

Authentic Leadership & Work Engagement

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The concern here is to understand how in organizations: a) authentic leadership relates to work engagement and psychological ownership, and b) psychological ownership interferes with the relationship between authentic leadership and work engagement. Using a correlational research design, the authors collected cross-sectional data from 117 working professionals through a Google Docs based survey in India. They found through regression analyses that authentic leadership indirectly relates to work engagement of employees through the full mediation of organization-based promotive psychological ownership. They discuss the implications for theory and research and argue that authentic leadership theory should include context variables such as control and position power.

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Introduction

Human self has been one of the most inviting topics for researchers (Baumeister 1999). It reflects in the human self-based approaches that are growing popular in leadership and organization studies. Authentic leadership, psychological ownership and work engagement are three such emerging constructs that hold considerable promise. Authentic leadership is gaining ground amidst growing global concerns regarding rising social costs of business and the resultant demands for authenticity (Gardner et al 2005, Klenke 2007). Psychological ownership (Pierce, Kostova, & Dirks 2001, 2003; Van Dyne & Pierce 2004) and work engagement (Attridge 2009, Christian, Garza & Slaughter 2011, Kahn 1990) are gaining ground amidst increasing demands on global competitiveness for modern organizations (Brown 1989,). Much research attention has come to work engagement due to the realization that most employees remain disengaged and therefore performing much below their potential (Bates 2004).

Scholars have attempted to link authentic leadership with Positive Organizational Behaviour (POB) literature

(Gardner & Schermerhorn 2004, Luthans & Avolio 2009, Yammarino et al 2008) and work engagement (Gardner et al. 2005, Walumbwa et al 2010). Psychological ownership is proposed to be a part of POB (Luthans & Avolio 2009, Walumbwa et al 2008). It fulfils the three criteria for inclusion into POB: a) based on theory, research and measurement, b) state-like in being open to change and development, and c) impacting performance in organizations (Avey et al 2009). It is close to several POB constructs such as psychological well-being, psychological capital, positive organizational scholarship, and character strengths and virtues.

Authentic leadership and work engagement are related in theory (Gardner et al. 2005) and there is some research support for this relationship (Walumbwa et al. 2010). Authentic leadership and psychological ownership are human self-based constructs and likely share relationship; however, we are not aware of any research in this regard. It is important to understand how authentic leadership relates to these constructs considering their potential to influence work performance and psychological well being of employees (Gardner & Schermerhorn 2004, Kahn 1990, Ryan & Deci 2001). We ask here two research questions: a) how authentic leadership relates to work engagement and psychological ownership in organizational contexts, and b) how psychological ownership interferes with the relationship between authentic leadership and work engagement. We begin by developing expectations and go on to present method

and findings. We conclude by discussing study implications for theory and research.

Authentic Leadership

Authentic leadership is a higher-order, multi-dimensional construct comprising self-awareness, balanced processing of information, relational transparency, and internalized moral standards

Authenticity, the core of authentic leadership, is variously conceptualized as moral virtue and ethical choice in philosophy, trait or state and identity in psychology, and individual and organizational characteristics in leadership studies (Novicevic et al 2006). It is deeply related to seeking coherence between what one is and what one does. Authentic leadership is a higher-order, multi-dimensional construct comprising self-awareness, balanced processing of information, relational transparency, and internalized moral standards (Gardner et al 2005, Walumbwa et al. 2008). Self-awareness refers to deep awareness of values, identity, emotions, goals and motives. Authentic leaders are aware of their core end values and resist compromising them. Balanced processing and relational transparency are related to leader self-regulation. Authentic leaders have optimal self-esteem and they objectively accept their strengths and weaknesses. They present their true selves to others in a trusting and open manner and encourage them to do the same.

Psychological Ownership

Psychological ownership has been extensively studied in various disciplines and contexts to explore the psychology of possession (Pierce et al. 2003). In organizational contexts, it is often argued that psychological ownership can be an important predictor of employee attitudes, behaviours and performance (Pierce et al. 2001, 2003, Van Dyne & Pierce 2004). The feeling of ownership toward material and non-material objects comes naturally to humans (Pierce et al. 2001). The 'owned' objects become the part of self and contribute to the identity of the owner (Dittmar 1992).

Psychological ownership is a cognitive-affective construct defined as a state of mind "in which individuals feel as though the target of ownership (material or immaterial in nature) or a piece of it is "theirs" (i.e., "It is MINE!")" (Pierce, Kostova & Dirks 2001: 299). It reflects "an individual's awareness, thoughts, and beliefs regarding the target of ownership" (Pierce, Kostova & Dirks 2003: 86). It is distinct from other related constructs such as commitment and satisfaction in its emphasis on possession (Pierce et al. 2001, Van Dyne & Pierce 2004).

