Authentic Leadership Theory:

Exemplifying Self-Awareness, Character and Transparency in Nursing Leadership

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Introduction

A traditional work culture is commonly based on control, rigid structures and hierarchy. However adapting authentic leadership as an all voices heard form of leadership has been found to be related to follower positive outcomes. Trust and strong team and leader relationships are created as leaders value all levels of contribution. A work culture that values lived experience, and personal growth encourages adaptability and readiness to achieve growth, innovation and creativity as a team (Azanza et al., 2013). Authentic leadership is a relatively new leadership theory that incorporates diverse traits, behaviours, styles and skills to promote ethical and honest behaviour. Ethical and honest behavior portrayed by a leader creates greater positive outcomes for leaders, their followers and organizations (Covelli et al., 2017). Authenticity is believed to make leaders more effective as they lead with meaning, purpose and values. When leaders lead authentically they are better equipped to deal with organizational challenges as they mitigate mistrust, unrest and corruption within organizational constructs (Covelli et al., 2017). For this paper I will research into the background and history of authentic leadership theory, provide an in depth analysis and explanation of the concepts of authentic leadership, and finally include an application regarding relevance to nursing leadership and personal practice.

History of Authentic Leadership Theory Development

Authentic leadership is a leadership style focusing on relational engagement. In early 2000, concerns about the ethical conduct of leaders based on high profile examples of corporate scandals caused authors Luthans, Avolio (2003) along with Bill George (2003) to appeal for a new form of values based leadership called authentic leadership (Alilyyani et al., 2018). Bill George popularized authentic leadership in management studies and popular culture with his

publications *Authentic Leadership: Rediscovering the Secrets to Creating Lasting Value* (2003) and *True North: Discover your authentic leadership* (2007). In accordance with George (2010), Avolio and Gardner (2005) believe that authentic leaders understand their purpose, practice solid values, establish connected relationships, demonstrate self-discipline and lead with heart. The theory illuminates that authentic leadership characteristics are not adapted by leaders but develop over the course of a lifetime through lived experience, engagement and conflict (Covelli et al., 2017). Unlike other leadership styles authentic leadership has no universal traits, styles or skills. Instead being authentic to yourself and your lived experience creates a unique expression of authenticity in leadership. Through life, individuals are met with experiences and events that can be positive or negative in nature. These events shape our attitudes, behaviours, and inspiration to impact and engage the world around us.

Luthans and Avolio (2003) identified three primary precursors that influence authentic leadership development: positive psychological capabilities, moral reasoning and critical life events (Alilyyani et al., 2018). Psychological capabilities encompass a posture of hope, optimism and resilience regardless the nature of the experience or event (Malik et al., 2016). Moral reasoning acts as a compass that guides actions and behaviours to promote and ensure the highest level of virtue, fairness, truthfulness and integrity (Wong & Cummings, 2009). Authentic leaders are able to build up positive psychological capacity of their followers by facilitating development of confidence, optimism hope and resilience in the shared vision of the team and unique abilities and contribution of each team member (Alilyyani et al., 2018). As authentic leaders use their moral compass to make and support their decisions followers then work to emulate the ethical

behaviours of the authentic leaders creating a sustainable organizational culture of trust, integrity and self-regulation (Covelli et al., 2017).

Elements of Authentic Leadership Theory

There are four core elements of authentic leadership theory articulated by George (2003): self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced processing and internalized moral perspective. First, self- awareness is an ongoing introspection process where one understands his or her exclusive core values, beliefs, unique talents, strengths and improvements (Waite et al., 2014). This insight into his/her honest self cultivates purpose through life experience and drives one's behaviour (Fallatah and Laschinger, 2016). Self awareness is not only limited to knowing their own strengths and limitations but how they affect others and the way he or she make sense of the world (Azanza et al., 2013) (Malik et al., 2016) (Shapira- Lishchinsky, 2014). As an individual discovers meaning of the world around him/her they become aware of how that meaning impacts the way one views himself/herself over time (Alilyyani et al., 2018). Self-awareness unfolds a deep knowledge of themselves, their needs, emotions and personality. To become an authentic leader, fostering self awareness requires that an individual pursue a personal life-long journey of self-discovery, self-improvement, reflection and renewal.

