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Authentic leadership and leaders' mental well-being: An experience sampling study

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ABSTRACT

Research on authentic leadership has yielded important insights about its effects on subordinates. However, its consequences for the leaders themselves remain largely unexamined. This is problematic, as organizations require their leaders to provide guidance and leaders' mental well-being is a prerequisite for this. Drawing on the theories of ego-depletion and authentic leadership, we investigate the role of authentic leadership in predicting leaders' mental well-being. In an experience sampling study, we apply hierarchical linear modeling to analyze 396 observations from 44 executives. Our multilevel moderated mediation analyses reveal that authentic leadership reduces leaders' stress and increases their work engagement and that these effects are mediated by leader mental depletion. Moreover, we show that the indirect effects are contingent on the extent to which leaders interact with their subordinates: authentic leaders deplete less with increasing follower interaction, while inauthentic leaders deplete less with decreasing follower interaction.

Introduction

The concept of authentic leadership has attracted considerable attention in both leadership research (Avolio, Gardner, Walumbwa, Luthans, & May, 2004; Cooper, Scandura, & Schriesheim, 2005; Dinh et al., 2014; Gardner, Cogliser, Davis, & Dickens, 2011) and practice (George, Sims, McLean, & Mayer, 2007; Shamir & Eilam, 2005). This attention was fueled by corporate scandals and questionable business practices that have undermined leaders' public credibility and legitimacy (Gardner et al., 2011; Peus, Wesche, Streicher, Braun, & Frey, 2012), which has triggered an increasing focus on positive, more values-driven forms of leadership in the past decade of leadership research (Fehr, Yam, & Dang, 2015; Luthans & Avolio, 2009; Schaubroeck et al., 2012), such as authentic leadership (Gardner et al., 2011). These leadership forms are assumed to counter the dysfunctional tendencies of leadership and to help restore subordinates' confidence in their leaders.

Specifically, an authentic leader is defined as one who draws on his/her own “personal experiences, be they thoughts, emotions, needs, wants, preferences, or beliefs, processes” and who “acts in accord with the true self, expressing oneself in ways that are consistent with inner thoughts and feelings” (Harter, 2002, p. 382). Moreover, it is not that a leader is either authentic or not, but it is rather “best to recognize that authenticity exists on a continuum and that the more people remain true to their core values, identities, preferences and emotions, the more authentic they become” (Avolio et al., 2004, p. 802). Authentic leadership is assumed to motivate followers and promote individual, team, and organizational effectiveness (Gardner et al., 2011; Luthans, Norman, & Hughes, 2006; Yammarino, Dionne, Schriesheim, & Dansereau, 2008). Empirical research has demonstrated that authentic leadership is indeed associated with several beneficial outcomes for followers such as organizational commitment (Peus et al., 2012), and work

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engagement (Wang & Hsieh, 2013).

However, while prior research has demonstrated authentic leadership's general effectiveness in instilling positive follower behaviors, the effects of authentic leadership on leaders themselves remain poorly understood (Gardner et al., 2011). In particular, beyond the issue of how leadership influences the behaviors and perceptions of followers, there is a dearth of theory and evidence regarding how authentic leadership affects leaders' own well-being (Gardner et al., 2011). This is problematic, given that leaders represent the backbone of organizations, even beyond the domain of business, and their effective functioning and well-being is essential for an organization's success. Specifically, research has shown that leaders' mental well-being has an important influence on both employees' well-being and leaders' effectiveness (e.g., Rajah, Song, & Arvey, 2011; Ten Brummelhuis, Haar, & Roche, 2014). The absence of theory relating to the role one's own leadership plays in leaders' own mental well-being appears particularly problematic.