Psychological ownership can have preventive and promotive foci, where the former refers to a concern for what to avoid for reducing punishment and meeting duties and obligations, whereas, the latter refers to a concern for what to do to fulfil hopes and aspirations. Preventive focus reflects in territorial beha-

viours, whereby, a person defends any influence over the target of ownership (Avey et al. 2009). Promotive focus reflects in a sense of belongingness, tendency to hold or to be held accountable, defining oneself through what one owns and a self-believe about capability to influence the environment (Avey et al. 2009, Pierce et al. 2001).

Work Engagement

Work engagement is variously conceptualized as psychological presence for the organizational role (Kahn 1990), antithesis of burnout (Maslach & Leiter 1997, Schaufeli et al 2002), and barter for resources and benefits received from organizations (Saks 2006). There is considerable agreement, however, that it is a higher-order construct comprising cognitive, emotional and behavioural dimensions (Christian et al. 2011). Its focus is formal task performance rather than voluntary behaviour (Saks 2006). It is simultaneously trait-like and state-like in being relatively enduring yet fluctuating over time (Christian et al. 2011).

Construct Interrelations

Authentic leadership is theorized to impact work engagement of followers in the sense of increasing their involvement, satisfaction and enthusiasm for work (Gardner et al. 2005), however, the work engagement literature distinguishes involvement and satisfaction from engagement (Christian et al. 2011). Job involvement refers to the cognition of how central the job is to one's self-identity (Christian et al. 2011, Lawler & Hall 1970,

Lodahl & Kejnar 1965), whereas, job satisfaction refers to the evaluative descriptions of job characteristics (Christian et al. 2011). Work engagement is different in being a) cognitive, affective and behavioural construct b) descriptions of experiences that one gets from work (Christian et al. 2011). However, job involvement and job satisfaction may have a moderate relationship with work engagement (Christian et al. 2011). It would be better to explore the possibility of authentic leadership's impact on work engagement in a more general manner.

Authentic leaders demonstrate integrity, show sustained performance, build trust and openness, and help followers realize their true potentials

Authentic leaders demonstrate integrity, show sustained performance, build trust and openness, and help followers realize their true potentials (Gardner et al. 2005). These behaviours are likely to enhance the safety dimension of work engagement as identified by Kahn (1990). Through positive modelling and compelling visions, followers of the authentic leaders are likely to internalize organizational goals (Gardner et al. 2005). Thus their extrinsic motivations would resemble intrinsic motivation in effect and the goals will become more meaningful (Ryan & Deci 2000). Besides, authentic leaders with their internalized moral perspective are likely to treat employees with dignity and in a fair manner. This interactional justice aspect is known to play an important role in work engagement (Pati & Kumar 2010).

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Authentic leadership perceptions will significantly predict the followers' work engagement.

Authentic leadership research gained momentum after the transformational leadership literature argued for pseudo and authentic transformational leaders (Avolio, Walumbwa & Weber 2009, Luthans & Avolio 2003, Price 2003). Transformational leaders are known to positively affect promotive psychological ownership (Avey et al. 2009). Further, authentic leadership is associated with positive psychological capacities viz. hope, optimism, resilience and confidence or self-efficacy (Luthans & Avolio 2003). Self-efficacy is an integral component of promotive psychological ownership. Moreover, authentic leaders foster positive ethical climate and a highly developed organizational context as well (Avolio et al. 2009) that may diminish the need for preventive psychological ownership.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Authentic leadership perceptions will have significant negative relationship with the followers' preventive psychological ownership.

Hypothesis 3 (H3): Authentic leadership perceptions will have significant positive relationship with the followers' promotive psychological ownership.

Supervisors, for their subordinates, are the personal manifestations of organizations' intent (Rhoades & Eisenberger 2002). Authentic leadership of immediate supervisors would develop organizational contexts that would promote positive attitudes and behaviours (Avolio et

al. 2009). It is expected, therefore, that authentic leadership would concern organization-based psychological ownership (PO-Org) more than the job-based psychological ownership (PO-Job). While the former is inclusively concerned with organization as a whole, the latter is exclusively concerned with the job (Mayhew et al 2007).

Pierce et al. (2001: 299) argued that the target of ownership “becomes part of the psychological owner’s identity”. PO-Job, in this sense, is likely to have closer linkages with job involvement. Moreover, self-investment into the potential target of ownership is theorized to be causally related to the degree of psychological ownership (Pierce et al. 2001). Therefore, PO-Job is likely to be a consequence of engagement. Such engagement is theorized to be a result of obligations that employees feel toward organizations to compensate for what they perceive as organization’s discretionary support (Pati & Kumar 2010, Rhoades & Eisenberger 2002, Saks 2006). Therefore, they are likely to have a positive view of organization before they intend to reciprocate through investing themselves in organizational roles.

