

**THE HEALING POWERS OF AUTHENTICITY:
EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF AUTHENTIC
LEADERSHIP ON WORK-LIFE INTEGRATION AND
EMPLOYEE MENTAL WELL-BEING**

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic and consequent lockdown restrictions induced an upheaval in the traditional ways of working, mandating a shift towards a hybrid work setting. Organizations across the globe are trying to adopt strategies and interventions to reduce associated stressors of hybrid workplaces like isolation, increased responsibilities, and blurring work-life boundaries. There is an intense focus on employee mental health and overall well-being, which sets the context for current research, however, limited research focuses on the positive leadership behaviors that can help reduce or eliminate these stressors. Further, most of the studies have leveraged the constructs of work-life balance, work-family conflict, etc. for their research which presents a highly dichotomous view of work and life, which is no longer relevant in the virtual and hybrid set-ups. The changing context necessitates the current research. The paper proposes that leadership capability is key in driving these interventions and explores how authentic leadership can help drive mental well-being and work-life integration for the employees. For this paper, the four sub-constructs of authentic leaders., self-awareness, balanced information processing, authentic behavior, and relational transparency, have been studied. The conceptual paper leverages resource conservation theory to propose how authentic leaders help individuals retain and enhance their resources contributing to their experiences of work-life integration which in turn creates a positive impact on employees' subjective, psychological, and workplace well-being. The paper makes leverages its conceptual model to make 7 propositions of how authentic leadership improves employees' capability for integrating their work-life demands thus reducing the negative effects that may negatively impact their well-being. The paper contributes to employee well-being literature and traces the importance of positive leadership behavior in the workplace. It further is relevant to academics and practitioners alike as it helps navigate through the added challenges of isolation, and workplace stress in the post-COVID hybrid workplace.

Keywords: *Authentic Leadership, Mental Well-being, Work-Life Integration*

INTRODUCTION

The current market environment has undergone a volcanic shift with complexities in technology and ways of working, shifts in the socio-economic landscape, and rising health adversities. The world also grappled with one of the biggest pandemics, the COVID-19 disease which forced regulatory restrictions and critical health concerns for the global population. Organizations and leaders struggled immensely to ensure business continuity. Leaders attempted to identify ways to help teams manage their personal and professional commitments and also to manage the distractions that may emerge in the work-from-home setup. This necessitated the need for employees and leaders to ponder on the need for work-life integration where in the absence of clear physical boundaries between work and non-work demands, individuals can navigate through.

Moreover, with the invasion of technology and digital connectedness, employees are deprived of physical and emotional connections with their teams. Individuals working extensively in remote setups have reported less frequent communication with co-workers. Most workers were used to commuting or having meals or celebrating with their co-workers which is beyond their work-related requirements. However, lately, the strength of relational ties has weakened in the virtual set-ups.

Through the ages, especially in times of crisis and extreme turmoil, historical figures such as Alexander the Great, Washington, Gandhi, Churchill, Eleanor and Franklin Roosevelt, Mandela, and Rudy Giuliani have risen to the occasion to provide positive leadership to move forward to address the problems confronting their communities and societies. The current study explores this construct of authentic leadership which draws from positive psychology and leadership theory to propose how the authenticity of a leader acts as a compensatory mechanism in the current business landscape. Avolio et al., describe authentic leadership in organizations as a process that draws from both positive psychological capacities and a highly developed organizational context, which results in both greater self-awareness and self-regulated positive behaviors on the part of leaders and associates, fostering positive self-development [2]. The study evaluates the role, authentic leaders play in the evaluation of this stress and an individual's coping ability resulting in improved employee mental well-being.

The paper is segregated into three key sections. We begin by introducing the three critical variables of study: authentic leadership, work-life integration, and employee mental health. We then leverage the resource conservation theory to present a comprehensive theoretical model for the relationship between these models. The section also includes the key propositions for further testing. Finally, we present the limitations and future directions of this study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Authentic leadership has borrowed from the philosophical literature on authenticity. Walumbwa et al., 2008 [14] defined authentic leadership in terms of its outcomes: *“a pattern of leader behavior that draws upon and promotes both positive psychological capacities and a positive ethical climate, to foster greater self-awareness, an internalized moral perspective, balanced processing of information, and relational transparency on the part of leaders working with followers, fostering positive self-development”*. This definition has been the most cited and accepted in the literature for Authentic Leadership and contributed to the research in the domain by highlighting four key components i.e., **self-awareness, balanced information processing, authentic behavior, and relational transparency** [2].

