

Authentic Leadership Development: Some Philosophical, Theoretical and Practical Dilemmas answered through Group- Coaching and the ALD360[®]

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Abstract

Among the legion of leadership theories that include Transformational, Transactional, Charismatic, Servant, Situational, Autocratic, and Democratic (Bass & Bass, 2009), it was hoped that Authentic Leadership would prove the positive root construct underlying them all. Consequently, it was almost inevitable that scholars in the field would attempt to develop an Authentic Leadership construct that could be objectively observed, studied and measured. In this article we explore how, along with its promise, the idea of Authentic Leadership and Authentic Leadership Development has also brought with it key philosophic, conceptual and practical challenges. These challenges mainly revolve around the definition of Authenticity itself and how this is effectively addressed in leadership development. The purpose of this article therefore, is to explore and tentatively offer an answer to these challenges through the process of Authentic Leadership Group-Coaching and its evaluation through a new instrument presented here for the first time, the ALD360[®].

Keywords: powerful questioning, dialogue, systems thinking, executive coaching, team coaching

Defining Authenticity

‘Know thy Self’ has become the clarion call in the pursuit of authenticity since it was inscribed above the Temple of Apollo at Delphi. This aphorism is often attributed to Socrates but, in reality, he was more an ardent follower of this maxim than its originator (Warner, 1958). This one-line philosophy from antiquity has occupied many great minds in the centuries since and definitions of authenticity have followed from all areas that ponder the human condition, from literature and art to psychology and philosophy. Of these it is probably the fields of psychology and philosophy that offer us the most fertile ground on which to cultivate a meaningful discussion of authenticity as applied to leadership. In particular, Existential Philosophy builds on the ancient Greek dictum above and urges us to not just know ourselves, but to be ourselves, and

moreover to actively choose and create ourselves and the lives we live. An uncompromising imperative of Existentialism is to become fully aware of the freedoms we have and to be fully responsible to each (Cooper, 1995). That is to be both aware of, and to make, conscious choices in determining our own destiny. This laconic definition of authenticity lies at the heart of many prodigious works by existential thinkers and writers such as Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre (Blackham, 1953). Each believed an authentic life was one of self-expression and self-determination and that, ultimately, we become the choices we make. This, they claim, is living authentically. But living always brings us into contact with a world which also has to be navigated and engaged with authentically. So, it is not just a case of being true to ourselves by ourselves but, more demandingly, in relation to others as well, which is no mean feat for any person fully engaged with the highly connected modern world.

Defining Authentic Leadership

Already, there's a sense of the even greater challenge this concept of authenticity poses for a leader, not least because the relational web most leaders have to navigate their way around can be both complex and conflicting. This is true, of course, for leadership of any age but without doubt, increasingly so. This can, and has, made very attractive some of the tantalizingly straightforward definitions of authenticity and authentic leadership proffered so far, for example 'the unimpeded operation of one's true or core self' (Kernis & Goldman, 2006) or 'owning one's personal experiences' (Harter, 2002).

The most popular Authentic Leadership theory was built on the first of these (Kernis & Goldman, 2003, 2006) and developed through the combined work of Avolio and Gardner (2005), Gardner, Avolio, and Walumbwa (2005) and Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing and Peterson (2008). This work defines the Authentic Leadership construct as being made up of four elements: Self-awareness, Unbiased Processing, Relational Transparency and an Internalized Moral Perspective. They state

Authentic leadership is 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 the leaders working with followers, fostering positive self-development. (Walumbwa, et. al., 2008, p. 94)