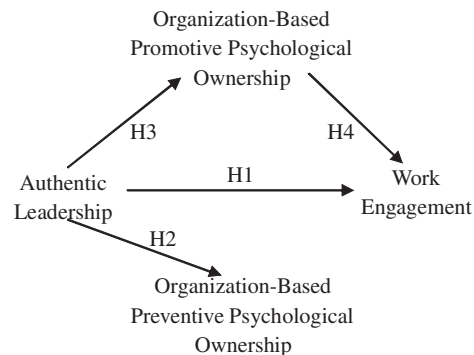
Hypothesis 4 (H4): Promotive PO-Org will significantly predict work engagement.

Authentic leadership, promotive PO-Org and work engagement are related to each other. Authentic leadership is expected to be positively related to promotive PO-Org, which in turn, is expected

to be positively related to work engagement. We propose that promotive PO-Org mediates the relationship between authentic leadership and work engagement. Figure 1 presents the proposed research framework.

Hypothesis 5 (H5): Promotive PO-Org will mediate the impact of authentic leadership on work engagement of employees.

Fig 1: Proposed Research Framework



Participants & Study Design

We tested our hypotheses using data collected from a Google Docs based survey in India. The survey link was sent through emails to working professionals in different organizations. 117 working professionals, 82 males and 35 females, from various organizations answered the survey. 68.1% of them had managerial job profiles, whereas, 24.14% had technical job profiles. 82.05% of the respondents were practicing Hindus. Their average age was 31.17 years (SD = 6.77 years) and average tenure with the current organization was 4.3 years (SD =

5.42 years). On an average they have been reporting to their current superior for past 2.29 years (SD = 3.43 years). The survey involved self-report measures for the dependent, mediator and independent variables in that order. We used correlational research design and collected cross-sectional data for our purpose.

Measures

Authentic Leadership Questionnaire is a 16-item theory-driven survey instrument to measure authentic leadership (Walumbwa et al. 2008). The instrument takes authentic leadership as a second-order factor with four first-order factors: self awareness, relational transparency, balanced processing, and internalized moral perspective. It uses a 5-point (0 = not at all; 4 = frequently, if not always) behavioural observation scale where followers rate leaders on questions such as “says exactly what he or she means”. The scale is reported to be fairly robust with internal consistency alphas (Cronbach’s alphas) for each sub-scale and overall scale higher than .70 in a cross-cultural validation study (Walumbwa et al. 2008).

Psychological Ownership Questionnaire is a 16-item theory-driven survey instrument to measure promotive and preventive PO-Org (Avey et al. 2009). Psychological ownership is a second-order multidimensional factor comprising five first-order factors: territoriality, self-efficacy, belongingness, self-identity, and accountability. The scale uses a 6-point (1 = strongly disagree; 6 = strongly agree) forced-choice Likert-type scale where

employees show their level of agreement with questions such as “I feel this organization’s success is my success”. It is reported to have good internal reliability with the alphas for each sub-scale and the overall scale higher than .70 (Avey et al. 2009).

The 9-item Utrecht Work Engagement Scale is used to measure work engagement, a second-order factor comprising three first-order factors: vigour, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli, Bakker & Salanova 2006). It uses a 7-point (0 = never; 6 = always/everyday) scale where employees respond to questions such as “At my job, I feel strong and vigorous”. It is reported to have good internal reliability with the median alpha for the overall scale being 0.92 across 10 countries in a cross-national study (Schaufeli et al. 2006).

Analysis

We tested H1 and H4 using linear regression, H2 and H3 using Pearson correlation coefficients and H5 using Baron and Kenny’s (1986) mediated regression technique. Mediated regression is based on two assumptions: a) mediator is measured well and b) the dependent variable does not cause the mediator (Baron & Kenny 1986). In our study, the first assumption is met by using a pre-validated instrument and the second assumption is met while deriving H4.

Mediated regression involves three steps: 1) regressing mediator on independent variable 2) regressing dependent variable on independent variable, and 3)

regressing dependent variable on independent variable and mediator taken together (Baron & Kenny 1986). Mediation is established when, apart from significant relationships in the first two steps, in step 3 mediator and dependent variable are significantly related and the effect of independent variable on dependent variable is lesser than that in step 2. Full mediation is said to occur if, in step 3, independent variable has no significant

effect on dependent variable. Partial mediation is said to occur if, in step 3, independent variable has reduced, yet significant effect on dependent variable.