The second core element of authentic leadership is internalized moral perspective, also identified as self-regulation. Self -regulation refers to a leader's ability to align their values, intentions and behaviours to demonstrate consistency between what they say and what they do (Wong & Cummings, 2009). Authenticity is derived from a Greek philosophy and denotes a humanistic psychological stance encapsulated by Shakespeare in Hamlet's "To thine own self be

true" (Waite et al., 2014) (p.4). The ability to root your knowledge, acceptance and behavioural responses to your personal values, convictions and motives brings forth true authenticity (Gardner et al. 2005). The adaptation of self-regulation allows leaders to stick to their internal moral standards and values rather than group organizational and societal pressures to please others, receive rewards or avoid punishments (Azanza et al., 2013). The authentic leader established by their internalized moral perspective role models a high standard of ethical and moral conduct that followers can look to and mirror acting with personal integrity and promoting ethical treatment of other people. Self awareness along with internalized moral perspective fosters positive self and team development, employee commitment and work engagement.

The third core element of authentic leadership is balanced processing, the ability and willingness to objectively analyze relevant data and explore the opinions of others before making a decision (Wong & Cummings, 2009). An authentic leader recognizes diverse perspectives of the group and makes a balanced decision through a process of collecting information, examination and interpretation (Covelli et al., 2017). Balanced processing calls a leader to challenge themselves to welcome questions from others, this ensures personal bias or self-protective responses do not hinder open discussion and sharing (Sagnak and Kuruoz, 2017). An authentic leader practices balanced processing by gathering sufficient opinions and viewpoints from others before making important decisions (Regan et al., 2016). Authentic leaders solicit views that challenge their deeply held positions recognizing that the unique lived experience of their followers strengthens the impact of their team.

According to George (2003), authentic leaders create an environment of trust, ethical behaviour and transparency among followers which strengthens collaboration and dispels the myth that sharing knowledge is loss of power or authority (Malik et al.,2016). Leaders create an environment of trust by adapting the final core element of relational transparency. Relational transparency is the ability to disclose information and reveal their personal thoughts and feelings (Fallatah and Laschinger, 2016). Authentic leaders are determined to develop strong and meaningful relationships that encourage a safe space for sharing strengths, weaknesses and uncertainties (Covelli et al., 2017). Relational transparency also reflects the extent to which a leader is ready and open to share feelings and thoughts and encourage followers to do the same (Malik et al., 2016). Relational transparency reinforces a level of openness with others that provides them an opportunity to be forthcoming with their ideas, challenges and opinions. Authentic leaders who embody elements of authentic leadership build cultures of trust, respect and contribute to healthier work environments.

Developing Authentic Leadership

Meaningfulness is experienced in everyday life when virtues such as compassion, honesty, caring, and commitment are transformed into actions (Sagnak and Kuruoz, 2017). Authentic leadership emphasizes that leaders are made not born. Shirley Chater, in the book by King, Altman and Lee (2011) articulates beautifully "effective leadership requires deep passion, an unwavering commitment to serving others, a bold vision of future possibilities and a conscious commitment to lifelong learning" (p.1). In order to develop oneself into an authentic leader, planning is required to work toward understanding your mission and long term vision. Authentic leadership planning includes reviewing strengths and weaknesses, analyzing

environments that facilitate or hinder growth and identifying what areas you need to free from

personal limitation and fear (Covelli et al., 2017). Authentic leaders stay their course and convey

to others, often times through their actions not just words, what they represent in terms of

principles, values and ethics (Shirey, 2006). A person brings his or her own true self into

everything they do therefore it is impossible to dismiss ones exclusive self narrative when

communicating or working with others (Waite et al., 2014). Understanding the connection of self

to others allows leaders to focus on being true to themselves facilitating the capacity to in turn be

true to others.