This definition has held sway for around a decade and has even led to the development of an Authentic Leadership assessment instrument called the ALQ (ibid, 2008). However, more recently this theoretical construct and associated assessment instrument has come under critique for being too deterministic and amounting to an Authentic Leader competency framework. By definition, such competency frameworks are based on the generic skills and behaviors that an organization wants their leaders to display, and do not necessarily favor a leader's individual and natural authenticity (Ladkin & Chellie, 2013). Criticism of the ALQ and the model of Authentic Leadership that it is based on cite its lack of a philosophic ontology as its major shortcoming, and that in its attempt to posit a conceptual model of authenticity, no real consideration has been given to the work of the existential philosophers such as those mentioned above who have debated the topic of authenticity for centuries. Among the critics of this concept of Authentic Leadership are Lawler and Ashman (2012) who have observed this lack of “a convincing ontological basis for the concept of authenticity as it is applied to leadership” (p. 327). Algra and Lips-Wiersma (2012) similarly note that “in its haste to be operationalized the concept of authenticity as it is currently used in authentic leadership is limited as there have not yet been sufficient attempts made to gain an understanding of the ontological roots of authenticity” (p. 118). Despite these misgivings though, there is still hope that if the field of Authentic Leadership can re-calibrate its course it has the potential to “provide a deeper understanding of the human experience which has long been ignored in leadership theory. If AL theory embraces its existential roots a substantial contribution to leadership theory can be made” (ibid, p. 126).

Morals versus Meaning in Authentic Leadership

In its haste to operationalize the concept of authenticity the leadership field has put the Authentic Leadership (AL) cart before the Authentic Leadership Development (ALD) horse. If we are to say that authentic leaders should be capable of demonstrating unbiased processing, relational transparency etc. then that is how we will inevitably aim to measure and develop them. Another potential issue with the existing AL model is the inclusion of a Moral Perspective component within its construct. My research (Fusco, 2018) and that of other researchers in the field (e.g. Eilam-Shamir & Shamir, 2013) show that leadership morals and ethics don't automatically fall within the realm of Authentic Leadership. It is understandable to want to make the inference, but currently this isn't soundly supported by the empirical evidence beyond that which led to the development of the existing AL construct and which seems to have become black-boxed ever since. Personal values are,

of course, a key component in authentic leadership, and research by Schwartz (2004), Rockeach (2008) and others demonstrate how important and indeed universal many individual and societal values are. However, the existing body of knowledge around Moral and Ethical Leadership (Gini, 1997, Brown & Treviño, 2006) already has its own models, theories and measures and therefore its place as a requisite core component at the center of the Authentic Leadership construct, although intuitive, may well be open to question. It also falls short, in my view, of what true authentic leadership is capable of achieving. Take, for instance, the grand figures who stand as the archetypes among our idea of authentic leaders, the likes of Martin Luther King, Mandela, Gandhi etc. Yes, these leaders embodied strong personal ethics and morals, but they also created or maximized the opportunity to apply these to grand social, political and humanitarian causes. Their geo-political leadership was characterized not just by ethics and morals, but also by an over-arching and deeply significant purpose and meaning.

In my view, what seems integral to authentic leadership, and often subordinated to its claim on morals and values, is choice and pursuit of a personally significant leadership purpose. It is difficult to conjure up the image of an authentic leader, without choosing someone who has implemented or at least orchestrated important interventions, be they economic, political, social, humanitarian or, indeed, in the case of the UN's Kofi Anan, all of the above. As an authentic leader I can be 'true to myself' – but in the pursuit of what, and to what end? I can live a life of isolated self-expression and self-determination, but that probably wouldn't be most people's definition of outstanding leadership. As noted in the Introduction, true personal authenticity includes an emphasis on determining both *myself* and my *destiny*. Therefore, it must surely follow that true authentic leadership requires self-determination in both my leadership role and my leadership goal – my purpose as a leader. Within operational constraints, even as a Senior Manager or Divisional Director, I can decide consciously what the purpose of that role is 'to me' and what goals I can achieve within it that have a deeper significance for me personally.

Consider Andy, who was a participant in the research described below. Andy was a highly competent engineer who headed up a nuclear safety inspection team. He enjoyed his work which was highly technical and of critical importance. However, most unexpectedly, what he found he enjoyed the most was the mentoring of the young graduates coming up through the technician ranks. This was a very demanding and consuming mentoring responsibility but one that he gradually discovered offered more intrinsic enjoyment and satisfaction for him than his leadership 'day-job.' Eventually, he took steps to

enlarge this part of his role and in time assumed full responsibility for the organization's entire mentoring initiative, finding greater congruence and meaning in his role as a result. More of Andy later.