The literature for Authentic leadership draws from the stream of positive psychology and positive traits have been leveraged by researchers to describe an authentic leader. As per research an authentic leader is confident, hopeful, optimistic, resilient, transparent, moral/ethical future-oriented, and gives priority to developing associates into leaders themselves [2]. Shamir & Eilam (2005) attempted to distinguish authentic leaders from non-authentic leaders through four key characteristics: (i) The degree of person role merger i.e. the salience of the leadership role in their self-concept, (ii) the level of self-concept clarity, and the extent to which this clarity centers around strongly held values and convictions, (iii) the extent to which their goals are self-concordant, and (iv) the degree to which their behavior is consistent with their self-concept [13]

Authentic Leadership has emerged from the discussions on moral and ethical foundations of leadership. Walumbwa et al. (2008) in his research found a positive relationship between authentic leadership and job satisfaction & job performance [14]. It also fosters follower development and research establishes a relation between empowering behavior of leader (e.g., fostering participation in decision making, facilitating goal accomplishment) and increased work effectiveness of the team [15]

Employee Mental Health

Employee mental health literature stems from theoretical discussion and works on employee well-being. Researchers in this domain accept two major philosophical perspectives of well-being, namely hedonism and eudaimonism (Ryan & Deci, 2001) [11]. Hedonism is happiness oriented and focuses on subjective well-being (SWB) while Eudaimonism explains well-being in terms of achievement or self-actualization i.e., psychological well-being (PWB).

The hedonic approach includes a cognitive and affective component within itself. The cognitive component is the individual's subjective judgment regarding

his/ her happiness and life satisfaction. The affective component indicates the presence of a high positive affect and a low (or absence of) negative affect.

The Eudaimonic approach involves acceptance of the existential challenges of life and acknowledges that all human pursuits might not result in optimal well-being for an individual, despite being pleasurable. It is best understood through the 6 factors for positive functioning described by Ryff, 1989 [12]. These include acceptance of self, identifying life's purpose, focusing on personal growth, feeling autonomy, mastering the environment, and building harmonious relations with others. The two components holistically form the definition of well-being.

A third component of the model was suggested by Page and Vella-Brodrick (2009) [9] termed Workplace Well-being. Workplace well-being encompasses job-related affect and job satisfaction levels experienced by the employee

Theoretical Model & Proposition

Given the identification of key challenges (inability to integrate work life) and the consequent impact on employee mental health, a theoretical model is developed (Fig. 1). As the model shows the constructs of authentic leadership i.e., Self-awareness, internalized moral perspective, balanced information processing, and relational transparency will help employees cope with stressors at the workplace by building ability to integrate work-life balance and hence impacting employee's overall mental well-being

Self-awareness Is the individual's ability to examine and identify their strengths and weaknesses. It allows individuals to be aware of the method they use to derive meaning from the world and how they develop a comprehensive view of themselves. The leaders present their actual thoughts and feelings to their followers helping them establish their credibility [1]

The authentic leadership concept has been a critical contribution to the ethical leadership literature. The construct of Internalized moral perspective signifies the extent to which the leader is aware and riven by an internal set of guiding ethics and values. These ethics are translated into the actions and decisions of the leader (Avolio and Gardner, 2005) [1] and helps establish them as role model in the organizations.

Balanced information processing requires leaders to analyze all given information from an objective and unbiased lens. The leaders are open to ideas that contradict deeply held existing notions to process additional new information. They attempt to proactively solicit information and ideas which challenges them (Gardener et al. 2005) [5].

The final construct is relational transparency. This is defined as the leader's ability to present their true self. At the same time, the leaders display emotional

intelligence to regulate the display of emotions as per the situational demands (Kernis, 2003) [7].

Given existing research and theoretical constructs discussed earlier, the first proposition is suggested. The proposition explains that these four dimensions will collectively build an authentic leader in the workplace

P1: Self Awareness, internalized moral perspective, balanced information processing, and relational transparency contribute to authentic leadership

The conservation resource theory suggests that individuals are motivated to ‘obtain, retain and protect’ available resources (Hobfoll, 2000) [6], and the threat of loss or call loos of these resources results in stress. Leadership support acts as a contextual and volatile resource available to employees. The pandemic has created a context where there is a merger of multiple domains requiring two or more individuals within a family simultaneously work in the same home and have additional demands of managing the household and possibly childcare needs. This has further made it difficult for employees to successfully balance their personal and professional lives adding to their workload and consequently increasing stress. Work-life integration focuses on balance and is aimed to achieve ‘harmony or equilibrium between work and life domains’ (Chang et al. 2010) [3]. Basis the conservation of resource theory and available literature on authentic leadership, we propose authentic leadership as a resource empowering the individual to balance their work and home/ family demands. They can help followers integrate their work and personal commitments through their moral values and interpersonal consideration.

