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To be or not to be your authentic self as a leader?

How leaders experience authenticity in their daily organizational lives.



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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore how leaders experience authenticity in their everyday organizational lives, and to shed light upon what factors drive and limit the leaders' perceived need and ability to be authentic. Since the turn of the millenium, the authentic leadership theory has developed into one of the most influential leadership theories among scholars and practitioners alike. However, there is ambiguity as to what authentic leadership actually is, and the effectiveness and desirability of the construct has been questioned. Today, debate rages between two opinionatedly separated camps: the authentic leadership advocates and its critics. But research that seeks to explore the middle ground, where the perspectives are not mutually exclusive, is conspicuous by its absence. The space in between the two perspectives is the identified research gap of this thesis. To address this gap, we conducted a qualitative study, interviewing leaders about their own experiences of authenticity. We find that the leaders can behave both authentically and inauthentically in seemingly uncontroversial ways. In fact, contemplating whether they are authentic or not seems to play a marginal role in their everyday organizational lives. Additionally, we find factors along three dimensions that seem to influence the leaders' perceived need and ability to be authentic. The dimensions are the intrapersonal, organizational, and interpersonal dimension. This study provides several empirical and theoretical contributions that hopefully will elucidate the unexplored middle ground.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Since the turn of the millenium, authentic leadership has emerged as an influential leadership theory (Liu et al., 2017; Gill & Caza, 2018), and its pervasiveness is apparent both in the academic world and among practitioners (Iszatt-Kempster & White, 2019; Alvesson & Einola, 2019). In the early 2000's, leadership scholars developed authentic leadership, a new type of value-based leadership, as a reaction to the many corporate scandals reported in mass media, such as the “ethical meltdown” at Enron (Gardner et al., 2011; Liu et al., 2017). Authentic leadership would counter the misuse of charismatic and transformational leadership, and promised to induce new hope and optimism in the leadership field by introducing a new kind of highly moral leader. However, there is still ambiguity as to what authentic leadership actually is, and the effectiveness and desirability of the theory has been questioned (Gardner et al., 2011).

Despite ambiguity and criticism, authentic leadership has remained popular in both leadership theory and practice. Practitioners and scholars alike are interested in authentic leadership because of its seductive promise to solve ethical and moral issues in organizations as well as in society at large, thus extending well beyond bottom-line success (Alvesson & Einola, 2021; George, 2003). Influential AL scholars Avolio et al. (2003) argue that solving the moral and ethical issues throughout society calls for a new leadership approach aimed at restoring basic hope and optimism, assuming they were ever lost in the first place. However, not everyone subscribes to the idea that authentic leadership is the remedy to all the world's issues; critics highlight several unresolved problems. For example: who decides what is authentic? Can authenticity be measured in reality? Is authenticity in leadership even desired? (Gardner et al., 2021). Pfeffer (2015) brings matters to a head arguing that being authentic is “pretty much the opposite of what leaders must do; leaders have no need to be true to themselves, but rather should be true to what the situation and what those around them want and need from them.”

The concept of authenticity exists in philosophy, psychology, and is a commonly used word to describe something in a favorable way, as unique, original, real, trustworthy or true (Lehman et

al., 2019). One could argue that in society today, we are obsessed with the quest for authenticity, whether it may be finding the places where the locals eat during vacation, wearing *original* brands or how to prepare a *real* Neapolitan pizza. Spicer (2011) describes it: “we live in an authenticity economy where the most valuable asset is keeping it real”. People are even encouraged to live “authentic” lives, letting all their quirks and imperfections shine through, as the picture below illustrates. But does this hold true for all people and in all types of situations? What happens when all the “flawed”, “quirky” and “magical” people express their true authentic selves in an organizational setting? Life in an organization can be challenging enough, and having “weird” and “magical” people around might not always be desirable.



“Just be yourself. Let people see the real, imperfect, flawed, quirky, weird, beautiful, magical person that you are.”

– Mandy Hale

Exhibit 1: Authenticity quotes like this overflow the Internet today.

Some scholars find it slightly problematic to combine leadership and authenticity, both complex concepts, into a single coherent construct (Alvesson & Einola, 2021). Leadership is an externally oriented process in which an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal (Northouse, 2020). Authenticity, on the other hand, involves being true to oneself and is individually and internally focused. Additionally, authenticity is subjective and thus difficult to measure, and combining it with leadership makes measurement even more complex (Ibarra, 2015). However the bulk of authentic leadership research remains quantitatively oriented, and has a positivist approach to the construct (Iszatt-White & Kempster, 2019). Critical scholars, while growing in numbers, are still struggling to gain traction in the research field. Firstly, they are dispersed in their criticisms towards authentic leadership theory. Secondly, their publications are often qualitative, and the leading journals in the field tend to be biased towards quantitative research (Ibid.).

Authentic leadership scholars, advocates and critics alike, usually agree that there is nothing wrong with authenticity itself. However, disagreement reigns supreme regarding if, when, and where authenticity is desired, as well as how research on the topic should be conducted. The few attempts to debate these issues between the authentic leadership advocates and critics initially generated some points of common ground (Gardner, Karam, Alvesson, & Einola, 2021). However, recent debate accentuates the polarization in the field and scholars are now accusing each other of having dishonest intentions and even “gaslighting” (Alvesson & Einola, 2022; Gardner & McCauley, 2022a; Gardner & McCauley, 2022b).

The promise of authentic leadership is alluring, and previous publications make convincing arguments about the tremendous value of the authentic component in leadership. Yet, we take the criticism towards authentic leadership seriously, and agree that the concerns are reasonable and relevant. Still, the debate within the field is unnecessarily polarized; despite its flaws, we believe that there are valuable elements of authentic leadership. Perhaps what is needed is a deeper and more nuanced understanding of how authenticity is actually experienced and perceived by leaders themselves. Possibly, taking a step back from the current scholarly debate and conducting research stripped of the burden of seeking to prove or disprove any one theory, is needed.

