

# **Dimensions of Authentic Leadership in the Middle Eastern Context: Are these Leaders Really Authentic?**

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## **Abstract**

The economic crisis and the various business scandals have placed a call for leaders who are responsible, ethical, do not deceive others, and lead in an authentic way. This article presents the concept of authentic leadership in a particular context that of the Middle East where religion and culture influence the ways we do business and leaders' behavior. This paper presents the findings of a survey conducted in the Kingdom of Bahrain among 25 companies. It investigates whether leaders in this context are authentic. The findings suggest that in the Middle Eastern context leaders exhibit authentic leadership behaviors with emphasis on relational transparency.

**Keywords:** authentic leadership, culture, ethical leadership, Middle East

## **Introduction**

Corporate scandals, such as Exxon oil spill, the Enron fiasco, in the new millennial business have revealed shortcomings in management and governance as well as leadership (De Cremer et al., 2011). Leaders were found in these companies to pursue their own well being with no regard to ethical consideration (Sendjaya et al, 2014). The society is also desiring their leaders to exhibit behaviors aligned with core societal values, where leaders are concerned about the society's well being without being deceiving (Gardner et al., 2011; Peus et al., 2012). These corporate practices and the broader society's demands have lead to a growing interest on leadership and authentic leadership. Gardner et al. (2011) propose that authenticity and ethical behavior have become critically important in contemporary organizations. In addition, there is an increasing need for better understanding of cultural influences on leadership and organizational practices.

## **Research problem**

The research problem from this study is that as leadership impacts on organizational effectiveness, the ethical component of authentic leadership is regarded as vital in today's organizations. The question is whether leaders nowadays exhibit authentic leadership behaviors in the Arab context, which is characterized by specific religious acts, and culture as it is further discussed in this paper. In order to investigate whether authentic leadership is exhibited in this specific context, employees' attitudes and perceptions of their leaders' authentic leadership are examined.

This paper contributes to the knowledge of authentic leadership and ethical behavior by examining the different constructs of authentic leadership in the Arab context. Although there are many studies on effective leadership and different leadership styles in the west, very few studies have investigated leadership and its effectiveness specifically from the Middle Eastern region (Kabasakal et al., 2012). Hence, the aim of this study is to highlight the extent to which the characteristics of authentic leadership are valid in the Middle East context. Moreover, this paper assesses the various managerial implications authentic leadership has within a particular culture with an effort to propose ways to develop authentic leadership. The cultural norms in this region are different and it is possible that leadership styles found to be effective in Western cultures may not be equally or similarly effective in this region.

### **Authentic leadership**

The growing demand from society for more transparency, integrity and ethical behavior within organizations has led to the development of authentic leadership (Gardner et al., 2011). Most of the work published on authentic leadership has been mainly conceptual (Gardner et al., 2011), however very little research has been presented on more empirical studies on authentic leadership (Day, 2014; Walumbwa et al., 2008). While there are various conceptualizations of authentic leadership empirical research is proposed by many as the concept started receiving attention in the last decade (Peus et al., 2012).

Various definitions of authentic leadership have been provided. Authentic leadership has been defined as a process, resulting in greater self-awareness and fostering positive development (Luthans and Avolio, 2003). Authentic leaders are found to be acting according to their values and beliefs, with focus on their followers' developments and forming a positive organizational environment based on trust (Luthans and Avolio, 2003; Walumbwa et al., 2008). Gardner et al. (2011) add that

authentic leaders have open communication and collaboration with their followers, which leads to positive performance outcomes. In addition, they stimulate followers' motivation and self-esteem, which results in trust in the leader, work satisfaction and commitment (Walumbwa et al., 2010; Wang et al., 2014).