First, authentic leaders can channel their internal values into everyday work. They possess self-reflective capabilities that allow them to understand and communicate their needs and expectations from members. This helps them regulate their behavior as per the situational demands. The capability for self-awareness and internalized moral perspective of concern for others let authentic leaders help followers integrate their work-life balance

Another explanation stems from the ability of leaders to process information in a balanced way and their relational transparency with followers. The leaders can build trust in the teams and followers can highlight their concerns and challenges. While leaders might feel the relevance and urgency of a deliverable, they will be able to objectively hear concerns from members on personal needs (household chores, caregiving responsibility) and attempt to solutions together (extend team, reschedule meetings, etc.). Given how the sub-constructs of authentic leadership interact to help followers harmonize their work and family demands, the next proposition is suggested

P2: Authentic leadership supports followers' work-life integration

Impact of Work Life integration on Psychological Well being

The absence of work-life integration has been found to negatively impact the psychological well-being of employees (Duxburry and Higgins, 2003) [4]. Another element of work-life integration, work-life flexibility, was found to be positively related to employee psychological well-being. Work-life integration allows employees to balance their personal and professional commitments. This contributes to an individual's ability to balance time and involvement at work. Individuals take up multiple social roles and work-life integration allows for equity across these roles leading to increased satisfaction.

The concept of role overload helps explain the relationship between work-life integration and psychological well-being. Role overload implies the invasion of a social role into the boundary of other social roles played by the individual. These roles can include the role of a manager, a father, a son, a husband, etc. The inability to successfully balance these roles causes a role overload [4]. Role overload eventually may result in feelings of fatigue, stress, exhaustion, anxiety, and depression [4]. These feelings create a sense of inadequacy in the individual due to a lack of environmental mastery and autonomy. Basis the above discussion, the next proposition is suggested.

P3: Work-life integration is positively related to employee's psychological well being

Impact of Work Life integration on Subjective Well being

The concept of subjective well-being relies on an individual's perception of their well-being. The relationship between work-life integration and subjective well-being can be explained via self-determination theory. The Self Determination Theory (SDT) suggests that all individuals have core psychological needs that contribute to their adjustment and well-being. (Ryan and Deci, 2000) [10]. These universal needs are of three types i.e., need for autonomy, need for competence, and need for relatedness. Borrowing from, the literature on work-life integration, the variables like the ability to set self-concordant goals, setting boundaries between work and life, defining schedules, and time invested across social roles contribute to an individual's feelings of autonomy. Further, the ability to balance these often-conflicting roles increased their perceived competence. These result in harmonious relationships contributing to the fulfilment of their relatedness needs. The fulfilment of these needs through work-life integration positively impacts their satisfaction. However, this impacts their perceived notions of life satisfaction contributing to a positive evaluation of their life. And hence basis the above discussions, it is proposed that work-life integration will positively influence the subjective notions of well-being an individual has.

P4: Work-life integration is positively related to an employee's subjective well being

Impact of Work Life integration on Workplace Well-being

Page and Vella-Brodrick (2009) [9] have suggested the concept of workplace well-being which includes the work-related affect that individuals experience and their overall satisfaction with the work-related constructs. The affect is typically measured in terms of employees' job satisfaction levels, turnover intention, engagement, and absenteeism. Intuitively, the ability to integrate work life should have the highest impact on employees' workplace well-being. Work-life integration builds an individual's capability to respond to work demands, manage commitments, and deliver desired work outcomes. Individuals invest in job crafting to increase the meaning they attain from their work, consequently enhancing their workplace well-being. Individuals leverage job crafting in designing work that aligns with their individual needs and values thus resulting in the creation of more opportunities for satisfaction at work, establishment of relationships, and enhancing one's purpose. Leveraging job crafting as a methodology to integrate work-life commitments, employees can enhance their mental well-being at work. Thus, the next proposition is suggested:

P5: Work-life integration will positively influence employee's workplace well being

Employee mental health is gaining momentum in research especially post in post-COVID ways of working. Well-being is no longer identified as the absence of illness, but rather a holistic state of peace and satisfaction experienced by an individual. This state denotes the absence of stressors and the presence of harmonious relationships at the workplace. The constructs of Subjective and psychological well-being have been studied as two distinct yet interrelated concepts of well-being. Further, the concept of workplace well-being draws elements from both subjective and psychological well-being. To build a comprehensive model for future testing, these elements have been proposed to contribute to the overall mental well-being of an individual

P6: Psychological, subjective, and workplace well-being contribute to employees' overall mental well-being

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) [8] proposed the transaction model of stress. The model proposes a person-environment transaction i.e., the response to stress by an individual is highly influenced by his/ her appraisal process. It includes the elements of stressor-appraisal-emotion-outcome. The individuals may experience stressors in the environment (E.g., pandemic-led fear, job insecurity, work overload) which led individuals to evaluate their resources to overcome stress. The evaluation or appraisal of the stressor results in the decision of choosing a coping mechanism by the individual. Inability in coping with this stress results in

emotions of anxiety, and stress, which leads to ultimate negative outcomes of decreased employee well-being and psychological functioning.

