadership

Source	Definition
Bhindi and Duignan	"[T]he authors argue for authentic leadership based on: *authenticity*, which entails the discovery of the authentic self through meaningful relationships within organizational structures and processes that support core, significant values; *intentionality*, which implies visionary leadership that takes its energy and direction from the good intentions of current organizational members who put their intellects, hearts and souls into shaping a vision for the future; a renewed commitment to *spirituality*, which calls for the rediscovery of the spirit within each person and celebration of the shared meaning with purpose of relationship; a *sensibility* to the feelings, aspirations and needs of the increasing globalizing trends in life and work."

Begley	"Authentic leadership may be thought of as a metaphor for professionally effective, ethically sound and consciously reflective practices in educational administration. This is leadership that is knowledge based, values informed, and skilfully executed."
George	"Authentic leaders use their natural abilities, but they also recognize their shortcomings, and work hard to overcome them. They lead with purpose, meaning and values. They build enduring relationships with people. Others follow them because they know where they stand. They are consistent and self-disciplined. When their principles are tested, they refuse to compromise. Authentic leaders are dedicated to developing themselves because they know that becoming a leader takes a lifetime of personal growth."
Luthans and Avolio	"[W]e define authentic leadership in organizations as a process that draws from both positive psychological capacities and a highly developed organizational context, which results in both greater self-awareness and self-regulated positive behaviors on the part of leaders and associates, fostering positive self-development. The authentic leader is confident, hopeful, optimistic, resilient, transparent, moral/ethical, future-oriented, and gives priority to developing associates to be leaders. The authentic leader is true to him/herself and the exhibited behavior positively transforms or develops associates into leaders themselves. The authentic leader does not try to coerce or even rationally persuade associates, but rather the leader's authentic values, beliefs, and behaviors serve to model the development of associates."
Kernis and Goldman	"[W]e define authenticity as the unobstructed operation of one's true or core self in one's daily enterprise. Rather than viewing this as a single unitary process, however, we assert that authenticity can be broken down into four discriminable components. Specifically, we suggest that authenticity involves *awareness*, *unbiased processing*, *behavior*, and *relational orientation*."
Starratt	"First, authenticity is the vocation of every human being, the call to bring one's unique possibilities into realization. There is a fundamental moral imperative here. One either violates one's authenticity or chooses it. Second, authenticity is always relational, in dialogue with another, a cause, a career. Thus, while the manner of being authentic is self-referential, the content of authenticity is realized in relationships. One does not know who one is unless one can recognize oneself in the response of the other, and in that recognition choose to continue to be that kind of person. Third, one's freedom to choose and shape one's life is exercised in a society that guarantees, more or less, those freedoms for everyone."
Avolio and Gardner	"[A]uthentic leaders are anchored by their own deep sense of self; they know where they stand on important issues, values and beliefs. With that base they stay their course and convey to others, often times through actions, not just words, what they represent in terms of principles, values and ethics."

The recurring themes and ideas that have emerged enable leaders to focus on the core components of authentic leadership. In drawing together the threads of each of the various definitions, it can said that the literature affirms authentic leadership as a journey that sets leaders on a path of discovering their true identity and a deep understanding of a sense of self that grounds a leader's thoughts and actions. The literature gives focus to moral/ethical purpose as being the means of actualizing the leader's identity and giving purpose to their behavior and action. These moral and ethical sensitivities are worked out in relationship.

Many of the proponents expand on the notion of leader/follower relationships as a key component of authentic leadership. They see this as a means for leaders to seek the good of the community. Finally, the literature points to a focus on leader behavior that facilitates the personal growth of the leader, the growth of others, and improved outcomes for the institution they lead.

In addition to these categories Bhindi and Duignan interestingly add spirituality as a key category in their frame. In presenting this as a part of their view of authentic leadership they explain that:

> [b]y spirituality a partisan religious view is not meant, but that individuals and groups should experience a sense of deep and enduring meaning and significance from an appreciation of their interconnectedness and interdependency, and from their feelings of being connected to something greater than self.

