Foreword: some transparent reflections on authentic leadership theory and research

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Back in 1987, at the end of a two-day meeting in Montreal, Canada, we were concluding what was the first management conference dedicated to examining charismatic and transformational leadership. As I think back to that time, we knew so very little about these elusive and yet extremely powerful leadership constructs. Rolling forward to today, we have now accumulated an enormous body of knowledge that helps explain how charismatic or transformational leadership can be modelled and measured using every imaginable method from qualitative content coding and sentimentality analysis on through to neurological imaging. We have also learned a great deal about the so-called 'black box' that contains the mediators or moderators that operate between leadership and perform-ance outcomes that explain how leadership is transmitted through to its impact on performance outcomes (Avolio and Mhatre 2012; Avolio et al. 2009b; Eberly et al. 2011).

Over a 30-plus-year time span, we have learned a lot about how varying leadership orientations or styles affect different observers of leadership through to how these varying leadership orientations emerge and are sustained across different organizations, industries and national cultures. Today, we even have evidence supporting that charismatic and transformational leadership can be developed and methods that work and don't work when attempting to do so (Avolio et al. 2009a; Bass and Bass 2008).

Nevertheless, we also know that there remains a broad range of problems with operationally defining and measuring these elusive con-structs, and in explaining why in some situations they account for performance and in others they don't. There are also many mechanisms in the black box and context that have not yet been identified or examined, and also mechanisms that have been examined at one point in

time along with leadership and outcome measures resulting in questions as to what causes what – does performance cause leadership or does leadership cause performance?

I am looking back as a preamble to what I want to discuss about authentic leadership theory and research. Specifically, through rigorous theoretical development and subsequent research spanning every method, population, culture and context, we have discovered a number of consistencies that provide a very practical foundation for advancing the assessment, evaluation and development of leaders and this form of leadership (Gardner et al. 2011). Indeed, there are now enough meta-analyses on the topic of positive forms of leadership to fill several volumes of a journal. So, the next time you go to a conference and hear someone say leadership can't be defined, measured or linked to performance outcomes, stand up in righteous and polite indignation and say, well, say whatever you want to say; just know that, even with our broad range and depth of imperfections, we, and I mean thousands of colleagues from almost every continent on earth, have done an amazing job of bringing these constructs into the light of day. Yet much work remains to fully understand what constitutes authentic leadership and its development, and, since contexts evolve over time, there will never be a spiking of the ball on the goal line, as the goal line will move as the context transforms over time; look at how advanced information technology is changing the way we all work and relate to each other, and the impact it can have on the leadership dynamic, just as one example.

Similar to the work on transformational and charismatic leadership, the work on authentic leadership theory has taken off exponentially since it was reintroduced into the literature nearly a decade ago – reintroduced in that many prior authors going back to Plato and Aristotle have discussed what it means to be authentic. Keeping track of the studies conducted over the last decade on authentic leadership, through our website at www.mindgarden.com, we find there have now been over 800 studies launched, from master's theses to complex field research projects, which are focusing on examining what constitutes authentic leadership and its development. There is also a large group of scholars and practitioners, who meet regularly at the Academy of Management meetings, who are also examining the theory, research and practice associated with authentic leadership. So the work on authentic leadership is very much alive and well, growing dramatically in terms of numbers of studies and potential impact on the way we assess, develop and evaluate authentic leadership and its development in leaders, followers, teams and organizations.

Perhaps, what's most interesting to me is that the impetus for studying what we originally referred to as the *root construct* of positive forms of

leadership started largely by accident. When I came to the University of Nebraska (Go Big Red!), I was totally focused on examining what genuinely developed leadership (substitute 'authentic' for 'genuine'). Indeed, based on my interest, with the formation of the leadership institute at Nebraska, the amazing cohort of doctoral and post-doctoral students who entered the programme were given a basic task that certainly violated every aspect of academic freedom in doing one's dissertation research. As a requirement for their research assistantship funding, all doctoral students had to conduct an intervention study, either an experimental manipulation study where cause and effect could be examined, or a developmental study, or both! The reason for this requirement was simple. I felt there was a paucity of experiments in the leadership field that had examined how to 'cause' positive leadership development, and that we needed to more definitively assess what caused different forms of leadership to grow, develop and impact performance. The personal motivation for me came from the billions of dollars spent on promoting leadership development around the globe without any theory or evidence to support these investments. Moreover, I was obsessed with the born-versus-made question, which I generally found to be strange, in that I cannot imagine anyone growing up to be a leader without going through the process of growing up, meaning made.