1.2 Purpose and Research Question

The purpose of this master thesis is to take a step back from the existing literature and ongoing debate in the research field, and ask how leaders themselves experience and practice authenticity in their daily organizational lives. By conducting interviews with leaders, we hope to nuance the ongoing debate in the authentic leadership research field by gaining a deeper understanding of how leaders experience authenticity in reality. Through a qualitative study focusing on leaders’ own experiences and reflections, we aspire to provide new insights and perspectives on AL, that may perhaps bridge the polarized field. To fulfill the purpose of this thesis, we formulated the following research questions:

- *How do leaders experience authenticity in their daily organizational lives?*
- *What key factors drive or limit the leaders’ perceived need and ability to be authentic?*

1.3 Delimitations

Leadership is a broad concept as it concerns an individual influencing other individuals to reach a common goal (Northouse, 2020), criteria which can be realized in a wide array of situations. By this definition, anyone from Google CEO Sundar Pichai to the captain of a junior ice-hockey team could be said to practice leadership. We chose to limit the scope to leaders who hold leadership positions within business organizations, as they are relevant subjects to understand within our field of studies, business and management.

The context in which the leaders we have interviewed differ in terms of industry, number of subordinates and type and size of organization. However, all subjects interviewed either work or have worked in a Swedish or Scandinavian context.

1.4 Thesis outline

Chapter 2 will give an account of authenticity and leadership, and outline the origins, development and current state of authentic leadership. In Chapter 3 we will present the theoretical framework and identified research gap of the thesis. Next, we will present the research approach applied in this thesis, as well as an account of our methodological choices, including a critical review of the research quality (Chapter 4). In Chapter 5 we will present the empirical findings and analysis of the obtained data. Subsequently, we will present the conclusions of our study and detail outstanding thoughts and reflections (Chapter 6). Lastly, we will outline the contributions made, limitations of the study, as well as suggesting areas for future research (Chapter 7).

2. Literature Review

This chapter will give an account of the numerous definitions of authenticity (2.1), followed by a definition of leadership (2.2). Next, we will outline the origins, development and current state of the authentic leadership research field (2.3).

2.1 Authenticity

Authenticity is a term commonly used in everything from everyday conversations between friends and colleagues, to philosophical discussions, and is often used to describe something or someone that is unique, true, genuine or real (Gardner et al., 2011; Spicer, 2011; Erickson, 1995). Depending on perspective, the term can bear different meanings, which is not surprising considering that it is a common usage word that people use to describe something in a favorable way (Ibarra, 2015). We will now explain some central ways of looking at the term from a philosophical, psychological and cultural perspective.

Beginning with the philosophical perspective, the term “authenticity” is thought to originate from ancient Greece and was used to describe one’s ability “to be true to oneself” (Luthans & Avolio, 2003). In classical accounts of the definition, authenticity often refers to being true to some sort of higher scheme, not necessarily oneself (Spicer, 2011). Plato, for example, argued that an authentic individual was one that adopted the characteristics of an ideal by achieving self-mastery of the kind that an ideal carpenter might achieve. In early Christian history the term authenticity concerned showing loyalty to the divine power, God (Taylor, 1989). As a contrast, modern authenticity can be viewed as a rebellion against the institutions we view as higher powers, such as religion or the corporate world, which are perceived to hinder us from being ourselves. (Spicer, 2011). In other contexts, a traditional way of using the word refers to “any work of art that is an original, not a copy” (Erickson, 1995).

From a psychological perspective, the concept of being true to yourself arguably demands introspective ability, by which one’s personal experiences, thoughts, emotions and needs are known, and then followed by actions that resonate with that identified true self (Harter, 2002). In psychology, authenticity is thought to be achieved when an individual engages in an internalized

self-regulation process where actions and behavior is guided by the individual's values (Ryan & Deci, 2003). Often, authenticity is recognized as a continuum in which one can be more or less authentic depending on to what extent one remains true to one's core values, opinions, identities and preferences (Erickson, 1995). Others, though, would consider authenticity to be more binary, where authenticity is a state reached when an individual's level of self esteem is high enough (Kernis, 2003, as cited in Alvesson & Einola, 2021). Furthermore, a fundamental assumption of authenticity, that there resides a "true self" inside us, has been questioned. Psychology scholars have found that individuals' attitudes follow their behaviors, meaning that we are what we do and, therefore, there exists no such thing as a "true self" (Pfeffer, 2015).

Moreover, authenticity is often conflated with related terms, such as sincerity (Alvesson & Einola, 2019). A sincere person assumes characteristics or qualities of a societal role and acts in alignment with role-based expectations in order to achieve a sincere identity, while an authentic person's identity is based on adherence to one's own inner image (Moeller & D'Ambrosio, 2019). Moeller and D'Ambrosio (2019) argue that we might be in the midst of a shift in identity theory, where authenticity will be replaced by "proficiency", that is "constructing one's identity under the social condition of pervasive second order observation". Meaning that individuals will think about, or observe, their identity as it is observed by someone else, and shape it accordingly. The concepts of sincerity, authenticity and proficiency are in many ways similar and Moeller and D'Ambrosio (2019) argue that they are not mutually exclusive.

From a broader cultural perspective, authenticity is commonly used to describe something that is perceived as real, genuine, trustworthy, original or unique. For example, tourists on vacation often seek out experiences that reflect 'the real side' of the country or region that they are visiting (Spicer, 2011). Scholars researching customer preferences in the travel and tourism industry highlight the fact that tourists, or *travelers* as they prefer to be called, increasingly demand "authentic, experientially oriented opportunities" (Paulauskaite et al., 2017). Others claim that authenticity has been commodified, and would therefore instead be inauthentic (Spicer, 2011). Spicer states that: "Notions of authenticity have been produced by a whole industry that includes motivational speakers, consultants, managers and media personalities who purport to champion cultures that allow people to "just be themselves". Spicer (2011) argues that

authenticity more often than not is crafted through deliberate processes of manipulation and is something that can be capitalized upon. Authenticity has also gained widespread attention within the field of marketing. Cova et al. (2007) found that certain brand subcultures, for example some Star Wars fans “see themselves as guardians of a brand’s authenticity”, and authenticity is a commonly leveraged selling point for different products and services.

What it means to be authentic in this thesis, will not be limited to any one definition. The notion of perceiving to act in accordance with one's “true” self will serve as our conceptual point of departure.