In order to develop authentic leadership an individual must be committed to a philosophy

of lifelong learning acknowledging that their personal leadership style will grow with them

through stages of life and lived experiences (Shirey, 2006). When an individual sees life

experiences as lessons for cultivating gratitude, strength or resilience they are able to use their

life experiences to motivate and guide people around them towards growth and development

(Waite et al., 2014). Another practical strategy to develop authentic leadership is through

seeking the personal and professional advice of those who go before them in their profession

(Fallatah and Laschinger, 2016). Mentors in their profession will be able to exemplify the long

term benefits of leading authentically developing their confidence in their own journey to live

authentically.

Impact of Authentic Leadership on Nursing Practice

Nurses are situated in a position of power and they are leaders in many aspects. They

have a specialized body of knowledge that is used to influence others and create changes in

patient safety and quality of care. Leadership can take many forms, and how it is brought upon

can be through positive or negative tactics. This depends on moral values and having an

awareness of self and others. I believe that a nurse's role as a leader is to ensure equality,

advocate, make ethical decisions, educate, collaborate, have self-awareness, and adapt to

situations. An authentic leader is genuine, trustworthy, reliable and believable (George, 2003).

These behaviours help authentic leaders develop positive, honest and open relationships with

followers that encourage followers' to be authentic and cultivate their personal and professional

growth, resulting in desirable well-being and performance outcomes (Read and Laschinger,

2015).

In nursing, sharing of knowledge through documentation ensures patients receive the best

medical treatment and care across the continuum. An organizational culture that supports

communication and collaboration, views individuals as assets increasing employee motivation

(Regan et al., 2016). Followers of authentic leaders become more open to sharing knowledge.

They are willing to donate to as well as accept knowledge from co-workers across teams and

divisions of an organization to create new knowledge, thereby increasing a team's creativity and

innovativeness (Malik et al., 2016). Sharing knowledge can also become a means for self-

awareness, growth and learning. Self awareness establishes self confidence in ethical decision

making allowing nurses to advocate for patients in interprofessional collaboration and in some

cases combat the reality of physician hierarchy (Shapira- Lishchinsky, 2014). Authentic nurse

leaders allow followers a certain degree of autonomy in decision making and encourage them to

think positively. Employees who have the freedom to establish their goals and enrich their jobs

are more likely to be creative (Malik et al., 2016). Nurses may feel more confident and perhaps

less threatened when they practice in an environment that supports and recognises their

professional role (Regan et al., 2016).

It has been suggested and emphasised that authentic leadership should be used as a

guidance to ensure quality care and the safety of patients and health care- personnel. A predictive

study by Dirik and Seyda (2017) was conducted in three turkish hospitals using an authentic

leadership questionnaire and safety climate survey. The study showed that where authentic

leadership was present leadership enhanced the safety climate of the nursing work environment.

The safety climate of a unit is determined by components such as leadership, policies,

procedures, communication and reporting (Dirik and Seyda, 2017). Authentic leadership

elements of balanced processing and relational transparency which assess clarity and

transparency in relationship and balanced evaluation of information have been associated with

positive perceptions of safety climate in the results of the authors research (Dirik and Seyda,

2017). Authentic leadership is a form of relational and follower-centered style leadership that is

likely to enhance the performance of nurses by providing learning opportunities that increase

confidence and reduce stress and burnout by facilitating safe working environments.

A second study by Azanza et al. (2013) on organizational culture and authentic leadership

showed how authentic leaders foster a flexibility-oriented work culture in which leaders provide

a context for cooperation and support in turn produces positive effects on followers such as job

satisfaction. The study articulates how relational transparency, optimism and a moral and ethical

orientation towards the future increase job performance, collaboration and performance

satisfaction. In regards to nursing relational transparency in authentic leadership can improve

collaboration within healthcare settings to improve patient centred care and safety (Azanza et al, 2013). Organizational culture and authentic leadership addresses how institutional constructs and hierarchy impede shared vision which can also be applied to organizational culture in healthcare regarding successful advocacy for patients through collaboration.