This view certainly affirms the need for leaders and followers to be connected by relationships formed by a sense of common purpose. For the person striving to be an authentic leader, time spent casting vision beyond the here and now, creating agency, and developing moral purpose, amplifies a community's sense of being.

Further to this, other proponents of authentic leadership, particularly those within education, affirm aspects of authentic leadership as being core purposes of the educational endeavor in general. Researchers such as Sergiovanni and Fullan speak of the importance of moral and ethical leadership as central components of educative leadership. Positive psychologists and leadership academics would affirm the need for leaders to be attuned to their understanding of self and its effect on those around them. This adds weight to the inclusion of these elements in any system or process of leadership development for educational leadership.

In an attempt to address concerns about the lack of empirical research to confirm the validity of the authentic leadership construct, a number of researchers have sought to develop tools which assist leaders to begin the process of identifying authenticity as a leadership trait. Of note, there are currently two self-assessed inventory tests that have been developed within the literature on authentic leadership. Both use a questionnaire and a self-assessment guide. Participants rank perceptions of self against a series of crafted questions that highlight a particular aspect of the proposer's frame for authentic leadership. Both questionnaires are validated, theory-based instruments, and provide a basis for future research in authentic leadership.

With these factors in mind, authentic leadership as a construct offers leaders an opportunity to focus on the self to refine and develop their skills, and to invest in the development of others around them. A strong moral and ethical focus serves to ground leaders more firmly in leading their organizations and people with firm, considered foundations at the core. An other-person focus serves to help leaders operate with the best intentions for their people, while a desire to thoughtfully develop the talents, skills, and abilities of people working in their organization provides an opportunity to build capacity for the future. While these elements may not be empirically validated, they are certainly human qualities that are worth pursuing and provide evangelical Christian educational leaders with a positive framework in which to consider how they operate with a distinct moral frame in mind.

Understanding an Evangelical Christian View of Leadership, Ethics, and Spirituality

Evangelical Christians operate with a particular epistemology. An evangelical Christian's view of the world is shaped by an understanding of the Bible and has led this branch of Christianity to frame leadership, morality, and ethics with certain tenets of faith in mind. Ledbetter, Banks, and Greenhalgh state that:

Christians consider the Bible authoritative for life. The Bible affirms

a God of history who revealed himself to humanity and established a

foundation for being, purpose, morality, and community. So, we

come to know by faith, by reason, and by experience—all guided by

the biblical narrative. This foundation informs our efforts to

understand leadership and acts as a filter for any research findings.

Evangelical Christianity, then, accords a particular view of leadership. John Stott, a well-renowned and influential evangelical Christian scholar, who has had a profound effect on the evangelical Christian church and academy, commented that: "Leadership is a word shared by Christians and non-Christians alike, but this does not mean that their concept of it is the same. On the contrary, Jesus introduced into the world a new style of servant-leadership." In another volume, Stott states: "Leadership and lordship are two quite different concepts. The Christian leads by example, not force, and is to be a model who invites a following, not a boss who compels one." Additionally, the former Archbishop of Sydney, the Right Rev. Dr. Peter Jensen, noted in a recent interview that "you can't separate the spiritual life of the Christian leader from his leadership, because his leadership requires faith, expressed in prayer of course, but faith in the willingness to do things which otherwise you wouldn't do." In context, Jensen is meaning that evangelical Christian leadership calls on its leaders to serve people in such a way that it requires them to encourage—but equally, to rebuke and exhort—people to a way of living that is consistent with the Bible.

Evangelical Christians are suspicious of leadership frameworks that call them to use power and assert authority over people outside of the biblical narrative. A Christian view of leadership is one that posits Jesus Christ at the center, as the person who commands all authority, and the one to whom all others need to reverence. Christians with authority to lead should be conscious that Jesus is Lord, and, in understanding this, strive to operate as his

subject and servant. Ultimately, their authority comes from Jesus, and so there is an expectation that these leaders will live and lead like Jesus. Authenticity in this realm is to model life, thought, and action by the example of Jesus himself.