Studies on conceptualizations of authentic leadership propose frameworks including various constructs. For example, Gardner et al. (2005) propose a framework that focuses on self-awareness and self-regulation processes, internalized regulation, balanced processing, relational transparency and authentic behavior. Ilies et al. (2005) propose four components of authentic leadership, including self-awareness, unbiased processing, authentic behavior and authentic relational orientation. A more recent study by Walumbwa et al. (2008) proposes that authentic leadership consists of four main dimensions: self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced processing and internalized moral perspective. They suggest that the previous frameworks were insufficient and not adequate to justify authentic leadership behaviors.

The four components of authenticity are also presented in the Authentic Leadership Questionnaire (ALQ). The first component is *internalized moral perspective*, which refers to the leader's well-developed values that guide their actions through an internal locus of control, regardless of any external pressures. The second key component of authentic leadership is *self-awareness*, which refers to an individual's knowledge and understanding about themselves, which includes cognitive, emotional, and moral development. The third key component of authentic leadership is *relational transparency*, which refers to a leader's capacity to articulate and process their values and thoughts with their subordinates, thus creating a mutual and open trust relationship. The fourth key component of authentic leadership is *balanced processing*, which refers to a leader's capacity to objectively process information and critically reflect on tasks and circumstances before making any decisions (Walumbwa et al., 2008; Nikolic, 2014). It is evident that authentic leaders are guided by morality, act upon their deeply held values, and are aware of their strengths and weaknesses. Similarly, Walumbwa et al. (2008, p. 94) define authentic leadership as "a pattern of leader behavior that draws upon both positive psychological capacities and a positive ethical climate, to foster greater self-awareness, an internalized moral perspective, balanced processing of information, and relational transparency on the part of leaders working with followers, fostering

positive self-development". Hence, they propose that authentic leadership draws upon a positive ethical climate.

Authentic leadership is very common with ethical, transformational and charismatic leadership approaches (Walumbwa et al., 2008). It is also considered to be positive leadership (Gardner et al., 2005). In this study we consider authentic leadership as ethical and we try to analyse how managers lead authentically while trying to act in line with local and cultural accepted ways of leading people in the Middle East. Ethical leadership is "the kind of leadership that attempts to put ethical decision making high on its agenda, recognizes the cultural difficulties associated with this and aims to put integrity and propriety at the heart of organizational governance" (Ertenu et al., 2008, p. 209). Brown and Trevino (2006) and Walumbwa et al. (2008) suggest that ethical leadership is in line with the internalized moral perspective dimension of authentic leadership. Hence, we suggest that in order for the leaders in the study to be acting in an ethical way they should score high in this authentic leadership dimension.

H1: Leaders in the Middle East are authentic when they exhibit internalized moral perspective

Although Walumbwa et al.'s (2008) model of authentic leadership is considered to be universal, it can be assumed that every culture has its own authenticity which according to Ertenu et al. (2011, p. 209) is "based on its values and local practices". Authentic leaders are defined as "those who are deeply aware of how they think and behave and are perceived by others as being aware of their own and others' values / moral perspectives, knowledge and strengths; aware of the context in which they operate; and who are confident, hopeful, optimistic, resilient and of high moral character" (Avolio et al., 2004, p. 4).

Building on the definition of authentic leaders this study aims to present this leadership style in the particular context of the Middle East. In this article, authentic leadership is examined from the followers' perspective as well as the leaders' own evaluation of authentic leadership.

### **The nature of leadership and culture in the Middle East context**

Global leadership is different from local leadership as it is influenced by the local culture and practices. The difference depends on the role culture plays in developing the norms and values (Morrison, 2000). In order for leaders to be effective they should consider the cultural norms in organizations including ethics (Kabasakal et

al., 2012). Cultural norms vary among different cultures, hence leadership styles and effectiveness may vary in the Arab context where this study took place.

The Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness (GLOBE, 2015) project is a unique study that investigates the effective leadership in all major regions in the world including the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The study describes the relationships between societal culture, organizational processes and leadership. Ten clusters emerged from this study including the Middle East the findings of which are used to support the different context in the region and its influence on authentic leadership. The Middle Eastern cluster revealed societal norms and practices that reflect historical, religious and socio-cultural characteristics (Kabasakal et al., 2012). The study proposes that Islam is the prevalent religion in the region and acts as unifying force creating a common culture. Islam provides guidance, values and rules on how people can conduct their personal life, on community relations and ways of doing business (Kabasakal et al., 2012). In addition, the Koran, which articulates Islam, is the unifying force that influences societal practices and contributes to the creation of culture in Arab countries (Kabasakal and Bodur, 2002; Cerimagic, 2010).

Moreover, other societal practices are prevalent such as in-group orientation, masculinity, and tolerance of ambiguity as well as limited emphasis on planning (Kabasakal and Bodur, 2002; Kabasakal et al., 2012). Almoharby and Neal (2013, p. 151) suggest that “culture and everyday discourse, are diverse, complex and contingent upon the particular sect within Islam”. According to the GLOBE (2015) the most distinct leadership style in Arab countries is the combination of family and tribal norms and bureaucratic organizational structures that foster authoritarian management practices. Masoud (1999) claims that the right to wield power or to influence people characterizes authority. In the influence of Islam, authority is accepted without criticism; hence there is evidence of acceptance of power inequality as well. Day (2014, p. 351) suggests that future research should determine how the authentic leadership exhibited by the leader could impact the follower in terms of his/her perceived authenticity. In view to this suggestion, this paper in addition explores whether there any differences between the leaders’ own leadership style with their followers.

H2: Leaders do not differ from their followers in their perception of authentic leadership style.

Moreover, Islam promotes the collectivistic culture where the father is the authority in the family and similarly the manager in a business, as authority in this case stems from the position (Kabasakal et al., 2012; Almoharby and Neal, 2013). The Islamic leader is considered to be the great man who is leading the followers towards common ideas. Badawi (2002) proposes that leader authority is based on a collective striving for truth and unity.

According to Fiedler (1967) and Dorfman (1996) the context or the situation in which leadership is practiced moderates the relationship between the leader's personality traits and effectiveness, hence the leadership style to be adopted in each cultural setting derives from the implicit leadership beliefs in these contexts. Moreover, Javidan et al. (2006) suggest that people accept others as leaders based on cognitive categories, mental models, and stereotypes. A study of the GLOBE report proposes that attributes of leadership effectiveness in the MENA region include integrity, inspirational, visionary, administratively competent, performance-oriented, team-integrator, diplomatic, collaborative and decisive characteristics (Kabasakal et al., 2012). Mir (2010) suggests that Islamic leadership is related to power and authority and rests upon 'traditional authority'. In view to the above, Kabasakal et al. (2012) propose that further research should be conducted in the region in order to identify stronger relationships between cultural characteristics and leadership perceptions. Thus, this study proposes that the cultural setting in the Kingdom of Bahrain (a member of MENA and an Arab country) may be related to the exhibition of authentic leadership and ethical behaviors as other studies suggest that that a leader to be trusted is expected to combine authenticity with powerful approach (Ertenu et al., 2011).

## **Methods**

The purpose of this study was to investigate whether leaders in the Middle East are authentic and whether the cultural and religious background had an impact on authentic leadership exhibited in this context, hence to get an understanding about the construct of authentic leadership in this region. In order to measure perceived authentic leadership behaviors the 16-item Authentic Leadership Questionnaire (ALQ) developed by Walumbwa et al. (2008) was used. The questionnaire included the four dimensions of authentic leadership: self-awareness (4 items), internalized moral perspective (4 items), balanced processing (3 items) and relational transparency (5 items). The items were scored in a 5-Likert scale from 1 = not at all to 5 = frequently, if not always. Sample items were for self-awareness "demonstrates

beliefs that are consistent with actions”, for internalized moral perspective “makes difficult decisions based on high standards of ethical conduct”, for balanced processing “says exactly what he or she means” and for relational transparency “asks you to take positions that support your core values”. The questionnaire has been validated by Walumbwa et al. (2008) and confirmed by other studies as well (Clapp-Smith et al., 2009).

