Describing Authenticity in the Context of Leadership: A Qualitative Investigation amongst Practitioners

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Abstract

Leadership is a complex and evolving concept and encompasses many different leadership styles. Authentic leadership is such a leadership style, generating a lot of research interest due to its perceived positive effects. However, there is a lack of a consistent and generally accepted definition of what it means to be an authentic leader. By using the grounded theory approach, this qualitative study was able to produce a practice-oriented conceptualization of authentic leadership, answering the research question: "What do leaders mean when they talk about being authentic in the context of organizational leadership?". Data were collected through one-on-one interviews with leaders in managerial positions and simultaneously analyzed, resulting in nine general themes (i.e., being true to oneself, transparency, self-awareness, self-development, leaders' characteristics, leaders' competencies, leaders' interpersonal environment, leaders' situations, and leaders' behavior). These themes were integrated into a conceptual framework, explaining that authentic leadership encompasses various leaders' behaviors that, when perceived in a certain manner, can be authentic (or not). The crucial elements for determining if leaders' behavior is authentic, are the context, personal leaders' attributions and authenticity, indicated in this paper as 'lens', through which leaders' behavior is evaluated. Hereby, this research is stepping away from the multidimensional definition of authentic leadership by conceptualizing authentic leadership as an ongoing developing process and an interplay between key themes. By comparing these findings to prior central conceptualization of authenticity and authentic leadership, this study contributes towards a greater understanding of what it means to be authentic in the context of leadership.

Describing Authenticity in the Context of Leadership: A Qualitative Investigation amongst Practitioners.

Leadership plays an important role in the success of any organization. No matter their goals or mission, they all necessitate leadership. A common definition of leadership is "the process of interactive influence that occurs when, in a given context, some people accept someone as their leader to achieve common goals" (Silva, 2016, p. 3). Regardless of this definition's apparent simplicity, leadership is a complex and evolving concept and encompasses many different leadership styles (Howard, 2005). A leader can use these various styles to ensure tasks are completed and result in the desired outcomes. The wide variety of leadership styles clearly illustrates that motivating and coordinating individuals towards a common goal can be challenging.

Authentic leadership is a leadership style that is currently generating a great deal of research interest (Zhang et al., 2021). This is because modern-day organizations face stressors (e.g., excessive workload, career pressure, accelerating technological change) for which authenticity is increasingly recognized as desired or even necessary (Avolio et al., 2004). For instance, a variety of studies established that authentic leadership has a positive impact on different organizational and personal outcomes, such as job satisfaction (Darvish & Rezaei, 2011), job performance (Wang et al., 2014), and work engagement (Hassan & Ahmed, 2011). Despite all this, there is a lack of a consistent and generally accepted definition of what it means to be an authentic leader (Brown, 2020). Therefore, this study aims to contribute to the literature by investigating what real leaders think about when they speak of authentic leadership and compares this to previous research.

Authenticity

Authenticity as a construct was first described by the ancient Greek philosophy: "To thine own self be true" (Harter, 2002, p. 382). In other words: to know, accept, and remain

true to yourself would be the essence of authenticity. More recently, Avolio et al. (2004) added that the construct of authenticity exists on a continuum and therefore should not be conceived as an either/or condition, but as a spectrum of which the extremes are quite distinct. Later, considering the historical literature, Kernis and Goldman (2006) concluded that authenticity encompasses four key components: awareness (i.e., knowing and trusting one's goals, feelings, motives, and values), unbiased processing (i.e., objectivity in assessing and accepting one's positive and negative internal experiences), behavior (i.e., acting in accordance with one's principles, preferences, and needs instead of only acting to please others, gain rewards, and dodge punishment), and relational orientation (i.e., establishing and appreciating honesty and transparency in one's interpersonal connections). In consequence, this multi-component conceptualization of authenticity became the theoretical foundation for various theories about authentic leadership (e.g., Spitzmuller & Ilies, 2010, Walumbwa et al., 2008).

Although there has been an increasing interest in combining authenticity and leadership in one concept, academics disagree about how to best define authentic leadership. Some argue the two terms do not combine well. Alvesson and Einola (2019) point out that whereas authenticity is framed as a self-referential and self-developmental construct, leadership by definition involves influencing others. Alternatively, one can claim that there is a common ground between the two concepts (Gardner et al., 2021). Specifically, although there are differences between authenticity and leadership, both concepts are subjectively shaped by the individual but also inevitably formed in social context (Day, 2000). Additionally, while being authentic, interaction with other individuals is not necessarily ruled out. For instance, the definition of authenticity, as described above by Kernis and Goldman (2006), includes establishing and appreciating honesty and transparency in one's interpersonal connections (i.e., relational orientation). Also, leadership, as earlier mentioned

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in this introduction (Silva, 2016), is all about interaction and does not exclude that, while having interactive influence, leaders can be aware of, for example, the goals and norms of the organization as well as their own.

Authentic Leadership

Due to the ongoing debate about the combination of authenticity and leadership and the conceptualization of authentic leadership, a wide variety of definitions have emerged over the years. The definition that dominates current literature relates to the multifaceted conceptualization of authenticity by Kernis and Goldman (2006), as discussed above, and was proposed by Walumbwa et al. (2008). Here, authentic leadership is defined as "a pattern of leader behavior that draws upon and promotes both positive psychological capacities and 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). In the present study, this perspective on authentic leadership will be used as the central scientific conceptualization of authentic leadership.

As the body of literature on authentic leadership grew, interest from both academia and practitioner domains rose, too. For instance, Clapp-Smith et al. (2009) provided important information on new developments, e.g., economic, geopolitical, and technological, which place demands on leaders that require them to be transparent, aware of their values, and lead with a moral perspective. For the reason that, being authentic as a leader improves numerous aspects of leadership effectiveness, such as dedication to the leader's requests, problem-solving skills, and improvement of positive employee attitudes and behavior, resulting in the ability of the team to deal with change (Datta, 2015). Also, inauthenticity is frequently detected by others and can become a disruptive, negative force, contributing to

employee doubt, distrust, and a lack of motivation (Gino et al., 2015). Despite all this, authentic leadership research still is subject to considerable discussion.

A recently published article by Alvesson and Einola (2019) casts doubt on the principal tenets of mainstream authentic leadership literature. First of all, these authors point out that the concept is often measured with nonsensical tools. As an illustration, in the Authentic Leadership Questionnaire (ALQ) by Walumbwa et al. (2008), most questions concern, among other things, the perceptions of others knowing an individual's authenticity. However, Alvesson and Einola (2019) argue that it is hard to observe whether people are authentic. Some individuals will score high on other-assessed authenticity because they excel in impression management, whereas individuals who are truly authentic may be seen as narcissistic instead of highly authentic (Ibarra, 2015). Other issues are incorrect measurements and modeling in authentic leadership literature, for example, in the retracted article of Walumbwa et al. (2011) the researchers made an analysis error (*Expression of Concern*, 2016). The fit statistics, when accurately computed, did not provide an appropriate level of support for the hypothesized model, rendering the authors' conclusions untenable.

Second of all, Alvesson and Einola (2019) claim there are overall flaws in reasoning, therefore empirical evidence of elements of authentic leadership hanging together could be misleading. For example, according to them, definitions of authentic leadership often include outcomes. Both the cause and the consequences are grouped together, which can be the result of the weak construct conceptualization. Lastly, according to Alvesson and Einola (2019) an out-of-date view of corporate life is often used as a basis causing a gap between the existing literature and real life. Namely, in modern day workplaces personal authenticity projects are generally not desirable, since authenticity has the potential to cause social issues and suspicion. For instance, when transparency results in public expression of opposite views, internal collaboration can become difficult. Also, an individual can be trusted because of their

predictability, as well as having a clear moral, yet this can be also viewed as a source of distrust in the workplace. Since, at some workplaces, for example, strong convictions about certain topics might not be desirable. According to Alvesson and Einola (2019), all of the above leads to an inadequate theoretical foundation of authentic leadership. Hence, there is an urgent need to go back to the theory formation stage and redefine authentic leadership.

The importance and originality of the present study are that it anticipates all of the critique mentioned above. In the first place, the key problem with the critique on the challenging operationalization of authenticity is that, although authenticity is difficult to observe, it does not mean it does not have meaning. Indeed, many of the intrapersonal constructs studied in organizational behavior are difficult to observe and measure (e.g., attitudes, cognition, motivation). However, it is important to still conceptualize and study these concepts, so they can contribute to an advanced understanding of existing or new theories (Gardner et al., 2021). As in this study, a re-conceptualization of authentic leadership.

Secondly, conceivably authentic leadership is ill-defined because its conceptualization is currently based on a summary of outdated philosophical work. This is exemplified in leadership articles that appear to treat these works as simply 'sound bites' in order to give their empirical claims greater theoretical weight (Gardiner, 2011). However, this has nothing to do with serious empirical research. For this reason, the present study employs current leaders in the field, because they can provide an up-to-date view of daily experiences in corporate life. It is particularly valuable that real leaders will share their experiences and understanding of their authenticity, to look for areas of common ground between academics and practitioners and identify crucial differences that complicate mutual understanding. Qualitative research is necessary in this regard to refine existing knowledge. It allows going back to the exploratory phase and eventually results in a practice-oriented re-

conceptualization of authentic leadership by answering the research question: "What do leaders mean when they talk about being authentic in the context of organizational leadership?"