Of course, self-determination as an authentic leader will always have to occur within organizational constraints, just as authentic self-expression, and determination in life more generally, will always to some degree be contingent on the facts-of-life which we are bequeathed. Such 'facticity,' as Sartre (1956) called it, includes our natural properties such as sex, race, nationality etc. but also the historical and cultural hands we are initially dealt with in life, but can ultimately transcend, such as economics and class. Whatever the facticity of my life, though, no account of these properties can ever fully describe the inner subjective experience I have of them. The kind of person I actually am is defined more by my attitude towards it. How I choose to interpret, learn from and ultimately respond to such facticity remains, to paraphrase Victor Frankl, my last freedom (Frankl, 1959). Similarly, each leader has the facticity of their organizational environment and leadership context, but there always remains the opportunity for choosing your own interpretation of meaning. Such conscious interpretation gives leadership meaning and therefore how a leader interprets events significantly influences how they respond to events. President Obama chose to interpret global events in one way, which influenced his actions towards them (along with a myriad of other influencing factors). President Trump chooses to interpret similar events in a very different way, which in turn leads to very different actions and interactions. When we attribute meaning to a situation we give it personal significance, a significance that in turn gives purpose to our interaction with that event. So, a challenge genuine authentic leadership development can address is to help individuals identify and understand exactly what personal meaning their leadership has for them and what achievements have personal significance for them as a leader. Because of its ease in being quantified and measured, profit seems to reign supreme as the main marker of effective leadership in business, but as some of the global leaders mentioned above show us, significance often transcends economic profit.

This, then, brings us to the challenge inherent in the development of authentic leaders. If authenticity and authentic leadership is a deeply individual experience, with no pre-existing list of generalized traits, characteristics or behaviors to show us the way, how do we engage in genuine authentic leadership development? How do we develop authentic leaders in a manner that takes into account the philosophic and existential roots of authenticity? How do we identify and develop the leader's values, meaning and purpose that gives life

to authentic leadership? And how can such development be measured in a manner that does not replicate the issues of an Authentic Leadership competency model discussed above?

I propose that we return the ALD horse back in front of the AL cart, and start again. That is, we develop leaders to become more of themselves in their leadership and we let *them* tell us what that means to *them*. Through research, we have established common themes and attributes that emerge through such individual leadership development. Among a clearer understanding of personal values and strengths etc., there is also evidence that such attributes include the ability to see more clearly the deeper meaning and purpose inherent in the individual leadership experience. Although these attributes emerge consistently it remains important to resist the temptation to abstract such themes into a model of Authentic Leadership to be strived for. Each individual leader should pilot their own personal route through this development, achieving learning unique to their own individual needs, motivations and aspirations. Such a form of ALD is summarized below, along with a newly developed assessment instrument that can be used by leaders, and others, to judge the results of such a self-authored developmental journey.

Authentic Leadership Group-Coaching

Many current forms of Authentic Leadership Development are still based around a didactic pedagogy seemingly based on the premise that you can actually teach or train authenticity into a leader. By contrast, I have developed a group program that is based purely on coaching principles and develops individual's leadership authenticity free from any of the usual management models, leadership theories or competency frameworks (Fusco, O'Riordan, & Palmer, 2015a). Briefly, Day 1 looks at the leaders past and ask them to identify what values they have developed. It asks them to identify when and how these values were adopted so they can genuinely know and understand them and integrate them into their leadership role. Day 2 looks at the present and invites individuals to explore how their character influences how they operate in their existing leadership domain. Day 3 looks towards their future and asks them to consider the actual purpose of their leadership and what they want to achieve with it. Importantly, these 3 days are run over three months to enable the learning to emerge and be applied. As leadership is a fundamentally social process, so the group-coaching is a social learning process, and as such the group has to be given time to establish the trust that genuine dialogue of this nature requires. In addition, as the learning is wholly individual and emergent, the programme remains free of the ubiquitous pre-determined course objectives

and learning outcomes that are often put in place in an attempt to direct and predict actual learning. The presupposition of this design is that to be increasingly authentic in their leadership, each individual participant has to take responsibility for their own learning. It falls to them to decide what they needed to learn, where they believe they can personally grow, and ultimately what they want to change or achieve as a leader. This approach to self-directed learning in a group-coaching environment falls squarely in line with Gestalt's theory of Paradoxical Change where 'change occurs when one becomes (more of) what he is, not when he tries to become (more of) what he is not' (Beisser, 1970, p. 72).