This raises some complications for evangelical Christians. Evangelical Christian leaders want to "do the right thing," to make decisions that are consistent and honoring to the Lord. The biblical narrative—the authoritative text—does not give an account of Jesus dealing with every conceivable issue that might be encountered, so evangelical Christians are required to understand the biblical text in such a way that they can build an ethical frame from which to operate. This requires evangelical Christian leaders to have a clear sense of self and direction as essential qualities for leadership. Herrington, Creech, and Taylor put it this way:

> A leader who has the capacity to know and do the right thing
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> understands himself or herself apart from others and so is able to
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> achieve distance from a situation and observe what is really going on,
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> without letting personal reactivity or anxiety get in the way.

To this end evangelical Christian leaders need to have a well-thought-out system of ethics and morality to help them understand how to apply the biblical narrative within their immediate personal context, institution, and wider community.

To aid in this endeavor, evangelical Christians have relied on an understanding of theology to develop their ethical frame. Evangelical Christian authors such as O'Donovan, Holmes, Hill, and Cameron have all created works that frame an ethical model based on an evangelical Christian understanding of theology and the Bible. O'Donovan summarizes this by saying:

> Purposeful action is determined by what is true about the world into
>
> which we act; this can be called the "realist" principle. That truth is

constituted by what God has done for his world and for humankind in

Jesus Christ; this is the "evangelical" principle. The act of God which

liberates our action is focused on the resurrection of Jesus from the

dead, which restored and fulfilled the intelligible order of creation;

this we call the "Easter" principle.

Further to this, Holmes states that "[o]ur highest end is to glorify God and enjoy him

forever. Consequently, these principles of God's kingdom [love and justice] are the principles

of a Christian ethic, to guide our judgements and our conduct." Each of these Christian

ethicists offer a vision of life for evangelical Christians that revolves around an ethic of love.

That is, in response to God's love for his people, Christians are to love others as God has

loved them. Additionally, they are to steward the world bearing the same concerns for and

love of the world as God. This model shapes an evangelical Christian's view of themselves,

of others, and the world, with Jesus Christ as the center-point of that understanding.

With regard to spirituality, Ledbetter, Banks, and Greenhalgh claim that all religions

espouse a view of spirituality and have deliberate spiritual practice. They argue that

"Christian leaders have a unique opportunity to winsomely integrate the human spirit, fully

engaged as part of their ventures." This provides a way for the integration of faith with

leadership theories, such as authentic leadership. Peter Scazzero asserts that "[w]ork for God

that is not nourished by a deep interior life *with* God will eventually be contaminated by other

things such as ego, power, needing approval of and from others, and buying into the wrong

ideas of success and the mistaken belief that we can't fail." If he is correct, then evangelical

Christian leaders need to take seriously the potential for authentic leadership to not only

deepen their understanding of self, their motivations, and behavior, but also to shape their

practice of leadership.

What Should Characterize Authentic Leadership in Practice for Educational Leaders in Faith-based Educational Contexts?

Bringing together the work of various researchers and academics in the realm of authentic leadership with a brief overview of evangelical Christian leadership, ethics, and spirituality, it can be argued that authentic leadership can be comfortably adopted by evangelical Christian leaders. Given the comments by Bhindi and Duignan that spirituality is not partisan, it is conceivable that a community of like-minded people could be brought together as a community of faith. Authentic leadership lends itself to an overt evangelical Christian faith context. It will serve to strengthen the ability of its leaders to give "meaning and significance" to the communities of people they lead.

With evangelical Christianity at the core, I contend that Christian leaders can rely on authentic leadership to frame and characterize their practice. Evangelical Christian leaders should already be committed to an understanding of self in light of their religious sensitivities. More specifically, authentic leadership provides these leaders with permission to pursue an evangelical Christian understanding of their identity and sense of self. It gives evangelical Christian leaders permission to reflect on the development of the tenets and practice of their faith as a part of their leadership development. Further reflection on evangelical Christian theology will shape behavior and help these leaders to act with sensitivity towards their community. Naturally, this assists in developing moral and ethical awareness.