2.2 Leadership

Leadership is a complex concept, challenging to define, and there are a plethora of definitions in today’s literature (Kort, 2008). However, there are components that can be generally identified as conceptual focal points. These are: a) Leadership is a process, b) leadership involves influence, c) leadership occurs in groups, and d) leadership involves common goals (Ibid.). A definition given by Northouse (2020) is: “*Leadership is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal.*”

Leadership as a *process* emphasizes the transactional nature of leadership; it is an interactive event that occurs between the leader and the followers, rather than being a trait or characteristic. Important to notice is that “process” suggests that a leader affects, but can also be affected by, the followers (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). *Influence* involves how the leader affects followers and is crucial for any leadership definition (Northouse, 2020). Leadership occurs in *groups*, and is about one individual influencing a group of individuals who have a common purpose. Lastly, leadership includes common *goals*, and leaders and followers all have a mutual purpose (Ibid.).

Kort (2008) argues that standard definitions of leadership, such as Northouse’s, overlook the importance of positions and expectations should be considered in leadership, as these to a high extent decide how the leaders will act. “Organizations are structured according to positions and

expectations for how individuals assuming these positions will or should act in relation to others holding other kinds of positions” (Kort, 2008).

2.3 Development of Authentic Leadership Theory

Authentic leadership can be said to originate from the criticism towards transformational and charismatic leadership theory (Iszatt-Kempster & White, 2019). Leadership scholar Bass (1998), as cited in Northouse (2020), first included authenticity as a component in leadership theory as a response to the critique that narcissistic leaders could leverage transformational leadership to push their own unscrupulous agendas. By extending the transformational leadership theory to include requirements of high moral standards, this abuse of power would be avoided (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999).

Authentic leadership as a theory (AL) started generating broad interest in the early 2000’s when Luthans and Avolio presented the framework of *Authentic Leadership Development* (2003). At the same time, famed autobiographical author and corporate leader Bill George (2003) reached widespread influence with his book *Authentic Leadership: Rediscovering the Secrets to Creating Lasting Value*. His work, a product of his personal observations as CEO, came at a time when public faith in organizational leaders was at a low-point after a series of corporate scandals (Iszatt-White & Kempster, 2019). As a reaction to these scandals, early definitions of AL highlight virtue and self regulation as essential leadership traits (Ford & Harding, 2011). However, it was not until 2007, when George published his second work on authentic leadership, *Discover Your True North*, that the notion of authenticity in leadership really gained momentum and widespread interest both within and beyond academia (Iszatt-White & Kempster, 2019).

During the mid ‘00s various attempts to measure AL were made, but no widely accepted tool for measurement existed. It was in this context, a year after George’s 2007 book was released, that Walumbwa et al. (2008) developed the *Authentic Leadership Questionnaire* (ALQ), which is the now generally accepted quantitative tool of measuring AL. The ALQ was based on Luthans and Avolio’s (2003) work, and redefined and advanced AL to include dimensions of the construct posited by Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, et al. (2005) and Ilies et al. (2005) (Northouse, 2020). Walumbwa et al. suggest that AL consists of four key components that can be measured through

the ALQ: self-awareness, an internalized moral perspective, balanced processing of information, and relational transparency. These are measured through 16 self-assessment questions where the respondents grade their own behavior and attitudes (see Appendix 1).

One of the first attempts to assess the current state of the AL research field was made by Gardner et al. in 2011, where they described AL theory as being in an early stage of introduction and evaluation. Much research at this time mainly consisted of quantitative research, such as the ALQ, aimed at tracing correlations between constructional elements (Iszatt-White & Kempster, 2019). Although concluding that the field was in an early stage and in need for more research to advance, Gardner et al. was not skeptical of the ALQ as a foundation for said continued advances (Gardner et al, 2011). However, some have criticized the rapid development of the ALQ, arguing that such speedy development may lead to leadership theories becoming “fashionable” cultural products, lacking deeply grounded underpinnings and critical consideration in their development (Iszatt-White & Kempster, 2019). Despite heavy criticism, the ALQ remains the dominant and generally accepted way of defining and measuring authentic leadership, used by scholars and practitioners alike (Ibid.). Publications using the ALQ after 2011, accept rather than challenge the underlying components, and no significant alternative has emerged since.

Iszatt-Kempster and White (2019) published a second AL field review with the aim to critically evaluate its development since 2011, in which they proposed a regrounding of AL theory due to the “flawed” theoretical foundations and questionable empirical validity. They also highlight the struggle of critical AL publications to gain traction as well as a lack of qualitative research as potential hazards. Alvesson and Einola agree: “Authentic leadership does not “exist” just because there are powerful stories by charismatic top executives others feel inspired by. A successful business leader's personal post-hoc account of “how they got there” explained through the lens of authenticity, does not amount to any evidence that there is a theoretical construct like authentic leadership at play” (Gardner et al., 2021). Scholars at both sides of the authentic leadership field are still calling for more qualitative studies, in order to get a more nuanced understanding of its complexities (Gardner et al., 2011; Liu et al., 2017). As Liu et al. (2017) describes: “... we highlight the need for future leadership theorizing to move beyond the

romantic ideals of leadership that it is currently based upon, and critically engage with the processes that underpin its social construction.”

Despite a steady influx of AL publications, the critics are not convinced of there having been any advancements in the field during the past decade (Iszatt-Kempster & White, 2019). They argue that the amount of publications on the topic does not in itself justify declarations of the field reaching more mature stages of theoretical development but “may only indicate conformity and the uncritical reproduction of assumptions” (Gardner et al., 2021). Recently, in an attempt to reconcile the diverging views in the authentic leadership field, and infuse it with some well needed constructiveness, Gardner, Karam, Alvesson, and Einola (2021) engaged in a series of letter exchanges, featured in *Leadership Quarterly*. The authors identified both points of common understanding and deep divergence in views. Despite attempts such as these, scholars in the field are still in disagreement regarding many fundamental elements of authentic leadership theory.

In sum, the topic of authentic leadership has spurred a steadily growing interest among both scholars and practitioners over the last 20 years. Whilst this interest has generated innumerable publications on the topic, its conceptual and methodological foundations have been sharply criticized by critical leadership scholars that are even questioning whether it is a good idea to progress the field at all (Gardner et al., 2021). Nonetheless, the authentic leadership theory has continued to advance along the original quantitative orientation, and still generates extensive interest (Iszatt-White & Kempster, 2019).

3. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework, which will be used in an exploratory manner, represents the lens through which the empirical data of our study will be analyzed. In section 3.1 we will describe the most influential authentic leadership theories. After this, we will present the key criticisms of authentic leadership theory (3.2). Lastly, we will present the identified research gap (3,3).

3.1 The Dominant Authentic Leadership Theories

The first influential, still dominant, publication on AL was written by Luthans and Avolio (2003). They define authentic leadership 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” (Luthans & Avolio, 2003). The authentic leader is confident, hopeful, optimistic, resilient, transparent, moral/ethical, future-oriented, and gives priority to developing associates to be leaders. An authentic leader’s values, beliefs, and behaviors serve as the key components of the construct. A positive organizational context, referring to the culture, is required for authentic leaders to develop. “Highly developed” organizational cultures, where leaders care about the development of the followers, are assumed to be more suitable for authentic leadership (Luthans and Avolio, 2003).

Based on the definition by Luthans and Avolio (2003), Walumbwa et al. (2008) redefined and advanced the concept. Walumbwa et al. (2008) defines authentic leadership as “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” (Walumbwa et al., 2008). The authors thus suggest four key components of authentic leadership: self-awareness, an internalized moral perspective, balanced processing of information, and relational transparency. *Self-awareness* is defined as understanding one’s strengths and weaknesses and the multifaceted nature of the self. An *internalized moral perspective* involves an internalized and integrated form of self-regulation, which is guided by internal moral standards and values. It results in

decision-making and behavior that is consistent with these values. *Balanced processing* of information concerns leaders “who show that they objectively analyze all relevant data before coming to a decision.”. This also includes promoting views that challenge their own positions. Last, *relational transparency* is about presenting one’s authentic self to others. This involves openly sharing “information and expressions of one’s true thoughts and feelings” while striving to “minimize displays of inappropriate emotions” (Walumbwa et al., 2008).

George’s (2003) approach to authentic leadership is based upon his own experience as a CEO, as well as interviews with 125 successful leaders. In George’s model, authentic leaders “genuinely desire to serve others through their leadership. They are more interested in empowering the people they lead to make a difference than they are in power, money, or prestige for themselves”. George distinguishes the authentic leader from an inauthentic one by the presence or absence of a moral compass, where the authentic leader is true to his/her own values, whereas inauthentic leaders only appear to be faithful to their values (Spoelstra, 2018). However, the main focus is on the characteristics of an authentic leader: *compassion, passion, behavior, consistency, and connectedness*. According to George, individuals must develop these characteristics if they wish to become authentic leaders.

3.2 The Critical Research Streams on AL and its Key Points

3.2.1 Shaky Theoretical Foundations

One common critique towards the authentic leadership construct concerns how it is measured, and whether such quantifications are even possible (Ibarra, 2015; Alvesson & Einola, 2021). Critical leadership scholars Alvesson and Einola (2021) state that “The recipe for positive leadership seems to be to combine four or five nice sounding, vague dimensions and let them form a style or type. They are formulated so that they per definition lead to favorable outcomes and operationalizations giving the respondent very strong clues for how to respond to questionnaires and for researchers to come up with confirmative results”. They further say: “the phenomenon is too fluctuating and difficult to grasp quantitatively for causal modeling to be meaningful—or even possible.” Ibarra (2015) agrees, meaning that being “authentic” or “true to

oneself” are commonly used and positively held attributes, which makes for a positively biased valuation already in the way AL is defined.

Another fundamental question regarding the measurement of authentic leadership, is if it is possible for individuals to assess their own efforts of “staying true to themselves” (Ibarra, 2015). Goffee and Jones (2005), claim that authenticity in leadership is decided by how a leader is perceived by others, and therefore something that is crafted to achieve an authentic image. This poses the question if one can ever know if someone is truly authentic, which is something Spoelstra (2018) brings up. He states: “the authentic leader, in turn, is sometimes seen as someone who is a master at appearing authentic or sincere, suggesting a preoccupation with outwardness”, raising the question of whether authenticity can be objectively measured at all.

In addition, other scholars argue that the positive framing of authentic leadership is misleading and risks undermining the empirical validity of the research field, and of leadership literature in general (Liu et al., 2017; Nyberg & Svenningsson, 2014; Ibarra, 2015; Pfeffer, 2015). The critics argue that any leadership theory, when phrased in a positive manner, will yield equally strong correlation of positive outcomes (Alvesson & Einola, 2021; Pfeffer, 2015; Ibarra, 2015). Other scholars question the academic sobriety of authentic leadership advocates and argue that they, just like religious fanatics, are fueled by faith in two significant ways: “(a) faith in leadership concepts, even when their accompanying measures fall short of methodological standards and (b) faith in leadership studies as a science, even when it is tainted by commercial interests and professional rewards” (Spoelstra, Butler & Delaney, 2021). Other critical scholars question whether authenticity, being an inwardly oriented phenomenon, can really be combined in a meaningful way with the outwardly oriented phenomenon of leadership. For example, Alvesson and Einola (2021) states: “Even though ‘who we really are’ obviously influences how we lead and follow, just like it affects every other aspect of our lives, the authenticity-leadership link is too ephemeral”.

3.2.2 Romanticized Ideals

Despite the idealistic nature of authentic leadership, critics argue that the romanticized authentic ideals may lead to harmful consequences for individuals striving to achieve them. Alvesson and

Einola (2021) argue that leaders being their authentic selves makes them more exposed and vulnerable, which could be harmful. “It is virtually impossible to live up to the requirements of authenticity in leadership” (Alvesson & Einola, 2019), and trying to live up to the demands of an authentic leader may lead to feelings of being inadequate and cause identity trouble (Alvesson & Einola, 2021).

This is related to another critique brought forward: that of the possibly gendered nature of authentic leadership theory (Erickson, 1995; Pfeffer, 2015; Alvesson & Einola, 2021). Erickson (1995) makes the case that people belonging to marginalized groups in many high ranking corporate settings, such as women and people of color, face higher pressures related to choosing between displaying their own authentic selves or acting in accordance with the perceived norms and expectations of the more powerful majority. Pfeffer (2015) illustrates this gendered nature of authentic leadership: “Sheryl Sandberg, the COO of Facebook, founded a movement, Lean In, on the basis of the insight that women are often not quite pushy enough - but [...] women can change their behavior and become more successful.” Pfeffer (2015) argues that this example displays how marginalized groups, rather than benefiting from authenticity, on the contrary seem to have greater chances of being successful when actively trying to be inauthentic.