Present Study

The present qualitative study makes use of the grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to find the meanings and concepts used by leaders in real settings to describe authentic leadership. The grounded theory approach makes it possible to explain what is going on in modern day organizations instead of defining what should be happening (McCallin, 2003). The purpose of this research strategy is to inductively generate theory from data. Fundamental to this approach is the process of concurrent data collection and data analysis, which eventually leads to the formulation of a conceptual framework. Data are collected through one-on-one interviews and analyzed by clustering common themes and turning those clusters into a conceptual framework. By defining a central idea out of the collected data, this study provides a better understanding of how real leaders make meaning of their reality and conceptualization of authentic leadership. By comparing those findings to prior central conceptualization of authentic leadership, this research contributes towards a greater understanding of what it means to be authentic in the context of organizational leadership.

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Method

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Before starting this research, permission was requested and received through an application to the Ethical Review Board of the University of Tilburg.

Participants

Participants of this study were 9 leaders in managerial positions (i.e., middle managers, senior managers, directors, partners, and CCOs). This study used theoretical sampling, which means to start interviewing a small group of individuals selected by

purposive sampling, and select further subjects based on the information gathered from jointly collecting data, coding data and analyzing data from the first interviews (Foley & Timonen, 2015). All individuals were Dutch speaking and recruited via the network of the researcher and social media (LinkedIn). The average age of the participants was 45.56 years (SD = 10.44). The mean years of leadership experience (i.e., being in a leading position) was 14.00 years (SD = 9.54). A detailed overview of the subjects' profiles is described in Table 1.

Table 1

Subject Profile Demographics

#	Gender	Sector	Highest level of education	Title	Professional work experience (years)	Leadership experience (years)	Largest team (FTE)
1.	Male	Technology	Master	Director R&D	6	4	35
2.	Male	Technology	Master	Sales manager	7	1	16
3.	Female	Childcare	Bachelor	Member of the board of directors	30	27	60
4.	Male	Technology	MBA	Managing director	35	24	45
5.	Male	Professional services	Bachelor	CCO	25	12	75
6.	Male	IT	MBO certificate	Director/owner	35	20	110
7.	Female	Healthcare	Master	Director	22	13	220
8.	Male	Accountancy	Master	Partner	33	21	55
9.	Female	Technology	Master	Senior sales manager	11	4	17
	Male (66.7%) Female (33.3%)	6 Sectors	MBO certificate (11.1%) Bachelor (22,2%) Master (55.6%) MBA (11.1%)		Avg. 22.67 years Range of 6 - 35 years	Avg. 14.00 years, range of 1 - 27 years	16 - 220 FTE

Note. FTE = Full-time Equivalent; MBO certificate = college degree equivalent.

Data Collection

The leaders' conceptions of what it means to be authentic in the context of leadership were assessed using semi-structured interviews, including 19 open-ended questions and 10 questions asked to capture demographic details (see appendix A). Initially, the questions were constructed following three themes: how participants defined authentic leadership, what made leaders they worked with appear authentic to them, and their personal experiences with authenticity at work and in private. The main aim of these three themes was to understand how participants perceived authenticity across three dimensions: conceptual, observational, and experiential. The duration of the interviews varied, but generally lasted around 45 minutes. The job of the interviewer was to verbally paraphrase the statements of the interviewed leaders and - if needed - ask for more detailed answers to make sure a common understanding was reached. All interviews were either held face-to-face ($n = 3$), or via video conference ($n = 6$), depending on subjects' location and availability. The interviews were executed by one interviewer, and audio was recorded with the approval of the interviewees. Before starting the analysis, all recordings were transcribed using intelligent transcription. This means to transcribe every utterance, apart from pauses and filler words, and to clean up the grammar. Accordingly, this resulted in approximately 73 pages of transcripts. All interviews were anonymized while transcribing.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using the grounded theory approaches of open, axial, and selective coding (Glaser & Straus, 1967) and two overarching processes including: the constant comparative method and memo writing. In Figure 1, an analytical overview of the grounded theory methods is presented. For the coding and analysis of the transcriptions throughout the entire process, Delve was used. Delve is a computer-based qualitative software application, which can facilitate the multiple waves of coding (i.e., open, axial, and

selective), and can also be used to identify overlapping codes or efficiently search for excerpts.

Figure 1

Analytical Overview of the Grounded Theory Method
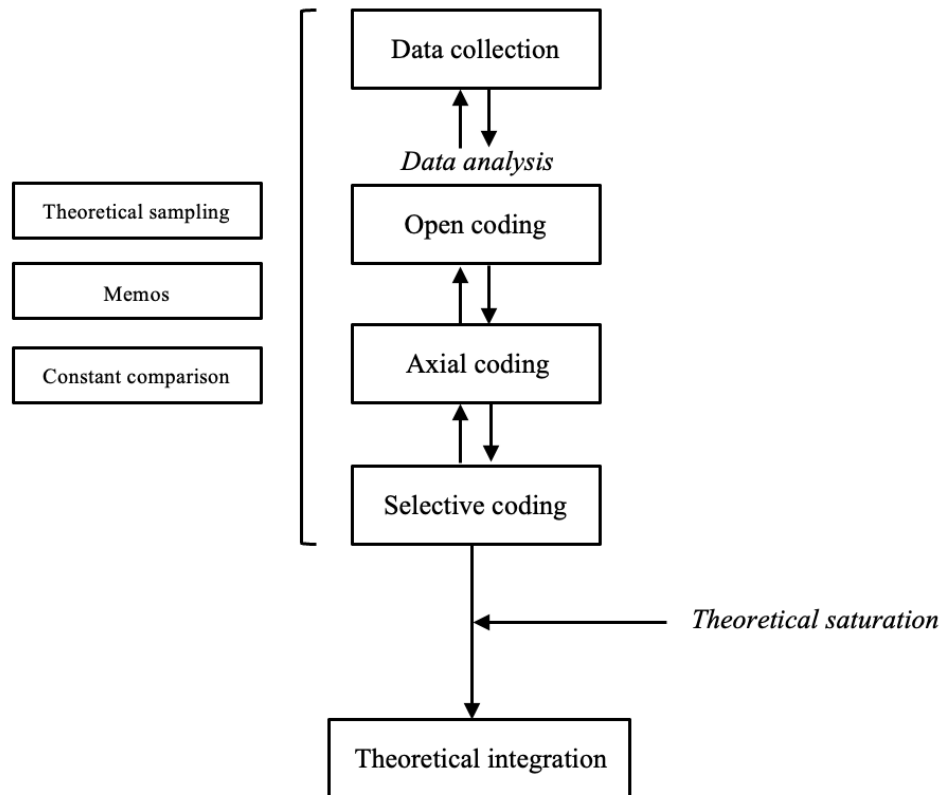
Open, Axial, and Selective Coding Phases

In the first phase, the transcripts were broken down into fragments that comprised words, phrases, or large blocks of text and were coded using preliminary labels. A total of 159 codes were identified and became the foundation for the first iterations. After reading the data several times, all codes were evaluated and discretely defined, removing any duplicate or similar codes. This is known as open coding, and resulted in the production of 81 unique codes (e.g., talking to an employee, group dynamics).

In the second phase, the team of three researchers collaboratively began to make tentative propositions about the relationships between codes by setting up conceptual

families. This process is called axial coding, which means constructing abstract categories inductively. By studying tentative relationships between codes and categories, codes could define categories in more detail. This process resulted in 36 different main categories (e.g., communication, team).

The last coding phase, known as selective coding, entails identifying fundamental themes that include or supersede other categories in terms of explanatory value. The team of researchers discussed all themes based on propositions from the main author and continued to refine the main categories and themes after conducting all the interviews. As a result, nine central themes emerged (e.g., leaders' behavior, leaders' interpersonal environment). The relationship between themes can constitute a central idea by integrating them into a conceptual framework with variables that include the collected data. Subsequently, a conceptual framework that captures the essence of authentic leadership as it is viewed by leaders in the field could be proposed, which is presented in the findings section. Figure 2 shows an example of all coding phases.

Figure 2

Open, Axial, and Selective Coding Phases: An Example
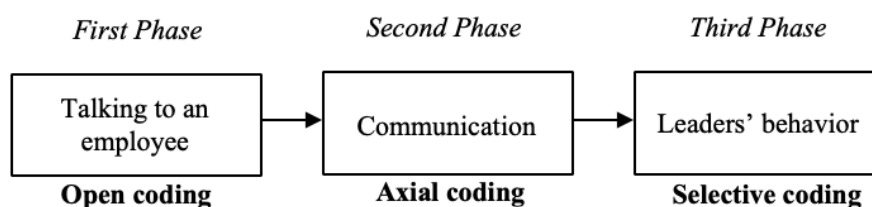
Overarching Processes

Besides data collection and the three phases of data analysis, the grounded theory approach also includes some overarching processes. The ongoing comparisons of fragment to fragment, fragment to codes, codes to codes, codes to categories, categories to categories, categories to themes, and themes to themes are the initial steps in the contemporaneous data

collection and analysis process. This is a process that continues until a grounded theory is fully integrated and is defined as the constant comparative method. For example, after comparing codes to codes, this study chose to merge 'doubt' and 'insecurity', since the quotes greatly overlapped in their content. As previously stated, the grounded theory approach is inductive since it is a procedure for theory generation from the data itself. Therefore, theoretical induction is accomplished through a series of comparison analyses.

Another part of the process of concurrent data collection and analysis is memo writing. Memos are generated from the very beginning phases of planning a study until it is completed, therefore this is a continual activity for grounded theorists. Memos are written notes of a researcher's thoughts, feelings, judgements, and ideas related to the research study. These notes will eventually become grounded theory findings. Writing frequently and consistently aided in the development of intellectual assets. As an illustration, some documented thoughts of the researcher during this study were "People often say they are less authentic in negative situations. However, authenticity might actually be more beneficial in those moments?" and "Interviewees are very open in their answers. Is that required to be able to talk about authenticity?".