Given that an ethical frame is central to the faith, life, and work of evangelical Christians, these leaders should focus on developing an understanding of their faith. It provides an epistemology from which evangelical Christian leaders can ground their morality and ethics. The practice of evangelical Christianity enables the leader to ground their actions and behavior in an understanding of their faith. Starratt affirms that becoming authentic is

always done in relationship to others, including God. Similarly, faith-based leaders can be confident that leading with an evangelical Christian faith at the center provides them with certainty of thought and action. This aids followers in understanding the standard and expectations for evangelical Christian leaders. This accords with Avolio, Gardner, Walumbwa, Luthans, and May, who state, "[w]e conceive of authentic leaders as persons who have achieved high levels of authenticity in that they know who they are, what they believe and value, and they act upon those values and beliefs while transparently interacting with others." Evangelical Christian educational leaders who have a clearly articulated theological understanding that is communicated through relationship with the wider community will be empowered to lovingly serve their followers and develop future leaders.

Evangelical Christian leaders should be characterized by a deep awareness of their faith as it shapes their understanding of leadership. It shapes their sense of identity, and their frame to live a moral and ethical life. It develops a deep concern for the welfare of those among whom they work by providing leadership, in their service and towards those in the wider community. These leaders should develop authenticity through a consistent approach that comes from a cogent faith. This is grounded and shaped, not arbitrarily, but in the person and work of Jesus Christ who acts as leader par excellence, and as the model for all human behavior and endeavor. In this respect, evangelical Christian educational leaders should not act as autonomous masters. Rather, they should see themselves as subject to a greater power and submit themselves to their Lord, Jesus Christ. Evangelical Christian educational leaders need to see that their journey in leadership is as much a work of knowing and understanding the mechanics of leading people, as it is a journey of spiritual formation. Christian leaders can take confidence from this statement by Greenman who says:

> Spiritual formation is an ongoing process for Christians. It is not a
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> program or project or course that is completed in a few weeks, but

rather is a lifelong journey of transformation. … Faith in Jesus Christ

sustains a lifelong pursuit of spiritual maturity or wholeness found in

him. Despite the pressures of our activist, hurried culture, this process

cannot be reduced to learning personal management techniques or

how to "do things for the Lord" because it is primarily a matter of

cultivating an intimate relationship with the triune God.

An Agenda for Future Research

Throughout this chapter, it has been apparent that while there is limited literature available on

the specific topic of authentic leadership—and a subsequent limited availability of

empirically validated measurement tools for authentic leadership—there is limited literature

that examines authentic leadership from an evangelical Christian theological position. As a

leadership construct, authentic leadership lends itself to a rich and enduring faith-based

perspective. Further exploration of an evangelical Christian form of authentic leadership—

with subsequent investigation into the effectiveness of this construct for evangelical Christian

leaders, an understanding of the Christian "self" in light of authentic leadership, and

leader/follower relationship benefits within authentic evangelical Christian leadership—are

all potential areas of future research.

Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to explore the construct of authentic leadership from an

evangelical Christian perspective, and to illuminate the potential for authentic leadership to

inform faith-based educational leaders. To that end, I have sought to critically review the

literature on authentic leadership, determine its major components, analyze an evangelical

Christian view of leadership, and then determine if the ideologies were complementary. It is

hoped that this is the beginning of a new framework for evangelical Christian leaders to further explore strategies in leadership development.

This chapter has highlighted a shortage of literature in the emerging field of authentic leadership study despite a multiplicity of definitions. However, there are consistent threads that can be synthesized to show that authentic leadership researchers are in agreement at many points. To this end, the literature establishes that authenticity in leaders is formed through the exploration and understanding of personal identity and a sense of self. Further to this, the literature identifies an ethical and moral frame as being critical to the pursuit of authentic leadership. This is seen as a deeply relational component in the practice of this form of leadership. The literature also shows the need for authentic leaders to be committed to ongoing personal growth, a commitment to the growth of others, and a desire to see improved outcomes for the communities/institutions that authentic leaders manage.

In reviewing an evangelical Christian view of leadership, it is apparent that there are synergies with the authentic leadership literature. This opens the way for further research and investigation into building a faith-based frame for authentic leadership. This will provide evangelical Christian leaders with a construct to guide them in developing their skills as leaders, their leadership of others, and in the leadership of the communities that they serve.

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