### **Participants**

The survey was conducted in the Kingdom of Bahrain among 25 companies within different sectors such as banking, manufacturing, and retail among others and from multiple organizational levels across small and medium organizations. Cooper et al. (2005) and Luthans and Avolio (2003) propose that authentic leadership is exhibited at all levels of the organization, hence the authors studied the phenomenon at all organizational levels. 800 self-administered paper-based questionnaires were distributed and 447 questionnaires were returned which is a 55.8% response rate. Participants signed a consent form, which was at the beginning of the questionnaire. Participants were requested to rate their leaders on their leadership behaviors as described in ALQ. In addition, leaders themselves were required to rate their own authentic leadership. 54.4% of the participants were men and 45.6% were women, mainly between 18-39 years old (66.2%).

Cronbach’s alpha for all authentic leadership items was  $\alpha=.924$ , which is quite high and acceptable. Respectively Cronbach’s alpha for Self-Awareness was  $\alpha=.931$ , for Internalized Moral Perspective  $\alpha=.795$ , for Balanced Processing  $\alpha=.678$ , and for Relational Transparency  $\alpha=.751$ , all exceeding .70 (Kline, 2007). The data analysis included data screening to ensure data was free of error and that variables are acceptable with regard to the study (Coakes, 2013). In addition, descriptive statistics were used to identify the main items of authentic leadership exhibited by the leaders in the sample. Finally, independent sample t tests were conducted in order to identify any differences between the leaders’ own perceptions of leadership with those of their followers.

### **Data analysis**

The statements of the ALQ were grouped as per the four dimensions provided by Walumbwa et al. (2008). Self-awareness included items 1, 5, 9, and 13, Internalized Moral Perspective included items 2, 6, 10 and 14, Balanced Processing included items 3, 7, 11, and 15 and finally Relational Transparency included items 4, 8, 12, and 16.

Some researchers propose that authenticity is only perceived by others and should attributed to an individual by others (Harvey et al., 2006); hence the analysis should include only the followers' data. Nevertheless, for the purpose of this paper all participants were included to identify whether leaders in general exhibit authentic leadership style (as per their own evaluation and their followers' perception of leadership) and whether they are ethical in the Middle East context. The mean score of the respondents was derived as a measure of the level of leadership authenticity exhibited in the sample (table 2).

Table 2: Means and SD of dimensions

<b>Authentic leadership dimension (N= 447)</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>CODE</b>	<b>Items in dimension of AL</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>
<b>Self-awareness</b>	3.897	.867	AL1	Seeks feedback to improve interactions with others.	3.861	1.129
			AL5	Demonstrates beliefs that are consistent with actions.	3.859	1.069
			AL9	Encourages everyone to speak their mind.	<b>4.060</b>	1.127
			AL13	Analyses relevant data before coming to a decision.	3.809	1.084
<b>Internalized Moral Perspective</b>	3.873	.765	AL2	Accurately describes how others view his or her capabilities.	3.680	1.164
			AL6	Makes decisions based on his or her core beliefs.	3.977	1.087
			AL10	Tells you the hard truth.	<b>4.049</b>	.980
			AL14	Makes difficult decisions based on high standards of ethical conduct.	3.787	1.051
<b>Balanced Processing</b>	3.888	.767	AL3	Says exactly what he or she means.	<b>4.114</b>	1.010
			AL7	Solicits views that challenge his or her deeply held positions.	3.740	1.045
			AL11	Displays emotions exactly in line with feelings.	3.767	1.054
			AL15	Knows when it is time to re-evaluate his or her positions on important issues.	3.932	.944
<b>Relational Transparency</b>	<b>3.911</b>	.818	AL4	Admits mistakes when they are made.	<b>3.677</b>	1.248
			AL8	Listens carefully to different points of view before coming to conclusions.	<b>4.060</b>	1.034
			AL12	Asks you to take positions that support your core values.	3.923	1.070
			AL16	Shows he or she understands how specific actions impact others.	3.984	1.020

