



Are authentic leaders associated with more virtuous, committed and potent teams? ☆

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ABSTRACT

Through a team-level analysis, the study shows how authentic leadership (AL) predicts team potency both directly and through the mediating role of team virtuousness and team affective commitment. Data about AL and team virtuousness were collected two months before data collection on team affective commitment and team potency. Fifty-one teams were selected for testing the hypotheses. The main findings are the following: (a) AL predicts team affective commitment through the mediating role of team virtuousness; (b) team virtuousness predicts team potency through the mediating role of team affective commitment; (c) AL predicts team potency through the mediating role of team virtuousness and team affective commitment. By focusing on two positive constructs (AL and team virtuousness), for which interrelations have rarely been explored, the study contributes to the Positive Organizational Scholarship movement, and suggests that AL and virtuousness are good in themselves and also potential facilitators of team success.

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1. Introduction

Team potency, the collectively-shared belief of a team that it can be effective (Lester, Meglino, & Koorsgaard, 2002; Shea & Guzzo, 1987), can be a very powerful motivator¹ (Gibson & Earley, 2007). Team potency differs from collective efficacy in that collective efficacy “concerns individuals’ beliefs not necessarily shared by others. Thus, potency is an attribute of groups whereas collective efficacy is an attribute of individuals” (Guzzo, Yost, Campbell, & Shea, 1993, p. 90; for a discussion about differences between team potency and related constructs, see Stajkovic, Lee, & Nyberg, 2009). Team potency influences a team to initiate action, the effort levels the team exerts for reaching goals, and how long the team’s efforts are sustained. The topic has been investigated in several settings (organizational, educational, sports, military; Stajkovic et al., 2009). In organizational settings, team potency relates to variables such as team problem solving, team learning, service performance, and team performance (e.g., Bandura, 1997; De Jong, de Ruyter, & Wetzels, 2005; Kirkman & Rosen, 1999; Lester et al., 2002; Shea & Guzzo, 1987; Sivasubramaniam, Murry, Avolio, & Jung, 2002; see Stajkovic et al., 2009 for a synthesis). However, little is known about the factors promoting team potency

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¹ Although teams and groups have potential differences, Biemann et al. (2012) argued that both may be seen as “a clustering of individuals who are interdependent based on a set of common expectations or hierarchical structuring and who interact with one another as if they are a group”. For simplicity, we use the term “team” throughout the paper.

(Gibson & Earley, 2007; Lester et al., 2002). Guzzo et al. (1993) suggested that leadership is a key determinant of team potency, but empirical studies are scarce (Howell & Shea, 2006).

In this paper we focus on authentic leadership (AL) as predictor of team potency. The apparent degradation in the quality of the “overall moral fabric of contemporary leadership” (Avolio & Mhatre, 2012) creates a need for new theories that, like AL, focus on promoting what is right rather than focusing only on “results at whatever cost” to the exclusion of ethical considerations. Followers', teams', and organizations' effectiveness must be promoted via authentic leadership behaviors that also help to restore trust in leaders and organizations (Avolio & Mhatre, 2012; George, 2003). In times of a crisis of confidence (Avolio & Mhatre, 2012; George, 2003), studying and promoting AL is crucial for developing confidence in leaders and promoting “pragmatic outcomes” (Cameron, Bright, & Caza, 2004, p. 770). Considering the impact of team potency on team performance (Stajkovic et al., 2009), team potency may be considered to be a “pragmatic outcome” of AL, as we discuss below.