All phases of data collection and analysis (i.e., open coding, axial coding, selective coding, constant comparative method, and memo writing) were repeated until theoretical saturation (i.e., until new interviews did not provide any new information) was achieved. At the start of this study, it was not possible to determine precisely how many interviews would be needed to construct a coherent theory that will stand up to genuine evaluation. However, Guest et al. (2006) found that theoretical saturation can happen within twelve interviews, while most concepts are already present at six interviews. Since the publication of Guest et al. (2006), other researchers have also experienced that 6-12 interviews were the optimal number

of qualitative interviews needed to reach saturation (Coenen et al., 2012, Francis et al., 2010). Given these points, the sample size in this study ($n = 9$) is sufficient.

Findings

By studying the most frequently stated codes, this study was able to generate a deep consideration for leaders' perceptions of authentic leadership. The results of this research study led to two key findings. First, the themes are described that were found in practitioners' conceptualization of authentic leadership. Second, based on the identified themes and their perceived coherence, a conceptual framework is presented that captures the essence of authentic leadership as it is viewed by leaders in the field. The findings arose from interview questions about how participants defined authentic leadership, what made leaders they worked with appear authentic to them, and their personal experiences with authenticity.

Themes of Authentic Leadership

To begin answering the research question: "What does it mean to be authentic in the context of organizational leadership?", nine general themes emerged from the interviews regarding the participants' beliefs. A total of four themes were employed to describe authenticity, consisting of being true to oneself, transparency, self-awareness, and self-development. Additionally, the participants attributed certain competencies and characteristics as being typical for authentic leaders. Two themes that arose were about leaders' interpersonal environment and the situations leaders can be present in, resulting in them being perceived as authentic leaders. Underlying all those themes is leaders' behavior, since leadership itself is behavior. All themes are demonstrated below, highlighting general and typical codes and categories illustrated with excerpts from the data (i.e., participants' quotations). Since all interviews were conducted in Dutch, all quotes were translated for purposes of presentation.

True to Oneself

In all interviews, the informants emphasized the importance of being consistently true to themselves. Being true to yourself includes doing what feels true to you and acting in a way that makes you feel comfortable or at ease. One participant commented: "To be authentic would mean to stay true to yourself, both in your reactions as when giving directions... The moment you stay close to yourself, you always respond sincerely...so for me being authentic means that I do things in a way that suits me… I benefit from the fact that I don't really think about a lot of things. And about that, I don't think too much either. I think that's what you do by staying true to yourself as much as possible" (Participant 8). Another interviewee had a similar perspective, associating being true to oneself with some kind of inward orientation: "I think you stay close to yourself when being authentic as a leader and that you should also be okay with that for yourself and for the employees, also the fact that you don't try to adapt yourself to everything and everyone" (Participant 1).

Furthermore, participants also described that authentic leadership is definitely not about acting, wearing a mask, or doing some kind of automated exercise, like following the guidelines a textbook gave you. Talking about this issue an interviewee said: "There are quite a lot of training courses and books about management styles and how to be a manager. But if you are going to be a manager exactly like you've learned in those training sessions, that is not how you are as a person. At some point, people will see through that and they will notice you're acting. Or behaving exactly like you've learned will cost you a lot of energy, and as a result in a few months, you will be completely demolished and you will fall back into your old patterns. That's what I mean with 'don't act'." The interviewee continued, by giving an example: "I see a lot of managers who like to have control and then act as if they don't want that at all, but actually want to, and with that they exhaust themselves. If you want to have a lot of control, you can teach yourself to let it go. But you have to be able to come out to your team that that is who you are. If you just pretend to be someone else, that doesn't work, you'll

be burned out within three months" (Participant 2). Several respondents thought that if leaders fulfilled their tasks in a manner that is less sincere to their true self, they would be less authentic and followers would immediately notice. For instance, one participant commented: "The opposite of being true to yourself is playing a role, for me at least. And if you do that, people will immediately see through it if it doesn't suit you. And I think you lose a significant part of your credibility as a leader" (Participant 1).

Figure 3

*Example Codes to Theme: True to Oneself*
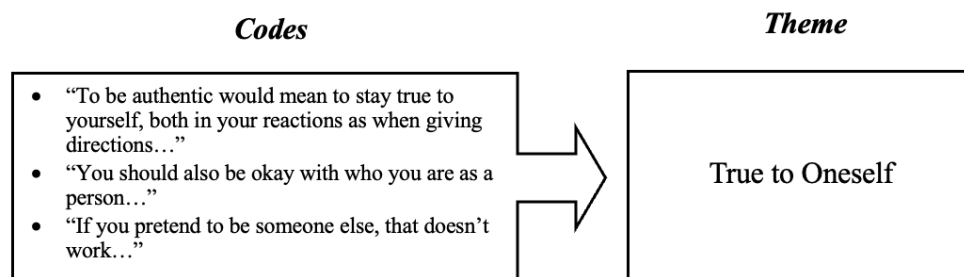
Transparency

On the whole, the participants demonstrated the importance of being transparent, clear and direct as a leader. Commenting on transparency, one of the interviewees said: "Transparency is not only providing insight into what your master plan is, but also how you are going to do it and involve people in it, and also just being very honest if things don't go well" (Participant 5). Transparency has to do with building mutual trust, within interpersonal relations, the team, and the organization. As a result, people know what to expect, it is about predictability, for example one individual said: "I think it has to do with people not being surprised by your reaction. People know who they are going to and they usually know how I will respond to their questions, to their problems, to their activity" (Participant 4).

Figure 4

Example Codes to Theme: Transparency

Codes   **Theme**

- "Transparency is not only providing insight into what your master plan is, but also how you are going to do it…"
- "I think it has to do with not being surprised by you reaction…"

Transparency
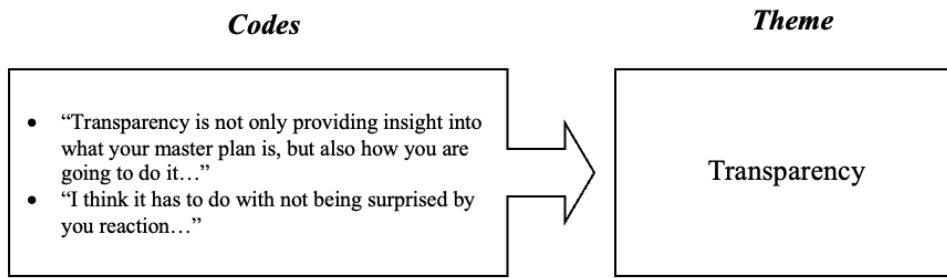
Self-awareness

A recurring theme in the interviews was a sense amongst interviewees that, in order to be authentic, you have to be self-aware, know your limitations, and recognize and embrace your own strengths and authenticity. One informant reported that it is also about self-knowledge: "I think in order to be authentic you have to know yourself. You need to know yourself. What is important to me? How do I respond to certain topics? What are things that interest me? What are things that don't really interest me that much?" (Participant 9). The same interviewee gave the following example: "When you look at receiving feedback, an authentic leader must be open to receiving feedback, they must try to do things differently, while still being very aware of how they are".

Figure 5

Example Codes to Theme: Self-awareness

Codes   **Theme**

- "You need to know yourself. What is important to me? How do I respond to certain topics? What are things that interest me?"
- "You must be open to receiving feedback…"
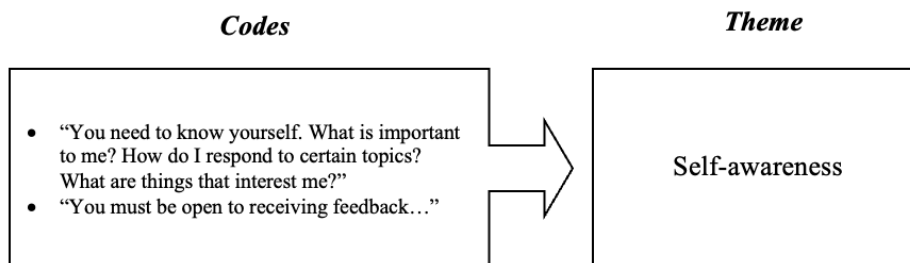
Self-awareness

Self-development

In addition to self-awareness, some participants argued that authentic leadership is also continuously shaped by personal development. One individual stated that you have to develop yourself while being authentic, something that cannot be taught. It is about learning

by doing, asking for feedback and making mistakes to learn from. One interviewee, when asked about their authentic leadership style, said: "It is something you have to make your own during the years" (Participant 8). Besides personal development, some subjects said authentic leadership is also about helping others to develop themselves. "An authentic leader is someone who challenges me to do a little better every day" (Participant 7).