Among the four dimensions of authentic leadership the participants scored higher in relational transparency mean=3.911. This confirms other earlier studies which suggest that the leadership culture for example in Qatar includes 'consulting the followers', 'asking their participation as a sign of respect' and 'creating a family

atmosphere' (Kabasakal and Bodur, 2002). Nevertheless, the difference with the other three dimensions was not high, as in balanced processing it was mean=3.888, in internalized moral perspective mean=3.873 and self-awareness mean=3.897. Walumbwa et al. (2008) suggest that the four components do not need to have equal contribution and that is possible that certain components may be more or less important, hence in this study authentic the leaders exhibited leadership with more emphasis on relational transparency. Hence, H1 was rejected as the leaders in this study did not score higher in internalized moral perspective, hence although they might be authentic they were not necessarily exhibiting ethical behaviors.

It is evident from the above that the highest scores in the sample included AL3 mean=4.114 (says exactly what he or she means), AL8 mean=4.060 (Listens carefully to different points of view before coming to conclusions), AL9 mean=4.060 (Encourages everyone to speak their mind) and AL10 mean=4.049 (Tells you the hard truth). These findings support Walumbwa et al.(2010), who proposed that authentic leaders promote behaviors of helping each other, which contributes to unit performance as well. Moreover, it agrees with research where authentic leaders have been found to be open and transparent in their relationships with followers (Walumbwa et al., 2010). The lowest score was in AL4 mean=3.677 (Admits mistakes when they are made), which confirms other studies where leaders are found to be authoritarian. Similarly, others have found paternalistic leadership to be the preferred leadership style in the Middle East (Aycan et al., 2000; Aycan, 2005; Kazulugil, 2009; Ertenu et al., 2011). Thus, leaders in the region are authoritarian, but they consider their subordinate's welfare; in return they expect loyalty and commitment.

In order to test H2 the authors tested whether the managers/leaders' self-evaluations of authentic leadership differ from those of their followers. For this purpose independent sample t tests were done. Table 4 shows the means, standard deviations and means differences of managers with their staff.

Table 4: Managers and followers independent sample t tests

<b>Authentic leadership dimension</b>	<b>Authentic leadership variable</b>	<b>Mean Managers N=61</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Mean Followers N=386</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Mean Difference</b>
Self-awareness	A1	3.409	1.464	3.932	1.052	-.522
	A5	3.655	1.263	3.891	1.033	-.235
	A9	3.688	1.408	4.119	1.067	-.430
	A13	3.491	1.286	3.860	1.042	-.368
Internalized Moral	A2	3.278	1.539	3.743	1.083	-.464
	A6	3.721	1.226	4.018	1.060	-.316

Perspective	A10	3.590	1.216	<b>4.121</b>	.919	-.531
	A14	3.524	1.119	3.829	1.035	-.304
Balanced Processing	A3	<b>3.868</b>	1.147	4.152	.982	-.284
	A7	3.360	1.329	3.800	.982	-.439
	A11	<b>3.245</b>	1.178	3.849	1.010	-.603
	A15	3.819	1.024	3.950	.931	-.131
Relational Transparency	A4	3.459	1.088	3.712	1.270	-.253
	A8	3.786	1.170	4.103	1.006	-.316
	A12	3.573	1.117	3.979	1.054	-.405
	A16	3.852	1.030	4.005	1.019	-.152

The data showed that the lowest mean for the managers (n=61) was for A11 with standard deviation (1.178). Whereas the highest mean was for A3 with SD (1.147). The highest mean for followers (n=386) was A10 with SD (.919) and the lowest was for A4 with SD (1.270). Comparisons of means through the independent sample t-test were utilized to examine whether there were significant differences between managers and their followers as shown in table 5.