Several years of ALD coaching-group output data has been analyzed (Fusco, O'Riordan, & Palmer, 2015b) using the Grounded Theory qualitative research method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This method of research and data analysis uses an inductive and constant comparison approach and builds discreet items of data into increasingly abstracted codes and themes until an eventual explanatory theory is achieved that is firmly *grounded* in the data. The ultimate aim of this research approach is to identify what is predictably and consistently achieved when leaders engage in such self-directed development as presented here. Ultimately, each individual leader generates the learning that is important and necessary for them personally, and no two leaders will be identical in that respect. However, through Grounded Theory it is possible to establish what the consistent and predictable themes of that learning will be, and below are the six key attributes that have been shown to consistently emerge from this group-coaching approach to ALD:

- Improved Strategic Leadership
- Increased Leadership Clarity
- Enhanced Leadership Proactivity
- Improved Self-Management
- Greater Interpersonal Insight
- Enhanced Relationship Management

What exactly is it that makes ALD Group-Coaching an existentially informed approach to leadership development? First, as mentioned above, it puts the individuals firmly at the center of their learning experience and not subordinated to theory or expert-directed instruction. In so doing it focuses the individual leader on key personal existential themes, not least of which is their sense of purpose and meaning. These are not typical issues addressed in more

usual types of leadership development. As already discussed however, *Meaning* and *Authenticity* are coequal, and in many ways indistinguishable as core existential issues. The psychotherapist Irvin Yalom (1980) lists Meaning among his four key existential concerns, alongside Freedom, Isolation and Death. The psychiatrist Victor Frankl goes even further and situates it firmly at the heart of Man's (sic) existence and believes life in its totality is a constant quest for meaning. He developed this belief while enduring the concentration camps of WW2, and personally attributed his survival to it. Along with, he says, no small amount of plain luck (Frankl, 1985).

A second existential feature of this approach to authentic leadership development, is the manner in which it takes a temporal approach and follows each participant along a past-present-future timeline (Heidegger, 1962). This forces the leader to confront each of these different aspects of themselves, in turn facilitating the integration of their current self with their past self and their anticipated future self (Markus, 1986). Third, its structure is based soundly on group-coaching principles which operationalise the social-psychological dynamics long believed to be required for the exploring, developing and establishing of a strong and authentic interpersonal self (James, 1890; Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934, Baumeister, 1982; Rosenberg, 1979; Schlenker, 1986). This group-coaching format also allows each individual to operate in the group simultaneously at both the intra- and inter-personal level of experience. This enables them to explore the two aspects that the self-system is now widely believed to be constructed of, and operating at. These simultaneous levels operate as both 'an internal organised dynamic cognitive-affective-action system' and 'an interpersonal self-construction system' (Mischel & Morf, 2003, p. 23). This approach helps leaders consider authenticity as something to be achieved both internally *and* relationally and helps them access and modify both their established core self-concepts, as well as their more malleable working self-concept, i.e. the part of their self-concept they are calling forth in any given situation. Such deep learning is demonstrated by consistent and significant increases in Self-Concept-Clarity-Scale scores in terms of both probability and effect size (Fusco, O'Riordan, & Palmer, 2016), (Campbell, Trapnell, Heine, Katz, Lavallo, & Lehman, 1996).

Measuring Authentic Leadership Development

With six key leadership attributes identified as the output of this ALD approach, the next step is to develop a way of measuring what gains have been made in each attribute, as a result of the group-coaching, something both individual participants as well as their sponsoring organizations may well be

interested in knowing. It should be noted again, however, that this is not a proposed six-component model of Authentic Leadership, but rather a list of attributes that are reliably developed through the group-coaching process. It was considered useful, for real world application, to develop measures of the six attributes that could then be used for either a leader's self-evaluation or for 360° assessment. This would allow the leaders and potentially their peers to see where personal growth and development had been attained as a result of their developmental experience, something quite key, particularly in the absence of program objectives and pre-set learning outcomes as noted above. The design and development of this instrument is briefly described below.