Figure 6

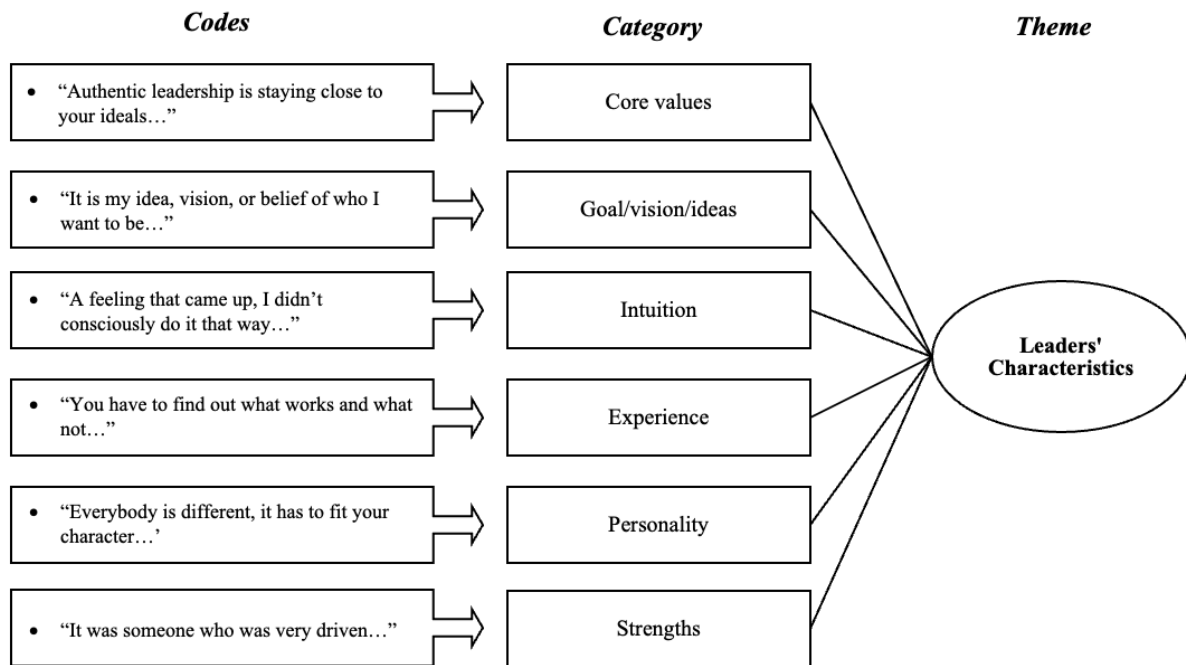*Example Codes to Theme: Self-development*
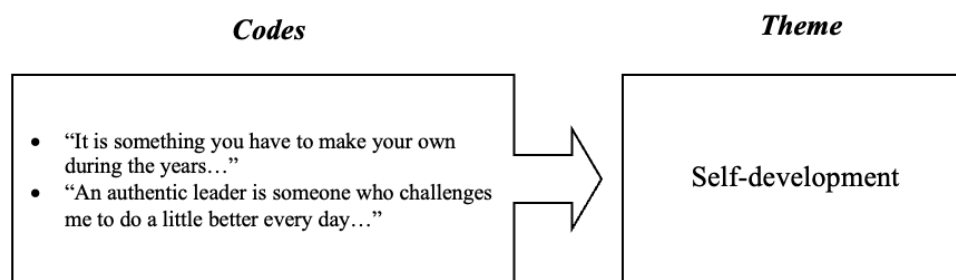
Leaders' Characteristics

The majority of participants illustrated that authentic leaders have certain typical characteristics. As related to being true to oneself, participants agreed that being authentic as a leader means centering or anchoring oneself around an internal set of values or ideals. Talking about this issue an interviewee said: "For me, authentic leadership means staying close to your own ideals, your own basis. And also try to think and act from that basic attitude, such as your core values, things that you find important…" (Participant 5). The preceding quotation explains the relation between internal values and beliefs and external expression. When these elements are in sync, it creates a stronger sense of authenticity. When there is a sense of misalignment or a lack of consistency, one's sense of authenticity weakens. As one interviewee put it: "I believe that being an authentic leader is not a role, it is my idea, vision or belief of who I want to be. In my position, yes, I have had to actively fire some employees, all things that I would rather not do, I was able to do that from the personal

conviction that it was the right thing to do. That means if I meet those people today, I can still face them with an open mind and say how are you doing today" (Participant 7).

In other cases, the participants thought that being authentic as a leader comes with acting based on your intuition. When reflecting on a difficult conversation one leader had with an employee, he said: "It was based on intuition, a feeling that came up, I didn't consciously do it that way, but afterwards I did think about it and my approach didn't disappoint me…" (Participant 1). Moreover, participants argued that the way you are authentic as a leader is shaped by your earlier experiences, personality and strengths. As one interviewee put it: "I think that if your personality and strengths are fully consciously used for good leadership, you can speak of authentic leadership" (Participant 3). Personality was coded as 'influence of personality' because participants mainly stated that personality has an influence, but did not specifically mention which personalities. While this could be read between the lines and consisted of things such as being flexible, listening, and being trustworthy. However, it has been decided to add these categories to the next themes, since they are better described there.

Figure 7

Example Codes to Category, Category to Theme: Leaders' Characteristics

| **Codes**	**Category**	**Theme**
• "Authentic leadership is staying close to your ideals…"	Core values	
• "It is my idea, vision, or belief of who I want to be…"	Goal/vision/ideas	
• "A feeling that came up, I didn't consciously do it that way…"	Intuition	Leaders' Characteristics
• "You have to find out what works and what not…"	Experience	
• "Everybody is different, it has to fit your character…'	Personality	
• "It was someone who was very driven…"	Strengths	

Leaders' Competencies

The sixth theme that arose from the data had to do with the ability of leaders to do something successfully or efficiently. In other words: their competencies. Interviewees illustrated that authentic leaders are role models. "You set an example, you are an example, you set the right example in an organization. I work like this, so follow me" (Participant 4). To be able to fulfill this authentic leader 'position' you need to possess certain competencies. This theme came up, for example, in discussions about leaders' personal experiences. Here, there were some suggestions that leaders ought to be flexible, trustworthy, and it was even argued that the use of humor can be helpful. For example, one interviewee talked about flexibility as accepting a situation as it is, "because sometimes there is no point in arguing with it, so you have to let it go, do not hold tight just to keep control" (Participant 8). Talking about this issue, another interviewee said: "I have the feeling that an authentic leader can easily let go, because they know their team members and they know they can trust them. For example, I know when I need something I can count on my team, I feel that this trust is mutual" (Participant 9). Additionally, the majority of participants agreed with the statement

that authentic leaders can be characterized by their involvement and commitment.

Commenting on this, one of the interviewees said: "I have a genuine interest in people I work

with. I think that's very important. Like: who are you, what can you do, what makes you

happy in your work, what kind of person are you. I also know the people I'm responsible for.

I know almost all 1100 people who work here by name" (Participant 3).

Figure 8

Example Codes to Category, Category to Theme: Leaders' Competencies.
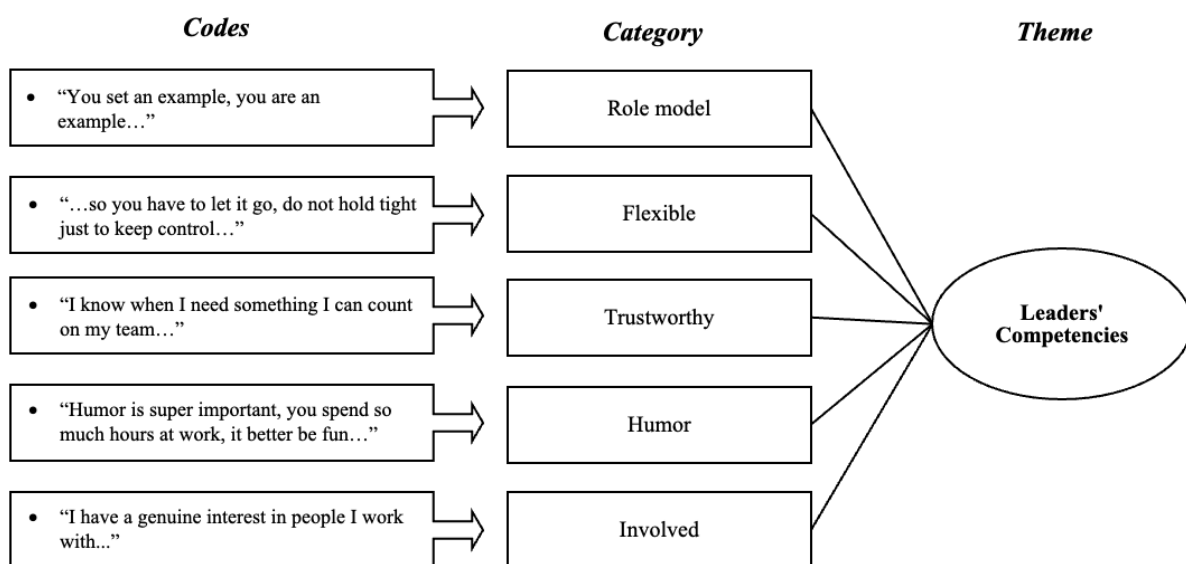
Leaders' Interpersonal Environment

As was already visible in some of the quotes above, the majority of those who were

interviewed directly or indirectly linked authentic leadership to leaders' interpersonal

environment. Interaction between leaders and followers are crucial because they influence

subsequent interpretations and behaviors. There are several relational approaches to

leadership. The foremost dyadic approach is the relationship a leader has with the employee