Table 5: Results of independent sample t tests

Authentic leadership dimension	Authentic leadership variable Equal Variances Assumed	Lavene's test of equality of variances		T test for Equality of Means		
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig.
Self-awareness	A1	26.941*	.000	-3.398*	445	.001
	A5	3.377	.067	-1.601	445	.110
	A9	7.821*	.005	-2.792*	445	.005
	A13	7.128*	.008	-2.478*	445	.014
Internalized Moral Perspective	A2	21.930*	.000	-2.920*	445	.004
	A6	7.403*	.007	-1.987*	445	.048
	A10	15.843*	.000	-4.000*	445	.000
	A14	.903	.343	-2.110*	445	.035
Balanced Processing	A3	5.461*	.020	-2.048*	445	.041
	A7	11.896*	.001	-3.081*	445	.002
	A11	6.019*	.015	-4.235*	445	.000
	A15	4.159*	.042	-1.007	445	.314
Relational Transparency	A4	2.535	.112	-1.475	445	.141
	A8	3.349	.068	-2.232*	445	.026
	A12	4.075*	.044	-2.769*	445	.006
	A16	.979	.323	-1.086	445	.278

\*p<.05

The independent sample findings suggested that there were significant differences in almost all components of the authentic leadership dimensions except for A5 (Demonstrates beliefs that are consistent with actions), A14 (Makes difficult decisions based on high standards of ethical conduct). Interestingly, the findings suggested that in three out of four variables of relational transparency A4 (Admits mistakes when they are made), A8 (Listens carefully to different points of view before coming to conclusions) and A16 (Show he or she understands how specific actions impact others) there were no significant differences, hence there was agreement among the participants in this study that there is mutual trust. This point affirms other studies that propose that authentic leaders promote such behaviors, especially

in the region where leaders in this cultural context are characterized by collectivistic, paternalistic behaviors, which emphasize loyalty and in-group harmony (Ayca, 2005; Day, 2014). Although, authors criticize the theory of authentic leadership and claim that it is not clear how deeply self-referent aspects of leaders' self authenticity are apparent to followers (Ayca, 2005) the findings of this study propose that as followers scored higher in all variables of the authentic leadership dimensions than their leaders, the authenticity and authentic leadership style is apparent to them and exhibited in those leaders every day actions and behaviors.

## **Conclusions**

Global leaders should be aware of cultural differences and adapt their leadership style to the local expectations. This study aims at providing an insight about authentic leadership in the Middle East. It addresses the need for developing leaders who are responsible, demonstrate integrity and transparency with regards to unethical practices (Walumbwa et al., 2010). This study proposes that the four dimensions of authentic leadership developed by Walumbwa et al. (2008) are also valid in this region. Followers in this study identify those authentic behaviors exhibited by their leaders and they replicate their leaders' authenticity by mirroring their leaders' behaviors, in agreement to other studies (Chan et al., 2005; Walumbwa et al., 2010). The findings confirm other studies in this area hence leaders in this study are found to be authentic in their leadership style. The study presented in this paper makes a theoretical contribution by demonstrating the followers' perceptions of leaders' authenticity as significant in business in the region.

Luthans and Avolio (2003) propose that authentic leadership is regarded as a dynamic concept which is open to lifelong development, hence organizations that strive for organizational success should develop authentic leaders that should lead to positive behaviors as authentic leadership is found in this study to foster a climate which is perceived to be ethical. Training efforts within organizations should focus on what constitutes authentic leadership.

A lot of work remains to determine under what conditions authentic leadership may be more or less likely to foster ethical outcomes, or whether it impacts on organizational performance, commitment and loyalty. Moreover, given that the proportion of women assuming leadership positions is on the rise in the Middle East as well (Marinakou, 2014) it makes sense to examine if there are any

differences in the way authenticity is exhibited by male and female leaders in the region.

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