The ALD360® Scales and Reliability

The six scales arrived at through the Grounded Theory analysis (Fusco, et al, 2015b) have each been broken down to provide six discreet indicators. Sample items of each are presented below:

Leadership Clarity:

- I am prepared to communicate a change in leadership direction when necessary
- I can identify the critical issues pertinent to my leadership
- I am aware of the values that guide my leadership

Leadership Proactivity:

- I actively pursue leadership goals beyond those expected of me
- I consciously seek opportunities to create a positive impact
- I respond positively to unexpected leadership situations

Strategic Leadership:

- I take leadership actions that are anticipatory in nature
- I think broadly and systemically about my leadership goals
- I take actions that are intended to create change rather than just react to change

Self-Management:

- I understand the link between my thoughts, emotions and behaviours

- I am able to effectively manage my thoughts and emotions to aid my goal pursuit
- I continually learn from and develop my leadership approach from experience

Interpersonal Insight:

- I am open to and respect the ideas, opinions and perspectives of others
- I accurately judge the intent in the messages of others
- I suspend my own judgement when trying to understand other's perspectives

Relationship Management:

- I constructively take on-board feedback from others
- I seek mutual understanding in my dealings with others
- I am able to give constructive feedback to others

Results

The ALD360[®] research as presented here is midway through exploratory sequential analysis. This is a process by which research is initiated with qualitative analysis exploring a substantive area of investigation, in this case using Grounded Theory to assess group-coaching authentic leadership development. Based on the qualitative findings, in this case the leadership attributes presented above, a second phase of quantitative investigation and assessment is then conducted. This qualitative then quantitative, mixed methods approach can advance research in areas where there is a lack of existing data. Where subject exploration is needed It draws on the strengths of both methodologies as it moves forward to evaluate tools or instruments developed from the research. The final stage of exploratory sequential research is one of data integration. The reliability results detailed below represent the first step in the data integration phase to establish if all of the 36 instrument subscales are designed such that they are internally consistent and reliable. The second phase will move on to further investigate construct and content validity. A final phase of research will be replication studies to assess consistency of ALD group coaching and its output in terms of the six leadership attributes.

The internal consistency and reliability of the ALD360[®] scales were estimated using Cronbach Alpha coefficient. The coefficient score ranges between 0 and 1.0 representing zero and perfect consistency in the measurement of a scale's composite items. e.g. a score of $\alpha=0.70$ means that 70% of the variance in the scores is reliable variance and 30% is error variance. For exploratory research, $\alpha=0.70$ is usually cited as acceptable or $\alpha=0.5$ with a scale of less than 10 items (Lance, Butts, Michels, 1978). These scales have six items. A total sample of 141 middle and senior managers from three different UK organizations completed the measures and the overall reliability of the instrument scored high at $\alpha=0.94$, as did each of the six individual scales (Table 1).

Table 1. ALD360[®] Internal Consistency Scores

	1	2	3	4	5	6
Scale	Leadership Clarity	Leadership Proactivity	Strategic Leadership	Self-Management	Interpersonal Insight	Relationship Management
Cronbach Alpha	.809	.880	.819	.793	.812	.637

(n=141)

Discussion

The aim of this research is to demonstrate the practical benefits of a group coaching approach to Authentic Leadership Development. In particular, it seeks to establish what the tangible outcomes are when you empower experienced leaders to take responsibility for their own personal learning and don't direct learning in the form of learning outcomes to be achieved or competency frameworks to be developed. It also seeks to qualify how this deep individual learning is practically applied in the workplace and how this in turn benefits the leader's organization. On from this, the research also aims to start the process of validating an instrument that captures such learning to be used as a leader-centric assessment instrument.

Predictably, and along with a lot of leadership development, some of the attributes that have been shown to emerge as a result of ALD Group-Coaching include increased *self-awareness*, *interpersonal insight* and the ability to manage more *effective relationships*. But perhaps one of the more surprising attributes to consistently emerge from this form of ALD is a greater capacity in how individuals think and engage in *strategic leadership*. They become more able to think clearly about their leadership role and responsibilities and its

meaning and purpose, as opposed to just focusing on the immediate tactical firefights that come across their desks on a daily basis. The items within the Strategic Leadership scale include:

1. I think long-term about my leadership plans
2. I take leadership actions that are anticipatory in nature
3. I think broadly and systemically about my leadership goals
4. I attend specifically to important *formulation* aspects of a long-term plan
5. I attend specifically to important *implementation* aspects of a long-term plan
6. I take actions that are intended to create change rather than just react to change

Despite no effort being made to educate leaders in strategic thinking or strategic planning, group participants consistently report being more able to raise their gaze up from the knotty weeds of their operational management issues towards the broader horizon and the up-coming important issues facing their leadership, creating greater strategic alignment and preventing strategic drift (Johnson, 2016). Arguably a much-needed leadership attribute in the coming years and decades.