(leader-member exchange [LMX]) (Bauer & Erdogan, 2015), but leaders can also have

relations with a team, direct colleagues, or their own manager. Commenting on the influence

of those interactions, one participant talked about a situation in which he acted under pressure

from his direct colleagues. He felt that when under pressure, he gave up on his sincerity,
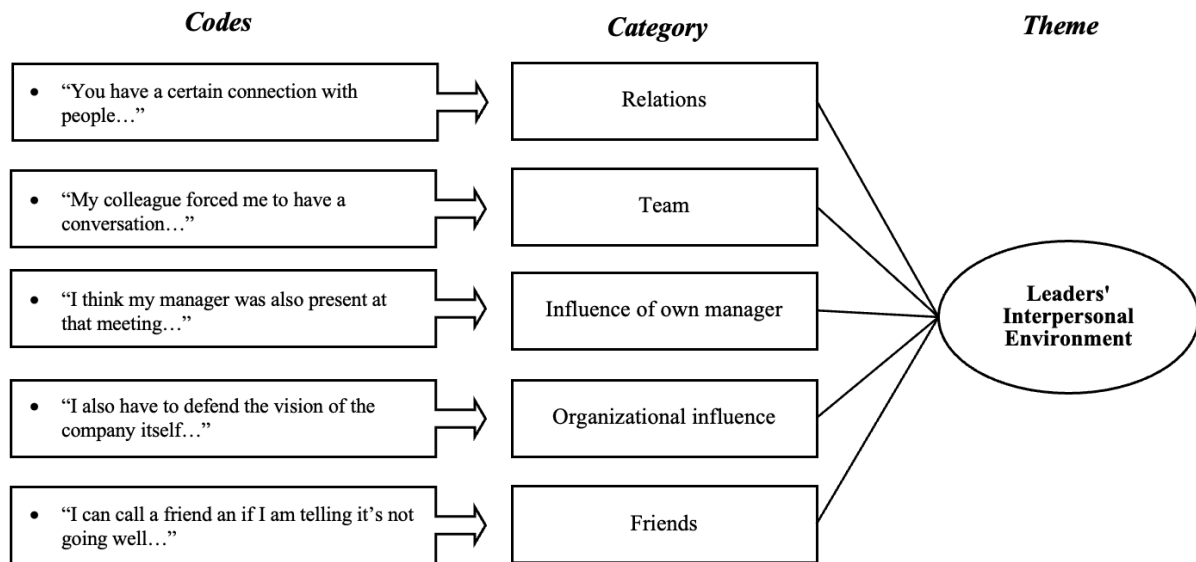
which he felt poorly about. This example is described in the following quotation: "My colleague forced me to have a conversation with an employee to make him stay with the company. It did not feel right from my side. While under pressure, we found a compromise on the salary conditions of his job. There is nothing wrong with meeting each other in the middle, however the two sides need to be on an equal level… I could hardly do otherwise because of the pressure from my colleague, from the office. Under normal circumstances, I would have said "no way, we're not going to do that". So, I wasn't authentic in the way I had to bring it, I didn't stay close to myself" (Participant 8).

Talking about the influence of their own manager, some interviewees said once their decision making or behavior was influenced by their own manager, they were less authentic as a leader. One interviewee explained this while talking about a meeting he once had: "I think because my own manager was also present at that meeting, I therefore felt a little less confident to really show myself. Because he only recently became my new manager. I just felt a little less secure of being authentic then. So that's why I acted more like the 'textbook'. Which by the way indicates that I was not authentic at all. I could not be myself when someone else is present, so that is not authentic at all…" (Participant 2).

Besides the work environment, the researcher also asked the leaders about their interactions in private settings and how those relate to authentic leadership. Participants explained that it is important for them to have friendships outside work and to tell those friends how they are really doing. Commenting on relations in the private environment, one interviewee said: "I can call a friend and if I am telling it's not going well and start to cry, well then it is fine, that person likes to see you for who you are, they don't judge" (Participant 9).

Figure 9

Example Codes to Category, Category to Theme: Leaders' Interpersonal Environment

| Codes	Category	Theme
• "You have a certain connection with people…"	Relations	
• "My colleague forced me to have a conversation…"	Team	
• "I think my manager was also present at that meeting…"	Influence of own manager	Leaders' Interpersonal Environment
• "I also have to defend the vision of the company itself…"	Organizational influence	
• "I can call a friend an if I am telling it's not going well…"	Friends	

Leaders' Situations

Participants also emphasized the role of contextual factors. The way leaders are being authentic depends on the situation. Various situational similarities and differences were highlighted. It therefore depends on the role you are in. First of all, being authentic in a one-on-one situation or group situation. Unexpectedly, when asked to illustrate a situation in which the leaders were most or less authentic, almost everyone mentioned one-on-one situations. This is striking because literature often associates leadership with one leader in front of multiple followers, whereas the participants talked about job interviews, performance interviews, or giving sanctions to certain employees, so one leader in front of one employee.

Second, being authentic at work and being authentic in private. When asked about the similarities between authenticity at work settings or authenticity in private settings, participants described "It would be weird to enter the office at 9 o'clock and show a completely different personality…" (Participant 7). However, some argued there were differences between being authentic at work and being authentic at home. One participant shared: "I think I am still myself at work, but I'm myself in a certain context. I don't feel like I'm not myself at work. Within the context, I am myself. Yes, so is it the same? No. Is it still authentic? I think so..." (Participant 9). And another commented: "Well, I behave differently

at work than at home. At work you have to lead by example and you also have to keep people on board, in some sense, in the context of the work-relationship you have with them. At home you have more space towards your partner, for example" (Participant 1). Another participant shared this sentiment: "I think you are more willing to compromise in a private situation, and certainly in your immediate family situation. You are a little softer. Not necessarily different, but softer" (Participant 8).

Figure 10

Example Codes to Category, Category to Theme: Leaders' Situations
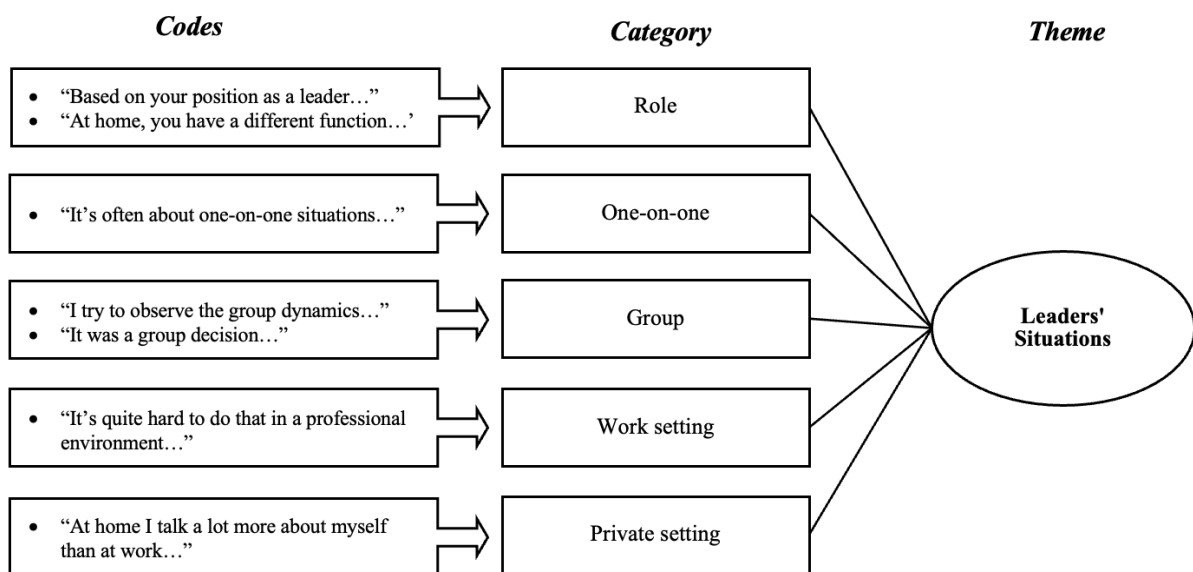
Leaders' Behavior

When asking about the participants' definition of authentic leadership, all interviewees' answers can broadly be divided into two groups. Either they started explaining certain behavior or else they illustrated some important facets which eventually result in certain behavior. Therefore, behavior can be seen as underlying all other themes. In line with transparency, all agreed that being open is a key behavior of being authentic as a leader. As one respondent put it: "Above all, you have to be sincere. And have genuine interest, not only in what you do in terms of work and tasks, but also in the people you work with, the relationships that you have. Internal and external. I believe that authenticity also includes

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sincerity" (Participant 3). Also, the importance of managing expectations is emphasized. A common view amongst interviewees was that your employees or team need to know where they stand, what they can expect from you, and that people can recognize your actions. One participant gave an example of an authentic leader he once had: "He already told me in the first conversation how to deal with him, what he is like as a manager. He knew himself and that turned out to be true. So, he gave me the tools to work with him and told me about what his manager's principles were and he stuck to them, no matter what, those were principles he always returned to" (Participant 2).