Furthermore, Liu et al. (2017), problematize the notion that authentic leadership is something inherently moral, a point to which Alvesson and Einola agree. In a debate with AL advocates Gardner and Karam (2021) they question that authentic leaders need to be confident and highly moral: “So being aware of and revealing low or fragile self-esteem would be at odds with authenticity? Authenticity is only for the strong ones, for the superior people?”. Gardner and Karam (2021) argue that authentic leadership involves an internalized form of self-regulation, which is guided by internal moral standards and values, in line with Walumbwa et al. (2008). However, critics argue that a leader can be, as the ancient Greeks described it, “true to oneself” without reaching high levels of moral reasoning and self-development (Alvesson & Einola, 2021). Additionally, Sparrowe (2005) argues that the Shakespeare quote “to thine own self be true”, often referred to by AL advocates, lacks any recognition of morality. Furthermore, the amount of reflection and self-awareness required by an authentic leader would require a significant amount of time, reserved for a certain, privileged, group of people: “a level of

authenticity and ability to utilize competence are probably wished for by many, but a good income, safe employment and having time and energy for leisure activities may account for more” (Gardner et al., 2021).

3.2.3 Lack of Contextual Factors

Nyberg and Svenningsson (2014), mean that organizational complexities, which are obstacles for expressing authenticity as a leader, are often absent in most AL publications. They challenge the assumption that leaders acting authentically will lead to advantageous outcomes for an individual and for organizations. Liu et al. (2017) agree that contextual factors, making the playing field for practicing authentic leadership far more dynamic in its nature, are overlooked.

Jackall (1988) analyzes the occupational ethics of corporate leaders, and in particular examines how the social and bureaucratic context of their work shape their occupational moralities. Jackall means that bureaucratic work shapes people’s consciousness in decisive ways, and in a bureaucratic world, a premium is always placed on a “functionally rational, pragmatic habit of mind”. Therefore, in large organizations, bureaucracy will premier pragmatism and the here-and-now-ways of reaching specific goals, and organizational needs and objectives will be put in front of “psychological and behavioral guides”. Furthermore, he states: “bureaucratic work causes people to bracket, while at work, the moralities that they might hold outside the workplace or that they might adhere to privately and to follow instead the prevailing morality of their particular organizational situation”. In this manner, personal values, beliefs and opinions of organizational leaders tend to become redundant at the expense of daily practically oriented issues. Jackall argues: “Bureaucracy transforms all moral issues into immediate practical concerns” and “create many mechanisms that separate men and women from the consequences of their actions”.

In organizational life, leaders' values are characterized by their lack of fixedness (Jackall, 1988). Jackall argues that organizational morale does not emerge from inside individuals, but rather from the relationships between individuals and social groups with varying degrees of influence; “Since these relationships are always multiple, contingent, and in flux, managerial moralities are always situational, always relative”. Ibarra (2015), agrees and problematizes the absence of

studying contextual factors in AL: “With new jobs, duties, employment, increasing age and so on, most people need to develop and change, and revise rather than to stick to a specific notion of who they are”. Pfeffer (2015) also subscribes to this notion, and argues that not only attitudes but also fundamental dimensions of personality are constantly adjusted according to the situational job related context.

3.3 Identified Research Gap

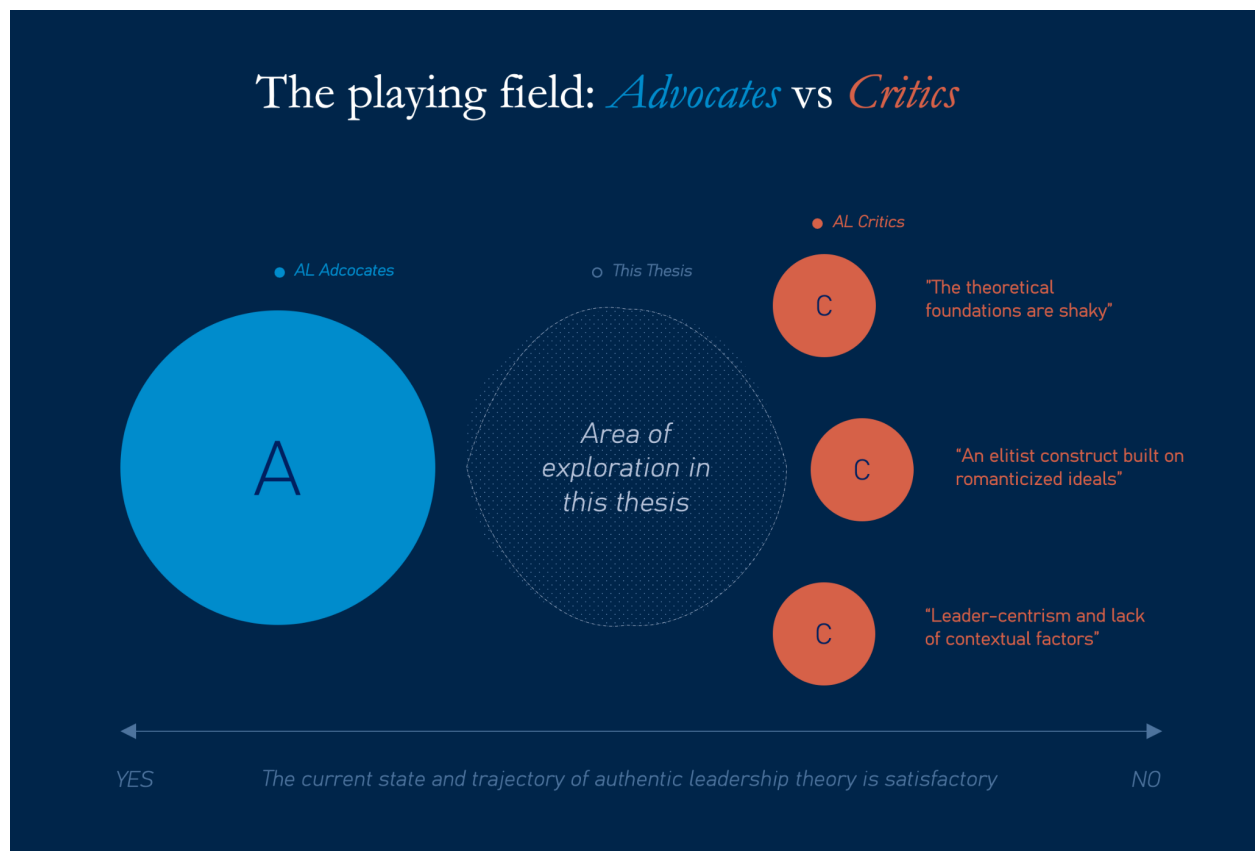


Exhibit 2. Visual representation of the identified research gap.