In review of existing research, authentic leadership elements of self-awareness, internalized moral perspective, balanced processing and relational transparency are seen to improve employee motivation, collaboration, job performance, safety climates and job satisfaction. Managers in healthcare facilitate the conditions for nurses' and other care providers' work by framing the quality of support, information and resources that are available in work areas (Shirey, 2006). The support managers provide ensure patient safety, encourage innovation and protect burn out through maintenance of healthy work environments. A healthy work environment is an environment where everyone feels respected, trusted and appreciated for their contributions. Nurses respond positively to their work and trust their managers when they perceive their leaders are authentic, open, truthful and willing to invite their participation in decision-making. In addition nurses who perceive their leaders to be authentic feel empowered and supported in their work.

Discussion/Reflection

In practice there will be situations where honesty is put to the test especially in situations where other professionals don't feel morally obligated to uphold the level of honesty you strive to live by. In these situations it is important to preserve your integrity and authenticity by respectfully addressing the issue. The unfortunate reality where institutional constructs will

affect successful advocacy for patients is something that I am aware but have little experience

how to deal with these situations confidently. My research in authentic leadership has provided

me with practical strategies to remain authentic, facilitate collaboration and challenge myself to

engage with diverse dynamics of a team. Cultivating authenticity motivates me to pursue a

personal life-long journey of self-discovery, self-improvement reflection and renewal. Adapting

a posture of authentic leadership will allow me to uphold personal values, practice ethically and

provide honest care. Thinking about my personal ethical perspective in regards to nursing it is

what drives my interest in ethical aspects of nursing regarding the value of human life, protecting

human dignity, fighting for social justice and understanding human suffering. I also believe that

though my personal ethical perspective is objective it will be important for me to reflect on my

own beliefs and values and ensure I am available to meet clients and patients in their lived

experience ensuring autonomy, respect and dignity are upheld. This area of ensuring patient

autonomy coincides with authentic leadership theory in balancing processing. Through analysis

of the patient's own values and beliefs I can ensure my professional standards provide holistic

care for the patient. I want to the be the type of authentic leader that is approachable, ethical, and

transparent in my moral values so others know where I stand while encouraging others to do the

same.

Summary

According to Sagnak and Kuruoz (2017) authenticity is established when one maintains

their intrinsic values and beliefs in all aspects of their life, therefore their values, beliefs, attitudes

and self-identity shapes their actions.Authentic leadership encompasses four areas. These

include, self-awareness which is understanding one's strengths, limitations, and values and how

they affect others (Azanza, Moriano, & Molero, 2013). Balanced processing, which encourages analyzing all relevant information from differing views before making a decision (Azanza et. al., 2013). Relational transparency which is openly sharing the authentic self by sharing knowledge, displaying openness with true thoughts, feelings, and trust (Sagnak & Kuruoz, 2017). Finally, internalized moral perspective, which is self-regulation by guiding actions with moral standards and values (Sagnak & Kuruoz, 2017) (Azanza et. al., 2013). Studies have shown that authentic leadership is positively associated with increased employee job performance, increased job satisfaction, and improved work engagement through honest and transparent relationships with employees (Azanza et. al., 2013). Authentic leaders display fairness, justice, empathy, respect, trustworthiness, reliability, and believability (Waite, McKinney, Smith-Glasgow, & Meloy, 2014).

Conclusion

This paper has provided analysis of the background and history of authentic leadership theory, the key concepts of authentic leadership, and finally an application regarding relevance to nursing leadership and personal practice. Authentic leaders are able to enhance the engagement, motivation, commitment, satisfaction and involvement required from staff to constantly improve their development, trust in leadership and feel valued for their contribution to the team. Leaders are essential in healthcare to achieve patient safety and healthy work environments. Authentic leadership encourages transparent relationships that build trust, optimism and promote inclusive and healthy work environments. The leadership style of nursing leaders determines access to resources that empower nurses to accomplish their work safely,effectively and confidently in a supported environment that recognises their professional role.

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