Consequently, back in 2004, we set off to discover what 'authentically' created leaders, by analysing every study ever done on leadership development (see Avolio et al. 2009a as one product of this effort), with a higher-order goal of examining what actually *accelerated* positive leadership development. At that time, we were very much convinced that genetic and life moments/events through some very intriguing and complex interactions produced 'positive forms' of leaders and leadership – good and bad, as well as ethical and unethical (Avolio and Gardner 2005; Avolio and Luthans 2006; Luthans and Avolio 2003). Simply put, the question that guided our work could be stated as follows: *What accelerated the development of leadership faster than your heritability programme?* We asked ourselves, was it crucible events, brief positive moments that triggered deep reflection, specific work challenges, education, training, micro-workshops and/or everything we just mentioned interacting in some complex dynamic?

However, something happened on the road to examining authentic leadership development, similar to paraphrasing what Yogi Berra once said, 'If you come to a fork in the road, take it.' Well, we came to a fork in the road and we took it, going down the path of examining what constituted authentic leadership *and* its development. The dual focus that emerged was in part reinforced by the work that I started with Fred

Luthans, which produced our 2003 chapter on authentic leadership development and positive organizational behaviour (Luthans and Avolio 2003). In that chapter, we covered the process of development, as well as examining what constituted authentic leadership and other positive organizational behaviour constructs.

Like most research discoveries over the course of history, the accident in our 'leadership laboratory' was born, and off we went defining not only authentic leadership development, but also authentic leadership back in 2003. Also, our conceptualization of authentic leadership further emerged from our first summit on the topic back in 2004, and then later with my colleagues in the leadership institute through a series of papers (Avolio et al. 2004; Gardner et al. 2005, 2011).

There were several other events that promoted the work we eventually pursued over the last decade. First, as I noted at the outset of this Foreword, I found myself revisiting the charismatic and transformational leadership conference in 1987, as well as a conversation I had with Bernie Bass in the early 1990s. In terms of the conference, I returned to something that Warren Bennis had said during his closing comments. He said after hearing the discussion on transformational and charismatic leadership that he was worried that we would actually learn so much about how to develop these forms of leadership that what we learned could fall into the wrong hands and be used by the 'wrong' people for the 'wrong' purpose. I was reminded of his comments again after reading Jane Howell's classic dissertation study on training charismatic leadership (Howell and Frost, 1989), and more recently after reading the work by Antonakis and colleagues (2012) on the same topic.

In the mid-1990s, I came into Bernie Bass's office at Binghamton University with an idea or question, which could be summarized as follows: *Was there an authentic form of transformational leadership, as well as one that looked like it, but was inauthentic?* Bass and Steidlmeier (1999) later referred to this as pseudo-transformational leadership. Now, 15 years past the Montreal conference and living in Nebraska, we were revisiting the question of authenticity, in terms not only of the leader, but also of the follower, groups and even organization as we escalated the construct across levels. Moreover, going down the other fork in the road, we were also interested in how we could authentically develop authentic leaders.

For those colleagues reading this Foreword who are just starting their careers, you will no doubt discover, as I did, that the early seeds and trigger moments in your career circle back and grow into full-blown models, methods, theories and research streams. So I feel compelled to now share my secret with each of you in the spirit of transparency

regarding what has motivated me to pursue this work on authentic leadership and its development. Simply put, I have truly marvelled at how an idea in any field can become a study, an article, a conference, the foundation for creating a network of scholars, a collaborative relationship, a grant, a research contract, and indeed in some cases even institutionalized in the literature.

Having now gained this important insight in my career, I have felt that the forks in the road that I have chosen to pursue over my career have been motivated by an interest in driving at least a small segment of the field of leadership forward by offering to others pathways to circumnavigate with their insights, critiques, field studies, measures, videos, consulting practices and quotations in their speeches. I will also admit, although often requested, that I have never written critiques of other people's work, nor do I ever respond to them, as I have focused on the act of creation as being my most important contribution to advancing leadership theory, research and practice. Through creation, my goal has been to provide fodder for a legion of experts, who are much better at picking apart creations to do their good work to advance the science and practice of leadership whether it be charismatic, transformational or authentic. I hope they have enjoyed the journey as much as I have in creating these few pathways to be pursued.

In sum, we started with a simple definition offered initially by Avolio et al. (2004, p. 806), who stated that authentic leaders 'act in accordance with deep personal values and convictions, to build credibility and win the respect and trust of followers by encouraging diverse viewpoints and building networks of collaborative relationships with followers, and thereby lead in a manner that followers recognize as authentic', which was later refined by Walumbwa et al. (2008, p. 94) stating that authentic leadership encompassed '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'. With these several lines of leadership code and of course a summit composed of brilliant colleagues and an edited book and special issue of *The Leadership Quarterly* to guide future work, the field of authentic leadership studies was born. Now, we are at a point in time where it is appropriate to look back at what's been accomplished, what has not, and what remains to be discovered. So, enjoy your journey through the remaining chapters in this book in terms of seeing how far we have come, and how far we still need to travel to understand the *root construct* of authentic leadership and its development.

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