Our conclusion based on the previous literature on authentic leadership is that the various forms of critique should be taken seriously. Perhaps, the AL construct is not as mature as the advocates claim; criticism is becoming more prevalent and AL advocates increasingly have to engage in firefighting and construct novel explanations in defense of the theory. Critical scholars have long called for exploring new research methods and performing the type of explorative qualitative research that should precede the quantification of theoretical conceptualizations. The field

consists of two opposite perspectives: the AL advocates and its critics. However, research that seeks to explore the middle ground, where the perspectives are not treated as mutually exclusive, is scarce. This space in between the two perspectives, the middle ground, is our identified research gap. We wish to nuance the debate on authentic leadership by exploring this paradoxical middle ground, and explore different factors that might enable or inhibit the perceived need and ability to express one's true self as a leader. In so doing, we hope to contribute with new insight, enabling a more constructive and empirically grounded progression of the AL research field.

4. Methodological Approach

The purpose of this chapter is to present and argue for the methodological considerations and choices made throughout the research process. We will commence with outlining the chosen research approach and method (4.1). Following this, an account for the method of data collection (4.2) and processing (4.3) is presented. Lastly, we will motivate the selected criteria for assessing the quality of the study, as well as choices made in the research process to ensure that these criteria were accommodated (4.4).

4.1 Research Method

4.1.1 Research Approach

To answer any research question fulfillingly, researchers generally adopt one of three research approaches: *deductive*, *inductive* or *abductive* (Eriksson & Weidersheim-Paul, 2011). In deduction, researchers seek to test or falsify the claims of previous theories, therefore having theory as its starting point. Induction, on the other hand, starts by generating empirical findings that are then built to new theory explaining the phenomenon researched (Bell et al., 2019). An abductive research approach departs from empirical evidence but shifts focus back to theory after the process of collecting empirical data has commenced, in order to focus the research question closer to the relevant reality identified within those findings (Ibid.). An abductive research approach will be applied in this thesis.

An abductive research method often starts with the researchers having a general inquiry generated by a surprising fact or mental puzzle, for which they find no explanation in the existing range of theories (Bell, Bryman, & Harley, 2019). Our research idea was conceived during a classroom debate about whether Donald Trump could be considered an authentic leader or not. Half of the class argued yes, and the other half no. That spurred the question of what counts as authentic, how subjective it is, and what factors may affect that perception?

The AL-research field is characterized by polarized views. However, the purpose of this thesis is to gain a deeper understanding of how leader's experience authenticity in their daily organizational lives, not to falsify existing theories and models. By applying an abductive

research method, we accommodate continuous reflection and improvement of our research process (Flick, 2014).

4.1.2 Qualitative Research Design

A qualitative method is considered most appropriate in this thesis, as it allows for the creation of in-depth studies, and is a standard approach in business and management research (Yin, 2016). Due to the social nature of the topic, a qualitative method enables a more nuanced understanding of the social experiences investigated (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2008). A recognized drawback of a qualitative research approach is its ineptitude to generalize conclusions based on the empirical findings. However, the research question of this thesis is exploratory and the purpose will be to enhance our understanding of leaders' experiences of authenticity, not merely explaining it (Yin, 2014). In exploratory research, a qualitative approach is most appropriate, thus, the empirical data in this thesis is collected and analyzed by applying this approach (Yin, 2003).

The main body of research within the AL field is quantitative and built on theoretical constructs, which involves measurement and operationalization of quantifiable variables (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013). However, as Stake (1995) argues: “The function of research is not necessarily to map and conquer the world but to sophisticate our understanding of it”. In creating such a sophisticated understanding, nuanced descriptions and understanding of lived experiences is needed (Stake, 1995). One concern with construct development, according to Corley, Gioia and Hamilton (2013), is its tendency to overshadow the equally important work of concept development, which they argue must precede any efforts of theoretical construct development. Concepts are more general and loose-ended descriptions or explanations of phenomena of theoretical interest that are crucial both for guiding and validating construct development (Ibid.). In this study, we are instead interested in exploring the lived experiences of authenticity among leaders, and thus a qualitative research approach has greater odds of capturing relevant concepts (Gioia et al., 2013).

4.2 Data collection

4.2.1 Interview Design

The empirical findings in this thesis were obtained through eight semi-structured in-depth interviews, which ranged between 55-90 minutes in length. The main interviews were conducted in a face-to-face setting when possible and with help of online communication tools such as Microsoft Teams when of greater convenience to the interviewee.

One of our main responsibilities during the data collection process was to give the interviewees an opportunity to honestly and openly describe their thoughts and experiences. In this regard, qualitative semi-structured interviews are superior to quantitative techniques such as surveys and questionnaires which are not designed to obtain rich and detailed answers (Yin, 2016). Interviews in qualitative research studies need not be limited to the initial interview guide; rather, researchers are encouraged to depart from the interview guide in order to obtain the insights the interviewees deem most relevant and pressing to explore (Bell, Bryman, & Harley, 2019). In the interviews, we continuously asked follow-up questions to go deeper and explore underlying themes in greater detail.

We were mindful to create a sense of trust among our interviewees to encourage honest and reflexive answers, tapping into their full knowledge and experience. This process was initiated prior to the main interviews through email communication, where we informed the interviewees about the general topic of study, assured them of their confidentiality, and asked warm-up questions (Appendix 2). These questions were designed to make the interviewees feel comfortable and to start reflecting upon the topic. For example, we asked the interviewees how they would describe themselves as leaders, and what they think constitutes a good leader.