Authentic leadership calls for a higher standard of supervision and leadership at the organization, one which is focused on building an organizational moral compass. The leaders attempt to build interpersonal and intrapersonal trust in teams which allows the members to come forward with their challenges. Additionally, the leaders hold themselves accountable to a higher standard of ethics and behavior and provide a positive role models for employees. The leaders are high on self-awareness and they build self-knowledge by seeking and internalizing feedback from others. These capabilities encourage authentic leaders to understand employees’ challenges and help solve teams. Employees are encouraged to transparently share their responsibilities and feeling with leaders and leaders in turn provide support to manage these conflicting priorities. The leader’s ability to influence employee resources and help integrate their work-life demands reduces the stress experienced by an employee resulting in their well-being. Hence the final proposition for the current study is:

P7: Authentic leadership is positively related to employee mental well-being

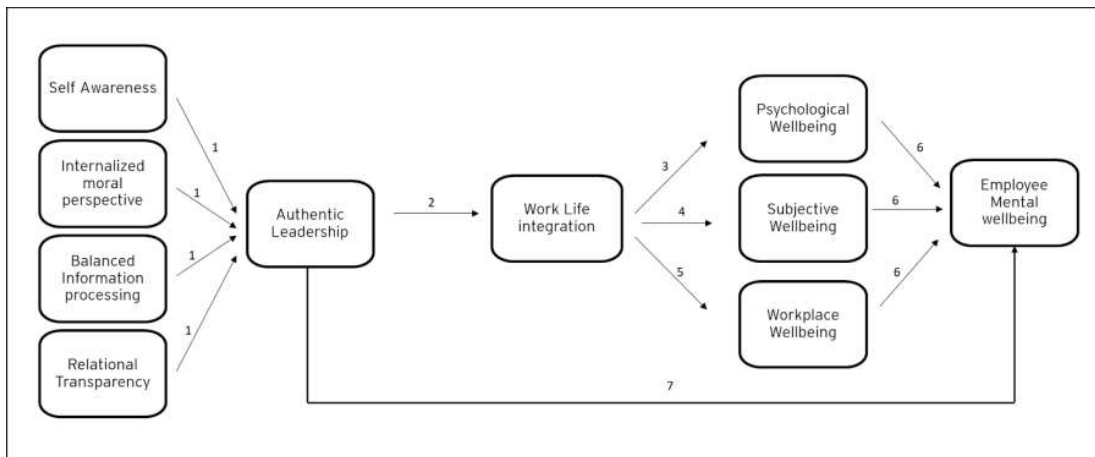


Fig. 1. The impact of authentic leadership on employee mental well-being

The current study proposes a model for evaluating the impact of authentic leadership on employee mental well-being. It proposes that authentic leadership improves employees’ capability for integrating their work-life demands thus reducing the negative effects that may negatively impact their well-being.

CONCLUSION

Mental well-being is not a new phenomenon. However, the pandemic and the subsequent tectonic shift to virtual and hybrid teams have created a unique set of challenges threatening the employees’ mental well-being. More and more individuals are reporting suffering from feelings of overwhelm, stress, and isolation resulting in a spike in the number of cases reported of workplace anxiety and depression. Given this context, the current paper attempted to explore the role

of positive leadership to compensate for external stressors. We discussed in the paper how subconstructs of authentic leadership, self-awareness; internalised moral perspective; balanced information processing and relational transparency help individuals integrate their conflicting work-life demands which consequently improved their psychological, subjective, and workplace well-being. This in turn improves their mental well-being experiences. The study holds the phenomenal potential to inform practitioners and academicians about the substantial contribution authenticity brings to the workplace. Further, it also presents a mediating variable (work-life integration) that can be leveraged in organizations to improve employee well-being. The study has both theoretical and practical applications which are extremely relevant in the current context of loss of temporal and physical boundaries between work and life. The authors suggest scholars to undertake empirical studies to validate the propositions of the study and form relevant interventions for leveraging the constructs of authentic leadership and work-life integration in the post pandemic workplace.

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