The participants were unanimous in their view that authentic leadership is about direct, clear, and open communication with your colleagues. One participant commented: "I think that sometimes open conversations about why you do what you do or why you think you do what you do, help to create an understanding between individuals. It is not going to change the way you look at things or how you value them, but conversation is important to create an opportunity to give feedback and find out how you want to work together as a team" (Participant 9). This view was echoed by another interviewee who mentioned that it is about taking responsibility, making decisions and delivering a direct message to your followers. "As a leader you may have doubts, but in the end, you have to make the decisions and therefore you have to give peace of mind to the people you work with. So, it's okay to say, gosh, I think it's complicated, I have to think about that, but in the end, you have to say we're going to the left or we're going to the right. You mustn't say I don't know either, what shall we do? Ultimately you have to make the decision. Better a bad decision than none" (Participant 3). The comment below illustrates that part of this communication is to also listen well to your employees. "With one of my first managers, the first conversation was only about who I was as a person, what I found difficult, how I wanted to develop myself or
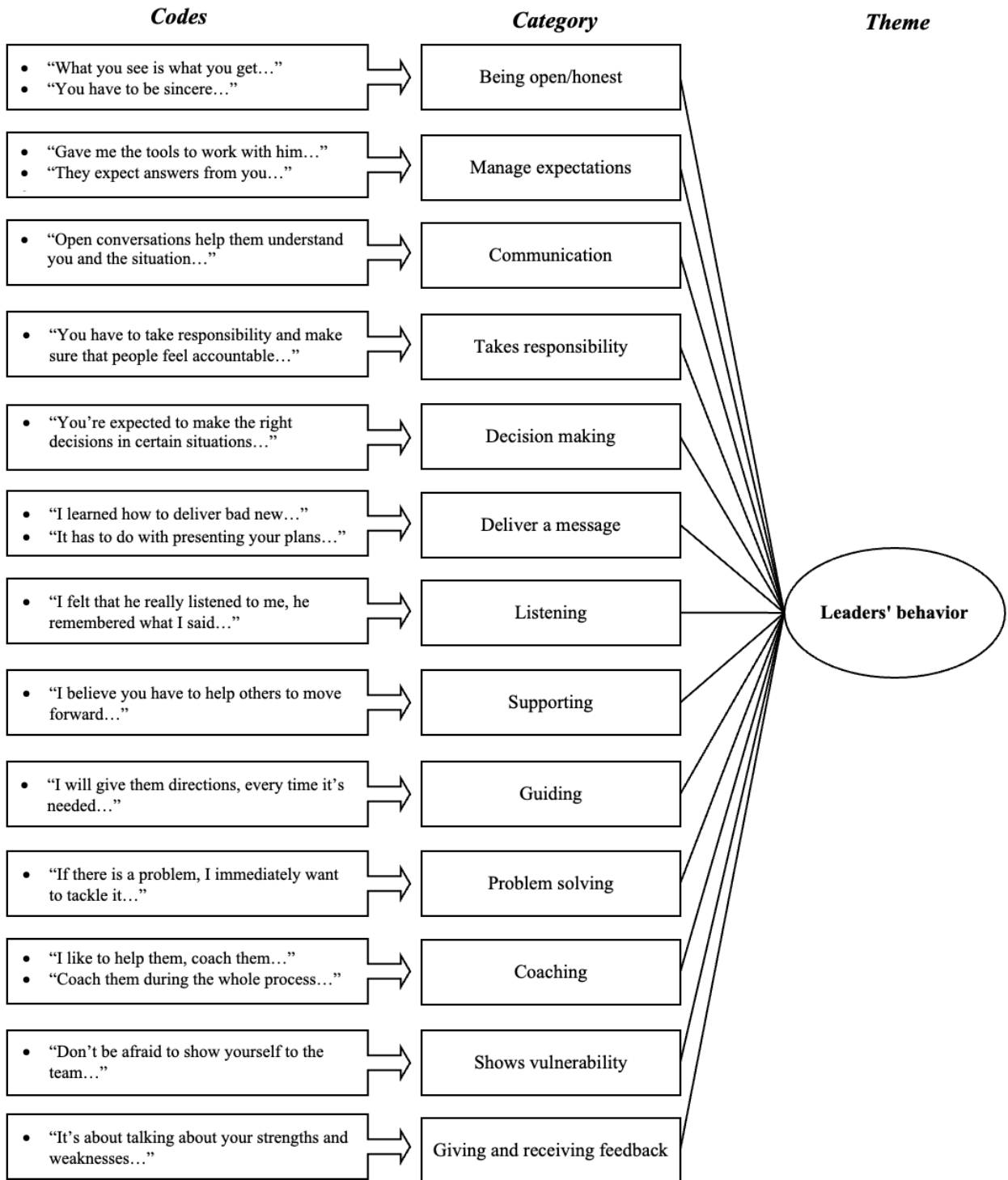
where I wanted to go. I felt that he really listened to me, among other things because he came back on it a few weeks later" (Participant 2).

Furthermore, leaders talked about a lot of other typical leaders' behaviors. As one respondent summarized it: "You support people, you guide people, you defend people, you develop people, I think that is what you do as a leader in an organization, you stand for your people, you stand for your organization, you stand for your goals" (Participant 4). Part of your authenticity can be shown in how you support and guide your employees, and how you help them solve problems. Talking about this, one interviewee said: "And if it gets hard, I will stand in front of the troops and that can be with your back to your employees towards the risk or danger that there is, but also if things have to happen, you have to face the group to include them in why certain things should be done" (Participant 7). Another participant explained that, in order to not let your employees feel unheard, you need to give them feedback, help them learn, develop, and move forward.

Lastly, being authentic as a leader is associated with coaching others by expressing your own vulnerabilities, through seeking support, and expressing your doubts. They emphasized the need of being open about the mistakes you made yourself, and how you learned from them. One individual stated that: "Dare to stand up and talk about your strengths and weaknesses. Make it no secret to the team. So now and then also showing a sign of weakness, not always wanting to be the Alpha who is good at everything, really showing that you struggle with things yourself…" (Participant 2).

Figure 11

Example Codes to Category, Category to Theme: Leaders' Behavior

Codes   **Category**   **Theme**

- "What you see is what you get…"
- "You have to be sincere…"
→ Being open/honest

- "Gave me the tools to work with him…"
- "They expect answers from you…"
→ Manage expectations

- "Open conversations help them understand you and the situation…"
→ Communication

- "You have to take responsibility and make sure that people feel accountable…"
→ Takes responsibility

- "You're expected to make the right decisions in certain situations…"
→ Decision making

- "I learned how to deliver bad new…"
- "It has to do with presenting your plans…"
→ Deliver a message

- "I felt that he really listened to me, he remembered what I said…"
→ Listening

- "I believe you have to help others to move forward…"
→ Supporting

- "I will give them directions, every time it's needed…"
→ Guiding

- "If there is a problem, I immediately want to tackle it…"
→ Problem solving

- "I like to help them, coach them…"
- "Coach them during the whole process…"
→ Coaching

- "Don't be afraid to show yourself to the team…"
→ Shows vulnerability

- "It's about talking about your strengths and weaknesses…"
→ Giving and receiving feedback

Leaders' behavior

A Conceptual Model of Authentic Leadership

The second contribution of this study is a conceptual framework that captures the essence of authentic leadership as it is viewed by leaders in the field (Figure 12). The nine themes described above derived from the grounded theory data analysis and allowed this research to create a practice-oriented conceptualization of authentic leadership, instead of

basing the construct only on prior and possibly outdated literary discoveries, as earlier mentioned in the introduction. The model can be divided into three parts: input, lens, and output (Figure 12), that are described sequentially. Together, those three parts synthesize and assemble the practical conceptual model of authentic leadership.

Figure 12

Conceptual Framework of Authentic Leadership Behavior
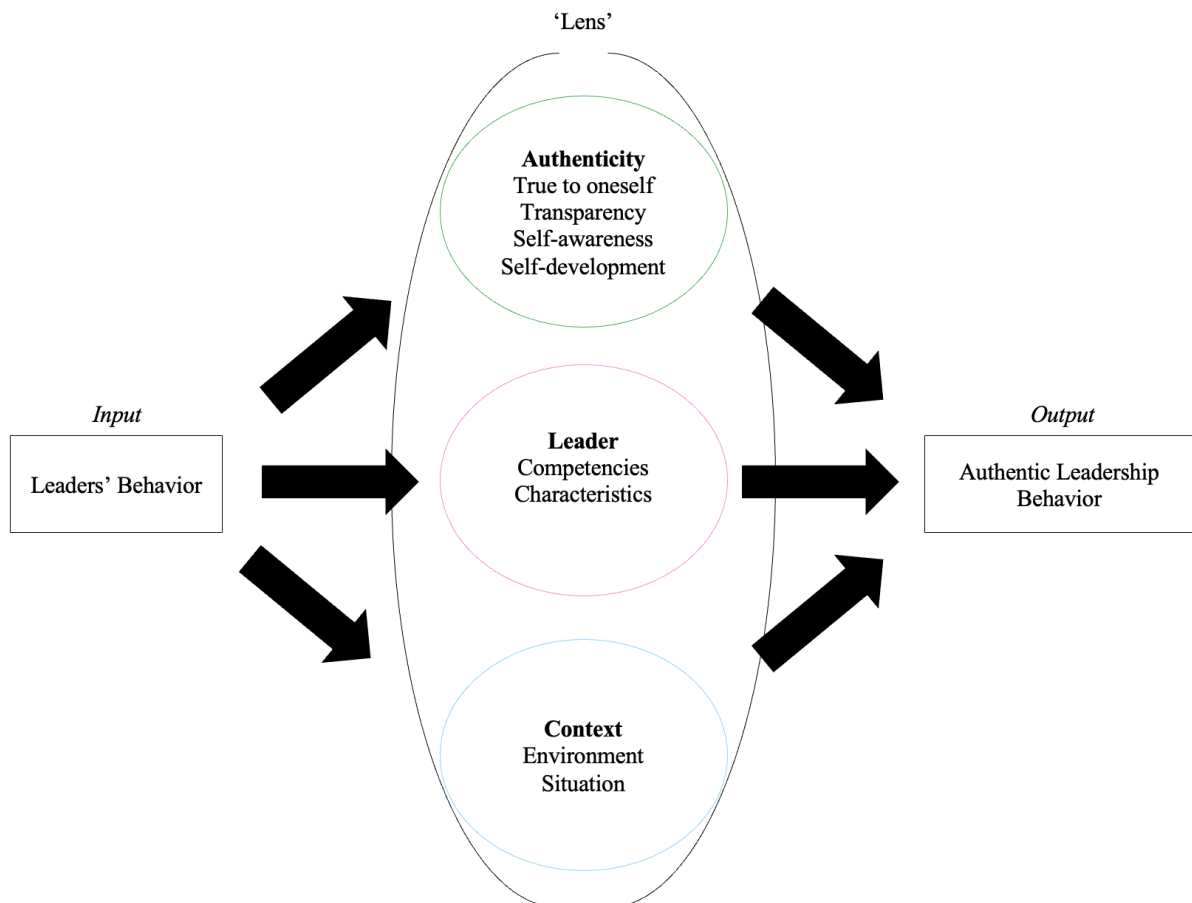
As illustrated in Figure 12, the first part of this conceptual framework is labeled as input and consists of the theme leaders' behavior. Primarily, one can see the behavioral perspective in this model. It is the underlying theme, since leadership by definition is behavior. This theme is about any behavior a leader can show and can translate to, for example, decision making, coaching, and supporting. Any behavior a leader shows, in other words leadership, can be seen as authentic leadership. However, in order for leaders'

behavior to be authentic depends on eight central themes that arose from the data – making up the 'lens' through which leaders' behavior is judged, the second part of this conceptual model. When (a part of the) themes are present, leaders' behavior is seen as authentic or not.