During the interviews, to escape any preconceived notions of authenticity, we explicitly refrained from using the term “authentic” and “authenticity” in the main interview questions (Appendix 3), but rather used terms such as being “true to oneself” when needed. For the same reason, when reaching out and introducing the leaders to the research topic, we only mentioned that we were interested in their leader experiences, and were careful not to mention authenticity. Yet, we

wanted to explicitly explore the leaders' reflections about authenticity, but this was not done until the end of the interview. To get as open reflections about authenticity as possible, we first gave a short introduction to what authentic leadership means, and then presented two opposing statements: one from an AL advocate, and one from an AL critic (Exhibit 3). The interviewees were asked to first reflect upon, and then compare these two statements, and then describe how they relate to authenticity as a leader. The transcription of interviews was done within 24 hours after the interview when impressions and relevant topics were stored fresh in mind.

Collecting relevant data requires involving oneself directly with a primary data source (Yin, 2017). The empirical material in this thesis consists of the primary data obtained through the interviews with the leaders. According to Yin (2017), an empirical study must use “newly collected data, based on a fresh set of data collection procedures—not information from existing secondary sources”. Hence we did not seek to rely on secondary data sources.

4.2.2 Interviewees

In order to account for various perspectives and contextual circumstances in which organizational leaders reside, we ensured the interview sample to represent various contexts. The interviewees represent various industries: from venture capital, life science and industrial engineering to music and food manufacturing. The interviewees cover a range of different roles belonging to the more senior domain, such as CEO, Head of Marketing and President. Interviewees differed in gender, age and leadership experience; the youngest leader being 28 years old with four years of leadership experience, and the oldest being 60 years old having more than 32 years of leadership experience. The organizations of the interviewees ranged from small to large, with operations located both in Sweden and globally, the largest one having over 17 thousand employees in 50 different countries. An overview of the interviewees is presented in Appendix 4.

We perceived that saturation started occurring after six in-depth interviews. At this point, we experienced that the answers and themes brought up were recurring and of similar nature. After this point, during the last two interviews, no new themes occurred. This is a sign that the

emergence of new themes was exhausted; thus, we felt confident of having gone beyond the point of saturation (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006).

4.3 Data Processing

Thematic analysis is a commonly used approach to process empirical data, and is applicable in a variety of qualitative settings (Braun & Clark, 2017). In order to identify and analyze patterns of meaning in our empirical data, we initially applied a general approach to thematic analysis and followed the steps as developed by Braun and Clark (2012). We commenced the process by transcribing our audio-recorded interviews with each interviewee, and took time reading them carefully. Simultaneously, we noted down interesting, surprising and recurring data points, thus familiarizing ourselves with the data and preparing for codification. We then proceeded by codifying the data, and assessed and compared these coded points of data to pin down potential themes. Then we reviewed the developed themes by confirming whether they represented the data points and codes, and if they were coherent with the entire data set as well as our research question (Braun & Clark, 2012).

However, although our thematic analysis contained interesting material, we wanted to improve the quality of our analysis and bring it closer to the lived realities of our interviewed leaders. Therefore, after the general thematic analysis, we instead applied the Gioia method, which represents a holistic approach to concept development, created to enhance the academic rigor of qualitative studies (Gioia et al., 2013). This method of processing data improved the work of identifying gaps, patterns, outliers, surprising and thought-provoking answers.

We re-started the process by performing initial data coding using the undistorted quotes (“first-order terms”) from the interviews as the starting point for thematization. Following this, the comprehensive summary of first order terms was organized into theory-centric second-order themes, which were also assembled into a data structure. Lastly we identified relationships, interdependencies and complexities in and between the formulated dimensions in order to generate the concepts discussion in this thesis.

4.4 Quality of the Study

Reliability and validity are commonly used criteria for assessing the quality of business and management research. However, qualitative researchers have discussed whether there are more relevant assessment criteria available that are less focused on measurement (Bell et al., 2019). Guba and Lincoln (1994) instead suggest *credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability* as suitable criteria for assessing the trustworthiness of qualitative studies. Therefore, we will apply credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability as evaluation criteria for assessing the quality of this thesis.

4.4.1 Credibility

Credibility, according to Eisenhardt (1989) is an important criterion for qualitative research in general and abductive research in particular. There exists no common agreement on what constitutes a “good” theory in qualitative research and credibility is a construction on the part of the reporter(s) and the subsequent reader(s) (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). However, it is important that the theory is grounded in relevant and valid empirical findings (Eisenhardt, 1989). Thus, our role as qualitative researchers is ensuring a good fit between the theoretical framework, applied study methods and the collected data, enabling valid concepts to be developed (Ibid.). The purpose of this thesis is not to construct new theory per se, but rather to nuance our understanding of the topic. Thus, the study aims to provide credibility by complementing the theories within the AL realm with new insights and perspectives.

Having a prolonged engagement with the investigated phenomenon is one way to enhance the credibility of a qualitative study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Both of us researchers have been observing leaders through previous work-life experience, and have immersed ourselves in the topic of leadership throughout our studies. The engagement with some of the leaders started several months before the main interviews, as they held extensive guest lectures about their leadership experiences as a part of our master program. This “mental baggage” served as an entrapoint to several investigated issues and contributed to creating a deeper understanding of the studied topic.

4.4.2 Transferability

Transferability is concerned with the ability to translate the findings of a study into other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985) it is ultimately the task of the reader to make their own subjective judgements about the study's transferability to other contexts or domains. Thus, our responsibility in this regard is providing the reader with a directory in which such judgment is possible. The definition of who constitutes a "leader" in theory is generally speaking quite broad, and the sample does not provide an exhaustive account of all types of leaders. However, it is not the purpose of this study to provide broadly generalizable truths, but rather to instill nuance and complexity into the polarized AL research field.

4.4.3 Dependability

Dependability is concerned with the consistency and trustworthiness of the researchers findings as well as ensuring adequate research documentation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Fulfilling this criterion therefore entails that an outside observer should be able to follow and critique the research process. In this regard, we have taken extensive measures to ensure sufficient documentation of critical phases of the research process, such as providing the used interview guide, overview of interviewees, presenting the data processing sequences, and finally giving an extensive account of research design decisions.