AL is a subject of growing interest among scholars (e.g., Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing, & Peterson, 2008; Walumbwa, Luthans, Avey, & Oke, 2011) and practitioners (e.g., George, 2003). Both argue that AL promotes positive attitudes and behaviors of employees and contributes to individual and organizational/team performance. More empirical research is necessary for further testing this assertion. Although several empirical studies have been conducted for predicting individual level outcomes (Rego, Sousa, Marques, & Cunha, 2012a; Walumbwa, Wang, Wang, Schaubroeck, & Avolio, 2010; Walumbwa et al., 2008), studies are scarcer in predicting team level outcomes (Walumbwa et al., 2011). In consonance with Avolio, Gardner, Walumbwa, Luthans, and May, 2004, we consider that AL, although important, is not sufficient to achieve positive team outcomes. There is a process linking AL to team potency, and we suggest that team virtuousness and team affective commitment may be part of that process. We hypothesize that AL nurtures team virtuousness, which in turn promotes team affective commitment (Avolio, Gardner, Walumbwa, Luthans, & May, 2004; Rego, Ribeiro, & Cunha, 2010; Rego, Ribeiro, Cunha, & Jesuino, 2011) and, in this way, team potency. Both team commitment and team virtuousness are potential mediators, with research suggesting that both predict team performance (Neininger, Lehmann-Willenbrock, Kauffeldt, & Henschela, 2010; Palanski, Kahai, & Yammarino, 2011).

Team commitment is analogous to organizational commitment, except that the target of the psychological attachment is the team, not the organization. There is reason to believe that team commitment contributes more to the prediction of team-related criteria such as team potency than does organizational commitment (Den Hartog & Belschak, 2007; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Riketta & Van Dick, 2005). AL may encourage team affective commitment through the mediating role of team virtuousness (Avolio, Gardner, Walumbwa, Luthans, & May, 2004). Team virtuousness refers to team contexts where “good” habits, desires, and actions (e.g., humanity, integrity, forgiveness, and trust) are practiced, supported, nourished, disseminated, and sustained, at both the individual and collective levels (Cameron et al., 2004). The topic has been “out of favor in the scientific community” (Cameron et al., 2004, p. 767) and out of the focus of practitioner attention (Rego et al., 2010). A few empirical studies have been conducted (Bright, Cameron, & Caza, 2006; Cameron et al., 2004; Rego et al., 2010, 2011), but to our knowledge none has focused on both AL and team virtuousness. This is surprising considering that both are core elements of Positive Organizational Scholarship (Cameron & Spreitzer, 2012). More empirical research is necessary for “legitimizing” them in both the scholars' and practitioners' communities (Cameron & Winn, 2012).

We hypothesize that AL fosters virtuous team climates, leading team members to share common positive perceptions about how virtuous the team is, which in turn increases team affective commitment and, in this way, makes the team more potent. For example, because authentic leaders set high standards for moral and ethical behavior, they nurture honesty, integrity, and trust within the team, developing positive/upward spirals within the team, making it more virtuous. Team virtuousness, in turn, creates team affective commitment (Rego et al., 2011), leading the whole team to feel more potent. Such effects may occur because, for example, team members develop meaning at work and gratitude for working in a virtuous team (Emmons & Shelton, 2001). As a consequence, they reciprocate with greater team affective commitment (Coyle-Shapiro, 2002; Eisenberger, Armeli, Rexwinkel, Lynch, & Rhoades, 2001). Through positive behavioral interactions within the team (Ilies, Morgeson, & Nahrgang, 2005), affective commitment translates into upward/positive collective spirals that make the team more potent.

2. Explaining the main constructs

2.1. Authentic leadership

AL can be defined 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” (Walumbwa et al., 2008, p. 94). Authentic leaders are people “who have achieved high levels of authenticity in that they know who they are, what they believe, what their values are, and that they can act upon these values and beliefs while transparently interacting with others” (Avolio, Gardner, Walumbwa, Luthans, & May, 2004, p. 802).

Theoretical and empirical evidence (Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May, & Walumbwa, 2005; Rego et al., 2012a; Walumbwa et al., 2008) suggests that the AL construct comprises four dimensions: (1) *Self-awareness* represents the degree to which the leader understands how (s)he derives and makes meaning of the world and is aware of his or her strengths and limitations, how others see him or her, and how (s)he impacts others (Walumbwa et al., 2008); (2) *Balanced processing* refers to the degree to which the leader objectively analyzes all relevant data before coming to a decision and solicits views that challenge deeply-held positions (Gardner et al., 2005; Walumbwa et al., 2008); (3) *Internalized moral perspective* refers to the degree to which the leader sets a high standard for moral and

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