Results

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations and the Pearson correlation coefficients of the study variables.

Table 1: Variable Descriptives, Cronbach’s Alphas and Inter-Correlations

Variable	Mean	SD	Æ	Correlations		
				2	3	4
1 Work Engagement	4.65	1.09	0.88	0.67**	.47**	————
2 Promotive PO-Org	4.69	0.82	0.88	————	.52**	-.23*
3 Authentic Leadership	2.43	0.91	0.95	————	————	-.25**
4 Preventive PO-Org	3.04	1.12	0.65	————	————	————

N = 117. PO-Org = Organization-based Psychological Ownership. * p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01

Work engagement and preventive PO-Org are not significantly associated; however, all other study variables share significant correlations.

It is clear that work engagement and preventive PO-Org are not significantly associated; however, all other study vari-

ables share significant correlations. As predicted in H2 and H3, authentic leadership is correlated negatively (r = -0.25, p < 0.01) with preventive PO-Org and positively (r = 0.52, p < 0.01) with promotive PO-Org. Preventive and promotive PO-Org share negative correlation as well (r = -0.23, p < 0.05). Table 2 presents the regression results concerning H1 and H4.

Table 2: Work Engagement: Impact of Authentic Leadership/Psychological Ownership

Independent Variable	Dependent Variable: Work Engagement				
	R ²	Durbin-Watson	F	B	SE
Authentic Leadership	0.22	2.23	31.87	0.56	0.10
Promotive PO-Org	0.45	2.10	95.29	0.89	0.09

PO-Org = Organization-based Psychological Ownership; p < 0.05

Durbin-Watson test statistic is a test for uncorrelated error term, a basic assumption of least squares regression (Durbin & Watson 1951). It is closer to 2 in both cases and thus both cases fulfil a basic assumption concerning regression. Table 2 shows that authentic leadership accounts for about 22% and promotive psychological ownership accounts for about 45% variability in work

engagement. Relatively large F-statistic in both cases indicates that the regression model is fairly robust. The values of non-standardized coefficient B indicates that authentic leadership and psychological ownership significantly and substantially predict work engagement of employees. This is as per our predictions in H2 and H4. Table 3 presents the results concerning H5.

Table 3: Psychological Ownership as Mediator between Authentic Leadership and Work Engagement

Step	Independent	Dependent	R ²	F	B	SE	t	Sig.
1	Authentic Leadership	Promotive PO-Org	0.27	43.45	0.48	0.07	6.59	0.00
2	Authentic Leadership	Work Engagement	0.22	31.87	0.56	0.10	5.65	0.00
3a	Authentic Leadership	Work Engagement	0.47	50.72	0.19	0.96	1.95	0.053
3b	Promotive PO-Org	Work Engagement	0.47	50.72	0.78	0.11	7.40	0.00

PO-Org = Organization-based Psychological Ownership; $p < 0.05$

Authentic leadership significantly affects psychological ownership (step 1) and work engagement (step 2). With psychological ownership significantly affecting work engagement (step 3), the preliminary conditions indicating mediation are met (Baron & Kenny 1986). It can be seen that the effect of authentic leadership on work engagement, when controlled for mediator, is lesser in step 3 as compared to that in step 2 (from $B = 0.56$ to $B = 0.19$, $p < 0.05$). The reduced effect is not significant ($\text{sig. } 0.053 > 0.05$). The Sobel test statistic obtained is 4.93 with 0.000001 probabilities (two-tailed) of occurring by chance alone. Thus the mediator can be said to significantly carry the effect of independent variable to the dependent variable. In other words, promotive PO-Org can be said to fully me-

diate the relationship between authentic leadership and work engagement.

Discussion

We expected that authentic leadership will share relationships with PO-Org and work engagement and advanced five hypotheses in this regard. The participants in this study experienced moderate to high levels of authentic leadership ($M = 2.43$ out of 4, $SD = 0.91$), promotive PO-Org ($M = 4.69$ out of 6, $SD = 0.82$), preventive PO-Org ($M = 3.04$ out of 6, $SD = 1.12$), and work engagement ($M = 4.65$ out of 6, $SD = 1.09$). It prepared a good ground for testing of hypotheses. The results showed that authentic leadership indirectly affects work engagement through promotive PO-Org.

Moreover, preventive PO-Org is negatively associated with authentic leadership and work engagement. All five hypotheses were tested positive.

The results showed that authentic leadership indirectly affects work engagement through promotive PO-Org. Preventive PO-Org is negatively associated with authentic leadership and work engagement.

