Empathy and Mindfulness: Potential Antecedents to Authentic Leadership

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ABSTRACT

As the upsurge of information continues due to globalization of economies in the wake of fierce competition, the role of information technology becomes more important than ever. The dynamics of business arena requires leaders in the IT industry who are well versed with new technologies as well as at the same time exhibit essential leadership skills that builds trust to ensure success. This paper discusses an empirical research aimed at identifying the antecedents for authentic leadership style for the professional in the IT sector by examining empathy and mindfulness as potential antecedents to authentic leadership. The questionnaire was completed by 250 respondents from the Indian IT sector. Findings reveal that empathy of a leader is significantly related to the development of authentic leadership. However, mindfulness is not related to authentic leadership. The paper identifies empathy as a potential antecedent of authentic leadership that is intended to foster positive organizational outcomes. Intense literature review reflects that only few studies have been conducted focusing on the antecedents of authentic leadership. The study attempts to fill this void.

KEYWORDS

ALQ, Authentic Leadership, Empathy, Mindfulness, Perspective Taking

INTRODUCTION

Today, IT industry is one of the driving forces behind the world economy with virtually every organization, business and even government being dependent on ICT. With rising competition among IT firms globally it becomes essential for IT companies to invest in critical success factors such as managerial, organisational and cultural issues. Leadership is one such critical success factor affecting organizational success. It therefore becomes important to trace as to which leadership behaviours would ensure positive organizational outcomes. However, there is a paucity of research that identifies predictors of leadership behaviour. Authentic leadership has recently gained momentum due to its contribution to positive organizational outcomes. We therefore, aim to find out the predictors of AL so that same can be developed as a skill among ICT professionals. Authentic leadership (AL) that emerges from the earlier theories of social intelligence (Thorndike, 1920) and multiple intelligence (Gardner, 1983; Salovey & Mayer, 1990) has attracted the attention of researchers and practitioners worldwide. Demand for authentic leadership has been on rise due to rising social costs globally and the need for authenticity (Gardner et al 2005, Klenke 2007). Empathy and mindfulness have been noted to significantly associate with the development of effective leaders (Wolff, Pescosolido & Druskat, 2002). While empathy significantly contributes to the leadership success (Cooper & Sawaf, 1997; Yukl, 1998), mindfulness too has been related to leadership (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005). Authentic
leadership, empathy and mindfulness are human constructs and are likely to share relationship among each other. It is therefore important to find how these mentioned variables are interrelated and are likely to contribute towards the development of AL.

According to the current literature, IT leaders for the new millennium—a world of vast technological advancements and high tech tools—should have the ability to be forthright yet still have compassion and empathy (Winters, 1997). They should know how to keep quiet yet informed (Alter, 1999) and should inculcate trust—an ability to nurture the “leader” in others (Dede, 1993).

This study aims to test the theoretical relationships among empathy, mindfulness and authentic leadership in millennials aged 18-34 who are eager to take the leap. A poll study shows that one in five of millennials plan to quit their day job to start their own business since they are wary and tired of scams (Ellevate, 2015). Millennials already think they have the right skills to become a leader as 55% of them think that relationship building is the most important skill which is closely related to relational transparency of AL (Workplacetrends.com, 2015). They want to learn online and have mentors to develop leadership as a skill. They also stress on the need of companies to create stronger leadership programs (Ellevate, 2015). The same motivates the researchers to explore the antecedents that are pivotal in development of the Authentic Leadership in such millennials.

We ask here two research questions: a) how mindfulness relates to authentic leadership, and b) how empathy contributes to the development of authentic leadership. We begin by developing expectations and go on to present method and findings. We conclude by discussing the limitations and implications for academicians and practitioners.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Authentic Leadership

Authentic leadership is a relatively newer concept hence it is still in its developing phase. The scholars are yet to agree on the common definition of authentic leadership. Kernis (2003) defined authenticity as a psychological construct as ‘the unobstructed operation of one’s true, or core, self in one’s daily enterprise’ (p.13). Authentic leadership is a complex multidimensional construct wherein followers, groups and the organization are ‘true’ to themselves without regard to others and the organization (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Gardner et al., 2005).

There are numerous facets to authentic leadership, however key themes that have been identified are:

- An ability to know one’s true self, awareness of one’s own strengths and weaknesses and its acceptance makes a leader better (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Gardner et al., 2005; Walumbwa et al., 2008).
- Acting truly to oneself and openly with others (Avolio, et al., 2004; Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Brown & Trevino, 2006; Walumbwa et al., 2008).
- Strength to act according to one’s own beliefs and values (Avolio et al., 2004; Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Endrissat, Muller, Kaudela-Baum., 2007; Gardner et al., 2005; Walumbwa et al., 2008).

Authentic leadership has emerged as 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 signifies leader’s awareness of his own strengths and weaknesses, and how they compare themselves with the rest of the world. Internalized moral perspective demonstrates intrinsic form of self-regulation. They align their actions with their values and beliefs and do not succumb to external pressures. Balanced processing refers