Broadly speaking, the lens contains three different components. The first component consists of the themes related to authenticity (i.e., true to oneself, transparency, self-awareness, self-development). The second component is related to the leaders themselves (i.e., competencies, characteristics). The third component is about the themes related to context (i.e., interpersonal environment, situation). These themes and components can be related to and influenced by behavior, which in turn makes it authentic leadership behavior. For example, a leader delivers a message (i.e., leaders' behavior), he/she does this for an entire group (i.e., situation [context]) in a direct (i.e., transparency [authenticity]) way by giving an example from his/her own experience (i.e., leaders' characteristics [leadership]). Taken all this together, this behavior (i.e., delivering a message) is seen as authentic leadership behavior, the output of this conceptual model.

Authentic leadership behavior, the third and last part of this conceptual model, is the output of this framework. When certain leaders' behavior can be described corresponding to the themes in the lens, it is authentic leadership behavior. In short, authentic leadership encompasses a wide range of leadership behaviors that, when perceived in a certain manner, can be authentic (or not). The crucial element for determining if leadership is authentic, is the lens through which the leadership behavior is evaluated.

Discussion

This study used a grounded theory approach to create a better understanding of the concept of authentic leadership according to real leaders. Data were collected through one-on-one interviews and analyzed by clustering common themes and turning those into a conceptual framework. This framework consists of three parts, created from the central nine

themes that were identified in this study (i.e., being true to oneself, transparency, self-awareness, self-development, leaders' characteristics, leaders' competencies, leaders' interpersonal environment, leaders' situations, and leaders' behavior). The conceptual framework explains that when certain leaders' behavior can be described corresponding to (one of) the eight themes in the lens, this behavior is called authentic leadership behavior. This framework lays the groundwork for the development of further authentic leadership theories.

Comparison to Other Conceptualizations of Authentic Leadership

From a theoretical standpoint, this research study has important implications for developing authentic leadership theories and contributes to the literature in various ways. The present study builds on prior knowledge by presenting an extensive conceptual framework that explains key themes in the conceptualization of authentic leadership. Below, the results of this study are compared to the central scientific conceptualizations of authenticity and authentic leadership as mentioned in the introduction. Overall, comparison of those themes with the central conceptualizations of authenticity by Kernis and Goldman (2006) and the central conceptualization of authentic leadership by Walumbwa et al. (2008) supports the findings of the current research. However, there are some differences.

Authenticity

First of all, being true to oneself, transparency, and self-awareness are all recurring themes in the prior empirical conceptualization of authenticity by Kernis and Golman (2006). In particular, both explain self-awareness as knowing your limitations and as being able to recognize and embrace your own strengths and motives. Although the content of being true to oneself and transparency is similar to Kernis and Goldmans' (2006) definition of authenticity, there are subtle differences. The labels of the two themes (i.e., true to oneself, and transparency) differ from the labels of the components described by Kernis and Goldman

(2006). Namely, whereas the current research used the label being 'true to oneself' to describe acting based on one's preferences, values and needs, Kernis and Goldman (2006) used the label 'behavior' to describe this. The same goes for the label 'transparency'. In the current study, establishing and appreciating honesty in one's interpersonal connections is called transparency, whereas Kernis and Goldman (2006) include this in 'relational orientation'.

Furthermore, there is one theme related to authenticity in the current framework that differs from prior literature. Self-development as part of authenticity is not mentioned by the prior conceptualization of Kernis and Goldman (2006), but in this research it was frequently mentioned by practitioners. This is because earlier literature mentioned it as an outcome, whereas current study concludes a learning curve is part of the process of being authentic. Lastly, Avolio et al. (2004) proposed that the construct of authenticity exists on a continuum, something that is not specifically described by the participants in this study. Although, they did talk in terms of less or more authentic instead of authentic versus inauthentic, which suggests a continuum.

Authentic Leadership

This research has attempted to specify the full set of themes underlying authentic leadership. Using the grounded theory method is a particularly useful way of identifying these specific themes, since there was little existing practice-oriented research on which to build assumptions. Moreover, the use of qualitative investigations has benefitted various leadership research fields in the realm of leadership (e.g., charismatic leadership) (Burns, 2012). The creation of a nomological network that links authentic leadership to its essential antecedent, mediating, moderating, and dependent variables may be aided by this research (Cronbach & Meehl, 1955).

There are a number of similarities between current research results and the central conceptualization of authentic leadership by Walumbwa et al. (2008). First of all, the behavioral perspective is primary in both models. Leader behavior is the underlying theme that is about any behavior a leader can show. Furthermore, they share a number of key themes. Both talk about being true to oneself, self-awareness, transparency, and self-development as being part of authentic leadership. However, while the conceptualization of Walumbwa et al. (2008) includes the positive psychological capacities of the leader, the current research labeled this as leaders' characteristics and leaders' competencies.

In accordance with the present findings, previous studies have demonstrated the need for applying authentic leadership in different contexts (Cooper et al., 2005). Without context, simply being a leader means nothing. There is a continuous tension between the leaders' individual level of authenticity and the interaction with other people, especially when the situation changes (Lehman, 2019). This view was echoed by the participants in this study, which is an interesting contrast with the critique by Alvesson and Einola (2019), considering that they describe the contradictory nature of authenticity (inward) and leadership (outward). According to the findings in this study, leaders do not seem to perceive this issue, since the majority of participants even only emphasizes the outward perspective. Additionally, Brown (2020) believes changing contexts can represent a deeper dive into generating foundational research, which eventually could lead to a better understanding of the concept of authentic leadership. As a result, future research must take into account the changing context in which leaders operate, this could have a direct effect on the theoretical construct of authentic leadership behavior.

To conclude, this current study' conceptualization of authentic leadership differs from earlier literature in an important way. Whereas prior research approaches authentic leadership as a multidimensional definition. This research is stepping away from this by defining

authentic leadership as an ongoing developing process and an interplay between key themes. Authentic leadership behavior is therefore depending on a certain context, personal leaders' attributions and authenticity. It varies over time and should not be simplified to an unchanging or stable construct.

Practical Implications

Based on the present study, there definitely is a connection between authentic leadership in academics and practice. All the interviewees emphasized, without a doubt, the importance of authentic leadership. This is also found in earlier research where authentic leadership is related to positive outcomes, such as job satisfaction (Darvish & Rezaei, 2011), job performance (Wang et al., 2014), and work engagement (Hassan & Ahmed, 2011). For this reason, the question whether or not authentic leadership is manifested through skills that can be trained, could be intriguing. Although, as some interviewees put it, some individuals are natural leaders and will be authentic without any guidance, others may have the capacity to be authentic but require assistance in reaching that potential. Therefore, it can be valuable to further examine whether authentic leadership can be developed by training individuals skills related to the central themes of authentic leadership behavior in this study. For instance, by using pretest-posttest study designs.

Furthermore, it can be questioned whether or not authentic leadership can always be achieved. As some interviewees explained, for example, some situations ask for a more polite reaction instead of a sincere answer, and therefore being authentic is not always practical. Hence, future research should investigate the realistic demands for leaders.

As a final point, during the interview the participants talked about the differences and similarities in being authentic as a leader compared to being authentic in their personal life. While most interviewees only illustrated subtle differences, others talked about the different role patterns that come with those divergent contexts. For instance, being a mom might

require other aspects of authenticity than being a manager. Future research should be undertaken to determine those exact similarities and differences.

Limitations

When evaluating the findings and debating future possibilities, the study has some limitations that should be kept in mind. First of all, while in quantitative research bias of the research results is avoided by minimizing the role of the researcher, this is not possible in qualitative research. This is evident in the case of the current study, since the conducted interview questions began from the researchers' point of view, a good illustration of potential researchers' bias. Frequently, this level of natural bias is seen in qualitative research and hard to counter (Brown, 2020). However, it can be argued that such a minimization is not even desirable in this qualitative research because having the researchers' point of view is helpful or even essential in a grounded theory study. The ability to recognize data elements and extract information from them (i.e., theoretical sensitivity) is of great importance for an evolving theory (Birks & Mills, 2015). Therefore, in this qualitative research, no attempt was made to eliminate the role of the researcher, but distortion of the research results is prevented by making that role as visible as possible. The section below illustrates what the current study did to, practically, minimize researcher's bias.