Implications for Authentic Leadership

These results are important for authentic leadership theory and research. Authentic leadership literature has largely kept its focus on the content of leadership to explain its outcomes. Wider organizational context has been largely seen as the responsibility of leaders (Gardner et al. 2005, Gardner, Avolio & Walumbwa 2006). Further, work engagement in the authentic leadership literature has been theorized to flow through leader characteristics, psychological safety and meaningful work (Gardner et al. 2005). The present study offers insights into both of these issues.

In the present study, H5 results showed that authentic leadership can predict work engagement of followers when two conditions are satisfied: a) followers see their leaders as personal manifestations of organizations' intent (our basic assumption for H5), and b) followers experience moderate to high levels of promotive PO-Org. If, for example, an

authentic leader has weak position power, it is unlikely that he or she will be viewed as manifestation of the organization's intent. In that case, authentic leadership may not trigger follower obligation toward the organization. Further, if the wider organizational context inhibits ownership, then authentic leadership may not trigger work engagement. For example, it is known that employees experience ownership to the extent they are allowed to control their job and work settings (Mayhew et al. 2007, Pierce, O'Driscoll & Coghlan 2004). If the wider organizational context doesn't allow much control, authentic leadership is unlikely to trigger work engagement.

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Avey et al. (2009) reasoned that individuals seeking stability, safety and predictability may resort to preventive form of psychological ownership. In the present study, H2 results showed that authentic leadership is negatively associated with preventive PO-Org. It offers some support for Gardner et al. (2005) who posited that authentic leaders create proximal organizational climates that are more inclusive, caring, engaged and development-oriented. It appears that authentic leaders, to some extent, can offer an alternative to softer organizational contexts; however, they cannot possibly replace harder contexts affecting followers. Therefore, it is important for authentic leadership theorists to in-

corporate the context of leadership in their formulations.

Conclusion

Authentic leadership, psychological ownership and work engagement, in a way, have shared common fate. These theoretical constructs have been driven by practical needs and a desire to appreciate the relationship of individuals with organizations in some sense. We have made one of the first attempts to investigate their interrelations. In the process, we believe to have made three important contributions: a) identifying promotive PO-Org as the predictor for work engagement, b) identifying the meditational effects of promotive PO-Org on authentic leadership – work engagement relationship, and c) proposing the importance of context for authentic leadership theorizing. We hope that the study will trigger a number of future research initiatives to advance theory.

Study Limitations

Findings of the present study, rather than being definitive, are more tentative in nature due to three important reasons. First, the study uses correlational research design with cross-sectional data. Correlational research cannot offer insights into the causal linkages because none of the variables are manipulated and all of them are measured at the same point in time. Second, the study is susceptible to common method variance as the measures for all variables are taken from the same sources at a time. Third, the sample size is relatively small. A larger

sample size would permit more sophisticated techniques such as structured equation modelling to detect mediation effects.

Suggestions for Future Research

First, the present study indicates a relationship that authentic leadership shares with PO-Org and work engagement. This relationship can be further verified using a larger, may be cross-national pool of participants and sophisticated analytical techniques. A future research can ascertain causality through causal research designs. It would be of immense help in understanding the inner workings of these important constructs.

Second, all the three constructs are second-order factors comprising three or more first-order factors. It is possible that various first-order factors share some sort of relationship. A future research can look into this aspect to identify more proximate handles for practical use. Third, the relationship of work engagement with PO-Job and PO-Org can be investigated. It is likely that work engagement will predict PO-Job.

Fourth, the authentic leadership theory contends that new entrants are more likely to participate in authentic leadership processes as compared to accustomed employees (Gardner et al. 2005). On the other hand, the leader-member exchange (LMX) theory posits that leader-follower relationship becomes more open and inclusive upon maturity (Graen & Uhl-Bien 1995). A future research can study the relationship between authentic leadership,

PO-Org and work engagement with maturity-levels and age of leader-follower relationship as moderators to study these competing positions.

Fifth, PO-Org and work engagement are deeply concerned about how individuals relate with organizations. Authentic leadership, at least in organizational contexts, is concerned about it as well. Person-organization theory (Argyris 1954, 1959, 1964, 1973), in organization studies, especially addresses this issue by proposing that organizations attempt to make agents of individuals, whereas, individuals attempt to make agency of organizations. A future research may study the interrelationships of the three constructs within the framework of the person-organization theory. It would be interesting to see whether authentic leadership prospers under the assumption of self-interest that the person-organization theory makes.

Finally, a future research may look into H5 using organizational context variables such as position power and control as moderators and mediators. It would offer deeper insights into how authentic leadership affects follower behaviours.

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