Allied, and possible precursors to this increased capacity for strategic leadership, are another two attributes that consistently emerge of *leadership clarity* and *proactivity*. It seems the opportunity to think through and discuss their current leadership realities, without the immediate pressure to conclude, decide and plan – but just to make sense of – helps individuals elevate their critical insight and understanding of where they want and need to take their leadership. As one participant exclaimed, “At last... some time to think!” Moreover, this seems to consistently enhance levels of motivation and engagement, witnessed by many leaders returning to their workplace to take up additional team and project responsibilities while still feeling even more in control and resilient than they did in their role prior to the group coaching. It would appear the opportunity to think deeply around a past-present-future orientation to their own personal leadership narrative, and to discuss this in a focused and structured manner with significant peers, helps identify and elucidate key aspects of their character and how their motivations and aspirations are applied (or not) to their leadership.

A case in point was Andy. Andy happened to have parents who were both school teachers and college lecturers. He came to realize he was still rebelling against them and what, as an adolescent, he saw as their ‘pointless unambitious’ jobs. He quickly became renowned as a very tough Mentor, and if a graduate engineer assigned to him missed a session he would terminate the arrangement without hesitation. Colleagues assumed he did not care much for the mentoring process or the mentees themselves, both things he initially believed himself. In group reflection and discussion, however, he came to realize the exact opposite was true. Despite the continuing parental rebellion in his head, he discovered he actually cared deeply about the future of the graduates and the development of the profession he was helping them grow into. Unwittingly, his draconian response to missed sessions was a bid to make the mentees take their career and personal development as seriously as he did. Needless to say, it was this revelation that triggered the chain of events that ended up with him heading the whole Mentoring program – a development he reported as bringing new meaning and purpose to both his career and his leadership. It would be easy to consider this straightforward generativity (Erikson & Erikson, 1981) and a natural late career desire to give something back, yet Andy was just 40. Such enhanced awareness and natural growth are typical of the learning that is generated when individuals take responsibility for their own development within the coaching group.

Conclusion

For over half a century, leadership development has been based broadly upon a strongly positivistic, even deterministic philosophy, exemplified by the birth and propagation of the leadership competency model. In communicating what the organization considers desirable leadership through the use of such tools, it is also stating how they want their leaders to behave and thus in what direction they want them to develop. Whilst leaders are given eye-watering responsibilities elsewhere, they are often relieved of the responsibility of using such insight and judgement when it comes to their own development. By contrast, Authentic Leadership group coaching places a phenomenologically orientated philosophy at the heart of the leader development experience and in so doing gives each leader both control of, and responsibility for, their own growth and personal evolution. In authentic leadership terms, how could it be any other way? Yet, understandably, there is still a need to ‘be sure of’ what sort of things this approach to leadership development can achieve. When you give intelligent, mature and motivated leaders responsibility for their own learning, what sort of change and growth do they achieve? As evidenced through this research and outlined above, these are the six personal leadership

attributes that consistently emerge as a result of this group-coaching approach. Significantly, though, these are what emerge when leaders are *not* being told what to learn through pre-set program objectives or learning outcomes. They appear as a result of the leaders being allowed to naturally engage in the learning that they both *think* and *feel* is personally significant for them. Learning that then leads to enduring, albeit seemingly paradoxical, change. Paradoxical, in as much as it is completely self-chosen, self-directed and self-achieved, without the aid of guiding tools such as competency models, program objectives or predetermined learning outcomes.

This efficacious and progressive approach to ALD shows significant promise as a method of helping individuals develop increased authenticity in their leadership lives and, as such, might offer an alternative way forward for the field of ALD and AL – first horse, then cart. It represents a way forward that returns the individual back to the center of both the concept of Authentic Leadership and the practice of Authentic Leadership Development.

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