Throughout the phases of data analysis and collection, a detailed research design has been followed (see method section). During the interview the researcher was constantly aware of its position as an interviewer and was asking as few guiding questions as possible. For example, the interviewer made sure there were no suggestive questions or asked for clarification when things were unclear. In reporting the results, the researcher chose to make use of extensive citations, since they make it possible to present data as concretely as possible and in their 'rich' and meaningful form. Quotations in qualitative reports have a similar function to tables in quantitative research: they make clear to the reader that the data are

really there. In addition, they make the relationship between the raw data and the interpretation visible, making it verifiable and open to criticism. Additionally, an idea for future research to avoid even more potential researchers' bias, is that the interviewed persons should have the opportunity to comment on preliminary results. This is called member checking, a technique for determining whether or not results are credible. Participants are given data or outcomes to check for accuracy and resemblance to their own experiences. In a list of validation approaches, member checking is frequently discussed (Birt et al., 2016).

The second possible limitation is that the categorical analysis proposed is probably not the only sensible representation of the data. A conceptual framework based on the grounded theory method, according to Locke (2002), should be considered as a theoretical place-marker in the development of thinking about authentic leadership. Although the present study did consider a number of alternatives during the analyses, and this one best represents the data in the view of the researchers, the present study should be replicated and evaluated by future research. Researchers' own opinions and interests could influence the interpretation of the results (i.e., reflexivity). However, material was collected adequately, there was an expert interviewer, the researcher used cyclical alternation of data collection and analysis (as befits the grounded theory approach), and data saturation has occurred. Also, the research is verifiable by means of audio recordings and transcripts. And there has been sufficient search for contrasting opinions. For example, by presenting conclusions of the evaluation to external experts (i.e., peer debriefing).

Lastly, the current theory mainly focuses on the leader and does not necessarily put the followers in the central point of attention. Whereas the main goal of this research was to get the practitioners-view, asking leaders themselves also carries risks. When talking about their own opinion and experiences they are by definition not objective, can give socially desirable answers, and need to have great self-reflection skills. Although the participants

were asked about their experiences with their own authentic leaders, so some information was collected from the follower perspective, still, considerably more work will need to be done to examine this followers' perspective. Especially, if one of the model's main principles is that the interpersonal environment is important, evidence may need to be obtained from both leaders as well as their followers, in order to be able to distinguish between the leaders' perceptions of their own behavior and the followers' perceptions of it (Cooper et al., 2005). In this instance, researchers would need to develop parallel assessment methodologies that could be used on both leaders and followers (e.g., surveys with corresponding scales).

Future Research

One of the more significant and recurring problems in leadership research is the use of nonsensical tools to measure various constructs. As mentioned before, this is especially disappointing because leaders' behavior is plainly perceptual and, to paraphrase an old cliché, 'in the eye of the beholder'. As a result, proper assessment becomes even more important in developing a broad grasp of leadership processes (Neider & Schriesheim, 2011). Although an Authentic Leadership Questionnaire (ALQ) (Walumbwa et al., 2008) already exists, this only takes into account the four dimensions that have been mentioned earlier (i.e., self-awareness, unbiased processing, authentic behavior, authentic relational orientations). Therefore, the conceptual framework and the relation between all themes in this research need to be quantified and further examined, so that current results can be the basis for the creation of a preliminary pool of themes for a new instrument. Consequently, a changing situation or interpersonal environment will need to be taken into account, too. Such a new inventory could become a valid tool to measure authentic leadership, since it focuses on momentary authentic leadership instead of authentic leadership as a stable leadership style. Eventually, this new questionnaire could be useful for experience sampling, a methodology that allows

researchers to record state and situation assessments in real time while individuals go about their regular lives (Cooper et al., 2018).

Another way of quantifying authentic leadership could be the deductive reasoning approach. Whereas, the conceptual framework of this study resulted from the inductive reasoning of the data (Figure 13). In other words, the observations showed a pattern (i.e., the lens) and eventually led to a theory (i.e., the conceptual model). Future research could use this model deductively (Figure 13), seeing authentic leadership behavior as a starting point (i.e., theory), the lens can be used as a checklist to determine (i.e., observation) whether this leaders' behavior is really authentic or not (i.e., confirmation).

Figure 13

Inductive and Deductive Reasoning
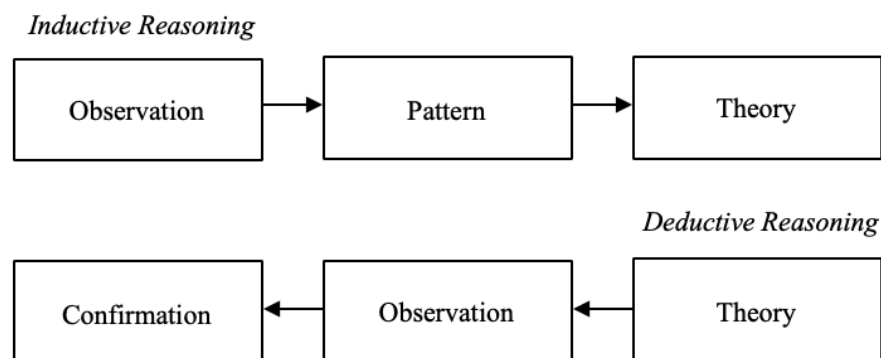
Although surveys like the ALQ (Walumbwa et al., 2008) are a common way to analyze leaders' behaviors and are an apparent choice, researchers should not rule out other approaches. For example, authentic leaders are expected to be able to make important organizational decisions, as a result it may be appropriate to provide them with a variety of scenarios depicting organizational dilemmas and measure their responses, or even enact some sort of moral dilemma for them and assess how they react, similar to an experiential learning format. Additionally, examining a matched sample of non-authentic leaders to see how they

differ in terms of leadership attributes, behaviors, or personal experiences may also be beneficial.

As seen in the results, individual characteristics, such as demographics and personality, as well as strengths and core values, may be crucial to determine authenticity in leadership behavior. In terms of personality, for example, Big Five attributes such as emotional stability may have an impact on a person's ability to become an authentic leader. A variety of demographic factors could potentially have an impact, too. One that appears to be particularly important is life experience. Leaders must have had the opportunity to encounter certain experiences in order to be able to reflect on them. Furthermore, the ideas offered in this article should be tested for cross-cultural generalizability. The concept of authenticity may not be equally valued throughout cultures or it may have different meanings and appears in different ways in distinct civilizations (Shamir & Eilam, 2005). Therefore, national culture should also be taken into account. Some cultures, for example, may not expect their leaders to be open or honest with their followers. What is considered authentic in the Netherlands may be viewed in a totally different light by Americans, for example. As a result, an intervention that is legitimate in the Netherlands may not be genuine elsewhere. Culture should be investigated as a boundary condition as interest in authentic leadership rises.

Adding to that, the importance of context in authentic leadership development, for example, will also need to be addressed, and the degree to which authenticity varies in certain circumstances is a potentially fascinating research topic for the future. The sector, company, size, organizational culture, organizational histories, team dynamics, conflicts, previous leadership interventions, and the degree of success/failure are all important context factors to examine. Also, little is said about authentic leadership development over time. Several interviewees do indicate that they developed their authenticity as a leader over time. By copying others, extracting things from them that appeals to them and through experiences

they have had over time. Finally, some questions that arose during the research were captured in the memos. For instance, does authenticity make you (more) vulnerable? Are there only positive outcomes? What is the effect of critical incidents? What can be the influence of, for example, pressure, stress, emotions, etc.? Therefore, the consequences and results of authentic leadership could be examined on the basis of the current conceptual model.

Conclusion

The present qualitative study makes use of the grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to find a practice-oriented conceptualization of authentic leadership. The grounded theory approach makes it possible to provide a better understanding of how modern-day leaders make meaning of their reality and conceptualization of authentic leadership, by defining a conceptual framework out of the process of concurrent data collection and analysis. The conceptual framework explains that authentic leadership encompasses a wide range of leadership behaviors that, when perceived in a certain manner, can be authentic (or not). The crucial element for determining if leadership is authentic, is the lens, consisting of three components (i.e., authenticity, leader, and context), through which leadership behavior is evaluated. By comparing these findings to prior central conceptualization of authenticity and authentic leadership, this research was able to identify areas of common ground between academics and practitioners. As a result, this study contributes towards a greater understanding of what it means to be authentic in the context of leadership.

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Semi-structured Interview Questions

Dimension	Interview questions
Demographics	· Name · Age · Race · Gender · Current organization + sector · Highest level of education achieved · Most senior title you've held · Years of professional work experience · Years of leadership experience · FTE count of the largest team you've led or had responsibility for

General	1. In your own words, what does authentic leadership mean?
	   a. What do authentic leaders do? How do they do it?
	   b. How important is it to be an authentic leader?
	   c. When is someone's leadership style not authentic?
	2. Think about the most authentic leader you have worked with.
	   a. What makes them appear authentic to you?
	   b. What about them stands out to you?
	3. Tell me about a situation or moment in your leadership experience when you were most authentic (give background and organizational context - crucial stakeholders, your role, your team's role, etc.).
	   a. In your opinion, what allowed you to be authentic?
	   b. How did being authentic impact your decision-making?
	   c. What was the result of your authenticity in leadership?
	4. Tell me about a situation or moment in your leadership experience when you were the least authentic (give background and organizational context - crucial stakeholders, your role, your team's role, etc.).
	   a. In your opinion, what allowed you to be less authentic?
	   b. How did being inauthentic impact your decision-making?
	   c. In your opinion what were some of the barriers that stopped you from being more authentic?
	   d. What was the result of your lack of authenticity in leadership?

5. Would you act less/more authentic if the situations described above were 1-on-1 situations instead of group situations (or the other way around)?
6. What are some of the similarities you see in being authentic as a leader compared to being authentic in your personal life?
7. What are some of the differences you see in being authentic as a leader compared to being authentic in your personal life?