Given this research gap, the main purpose of the present article is to advance theory on authentic leadership through an improved understanding of how authentic leadership influences mental well-being of leaders themselves. Authentic leadership is a worthwhile candidate for investigating the relationship between leadership and a leader's well-being as the promotion of values and the display of emotions that are incongruent with one's own inner thoughts and feelings are likely to afford more effort than when aligning with one's true self (Humphrey, 2012; Humphrey, Ashforth, & Diefendorff, 2015). In line with theory on ego-depletion (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven, & Tice, 1998; Muraven, Tice, & Baumeister, 1998), this effortful process of faking, suppression, and exaggeration should have a detrimental effect on leaders' mental well-being, thereby inducing elevated levels of stress and reduced levels of work engagement. Moreover, we posit that this detrimental effect is contingent upon the extent to which leaders interact with their followers. Thus, we link theory on authentic leadership with the literature on ego-depletion to argue that authenticity is a key variable in explaining leaders' mental well-being. To empirically test our conceptual model, we respond to calls for more diverse methods in authentic leadership research (Gardner et al., 2011) and apply an experience sampling methodology with a real-world sample comprising 405 daily observations in 45 executive managers. We thus enrich the methodological repertoire in authentic leadership research that currently relies heavily on cross-sectional designs. In line with prior research on mental well-being (Beattie & Griffin, 2014), we focus on work stress as a negative indicator of leaders' mental well-being, and on work engagement as a positive indicator.

The present study makes two main theoretical contributions. First, we extend and refine theory on authentic leadership to better understand the consequences of authentic leadership on leaders' own mental well-being and employ workplace stress and work engagement as relevant outcomes. The insights gained through this study therefore provide a step forward in developing a comprehensive understanding of authentic leadership (Cooper et al., 2005). Specifically, we identify leader mental depletion as a key mechanism through which authentic leadership unfolds its positive effect on leaders' mental well-being. By taking into account the mental well-being of leaders, we expand the bridge between theories on positive health and leadership theories promoted by Macik-Frey, Quick, and Cooper (2009). In this regard, our study also contributes to the research on workplace stress and engagement (Ganster & Rosen, 2013; Sonnentag & Fritz, 2015) by disclosing the consequences of authentic leadership related to the mental well-being of those leaders who engage in it. By examining how leadership affects leader mental depletion, we complement research that linked off-work factors with leader mental depletion and well-being (Barnes, Lucianetti, Bhawe, & Christian, 2015; Ten Brummelhuis et al., 2014).

Second, by investigating the contingent role of leaders' interactions with their subordinates, this study provides a new perspective on the enriching potential such interactions may have for authentic leaders. While it is widely acknowledged that authentic leaders strive and are more likely to develop others into authentic followers or authentic leaders themselves (Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May, & Walumbwa, 2005; Luthans & Avolio, 2003), we develop a theory for how interactions with followers support authentic leaders in replenishing personal resources, decreasing stress, and increasing their own engagement. We thus provide a further step forward toward implementing relational aspects in the development of theory on authentic leadership (Ladkin & Spiller, 2013; Leroy, Anseel, Gardner, & Sels, 2015; Wang, Sui, Luthans, Wang, & Wu, 2014).

Theory

Authentic leadership and leaders' mental well-being

Authentic leadership represents a root construct that can serve to enhance other forms of positive leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Authentic leaders have been characterized as individuals who are deeply aware of their values and beliefs, who possess sufficient self-confidence to express themselves and behave genuinely in agreement with their inner thoughts and feelings (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Gardner et al., 2005; Ilies, Morgeson, & Nahrgang, 2005). At this point it is important to note that this predominant psychological perspective of authentic leadership does not go unchallenged in the literature on authentic leadership and an "expanded understanding of authenticity as a relational and structural concept" (Algera & Lips-Wiersma, 2012, p. 118), which is based on existential theory, is alternatively advocated by some scholars (Algera & Lips-Wiersma, 2012; Tomkins & Simpson, 2015). However, our theorizing explicitly bases on theory and findings from a psychological perspective on authentic leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Gardner et al., 2005; Ilies et al., 2005). Moreover the focus of our study is on the individual leader, as compared to the focus on organizational members in their entirety advocated by the existential perspective (Algera & Lips-Wiersma, 2012). Therefore, we will refer to the psychologically based perspective of authentic leadership theory in this study.

While the attributes of authentic leadership have been shown to result in positive follower outcomes (e.g., Peus et al., 2012; Wang & Hsieh, 2013), we argue that this consistency of authentic leaders' behaviors with their inner thoughts and feelings has also important consequences for leaders' well-being. Acting authentically based on one's own values and beliefs, and hence being oneself,

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