4.4.4 Confirmability

Confirmability entails ensuring that the researchers have avoided obvious traps of subjectivity, such as allowing personal values to dictate the research process and the findings deriving from it (Bell et al., 2019). Although absolute objectivity is arguably impossible to achieve in qualitative research, we have taken measures to minimize the influence of our own personal values in the research process. Guba and Lincoln (1985) suggest the use of auditors to assess whether this criteria is fulfilled sufficiently. During the process of writing this master thesis, the possibility to conduct a comprehensive audit was limited, however, peers, as well as our tutor, were given the opportunity to critically examine the research process and its outcomes.

In addition, an extensive literature review was performed prior to the data collection, accommodating for divergent and opposing perspectives within the Authentic Leadership research field, providing us with a deep and multifaceted understanding of the topic. During data collection subjectivity was deterred in some key ways. First, all interviews were conducted in a tranquil and secluded setting to avoid any form of external influence on the respondent. Second, due to the positive nature of the term authenticity, we avoided using vocabulary connected to authenticity or authentic leadership, hence allowing for more answers and reflections free from bias derived from prior knowledge. Third, in terms of interview technique, we ensured that questions were not guiding answers in any one direction. Lastly, in the data processing stage, our starting point was in first order observations in order to preserve the voices of our interviewees.

5. Empirical Findings & Analysis

To adequately answer the research questions, we will start by giving an account of the empirical findings addressing the first question: “How do leaders experience authenticity in their daily organizational lives?”, followed by an analysis (5.1). Subsequently, we will present observations pertinent to the second research question: “What key factors drive or limit the leader's perceived need and ability to be authentic?”. Through the data collection and analysis, factors within three key dimensions were identified as particularly impactful in driving and limiting leaders' perceived need and ability to be their “true” selves: the Intrapersonal, Organizational and Interpersonal dimension. In sections 5.2, 5.3, 5.4 we will give an account of the empirical findings related to these three dimensions. Each section will be followed by an analysis of the empirical data presented.

5.1 Leader Voices on Authenticity

In this section, we will answer the first research question: “How do leaders relate to authenticity in their daily organizational lives?”, by giving an account of the leaders' own reflections on being authentic as a leader. As explained in the Methodological Approach, the leaders were asked to reflect upon two contrasting quotes from scholars on both sides of the debate in the authentic leadership field. In this section we present illustrative quotes from each interviewee, followed by our commentary.

5.1.1 Leader Voices on Authenticity

AL Advocate	AL Skeptic
<p>“Authentic leaders know their “True North.” They have a clear idea of who they are, where they are going, and what the right thing is to do. When tested in difficult situations, authentic leaders do not compromise their values, but rather use those situations to strengthen their values. “</p> <p>-George (2007)</p>	<p>“In fact, being authentic is pretty much the opposite of what leaders must do. Leaders do not need to be true to themselves. Rather, leaders need to be true to what the situation and what those around them want and need from them.”</p> <p>-Pfeffer (2015)</p>

Exhibit 3: The quotes illustrated above were used to inspire reflections on the topic.

Jon:

“I think it’s important to be malleable. But I also believe it is important that you remain true to your core values. But exactly how you do it is shaped by your experiences and insights.”

Jon seems to believe there is value in being authentic, although he wants to reserve some maneuverability regarding how authenticity is manifested by the leader. He does not believe that being authentic or malleable are mutually exclusive concepts, but such flexibility should not come at the expense of compromising one’s core values.

Jamie:

“I won’t claim to be authentic, that sounds pretentious, but I strive to be true to myself and lead in my own way. You sometimes have to accept things that you personally may not agree with. It’s a consequence of the organization growing and becoming more complex, there is more diversity and different perspectives and so on.”

Jamie views the term “authentic” as slightly pretentious, but he acknowledges the importance of being true to oneself. He highlights the importance of acknowledging that a leader must sometimes accept and act on beliefs that differ from his own. He considers it necessary for the development of the organization to allow for diverse perspectives and go against what feels natural to him personally.

Jorah:

“Authentic sounds a lot like it’s all about values, that you stick to them no matter what - that sounds a bit egocentric. The other one [Pfeffer] sounds like turncoat behavior and I think that’s wrong. But there lies some truth in that you have to think about what those around you need from you. Somehow these [quotes] are missing the point, it’s not about you, it’s about us.”

Throughout the interview, Jorah describes how he tries to stay true to himself. However, as shown above, he also doubts that it is possible to always do so. Further, he seems to regard both views as too simple and deterministic. He highlights that both have their advantages and disadvantages but that they both seem to overemphasize the leader, and in so doing overlooks the team and organization.

Ygritte:

“When I think about this ‘authentic leadership’ I imagine a start-up organization with a very charismatic and unique person shaping the organization in line with their own beliefs. I wouldn’t describe myself as that kind of leader, but it could maybe be right in some types of organizations and under certain conditions.”

Ygritte, while spontaneously expressing skepticism towards authentic leadership, does not completely discard it. Throughout the interview she expresses that it is always a question of adapting according to the situation. Above, she argues there are certainly instances where an authentic leader is the best choice, but she deems it more likely to be successful in a start-up setting.

Arya:

“We play different roles all the time without thinking about it, so what does it mean to be true to yourself? It becomes very philosophical. I agree with both, the first one describes the ideal authentic leader, but if you always adapt to the leader there isn’t much space left for other’s thoughts and behaviors. The other one seems to be more chameleon-like. I think you need a somewhat stable core in order to gain trust and be able to give a clear path forward, but you need to be flexible as well. Imagine a house that needs a body, but then the rooms can all have different wallpaper and furniture.”

Thus Arya argues that both perspectives hold something positive and complement rather than contrast each other. She believes having a solid core in terms of values is critical for a leader but also acknowledges the importance of remaining flexible. Throughout the interview she highlights that being open to change is crucial for developing as a leader.

Catelyn:

“My view is that authentic leadership is what most of us believe is fantastic. I can see both pros and cons, and I don’t think there is one best way of doing things, people don’t work like that. We adapt all the time, even as leaders.”

Catelyn thinks that being yourself is commonly regarded as positive, and that authentic leadership is idealized. She believes that it might not be for everyone, and acknowledges that, in line with Pfeffer’s quote, leaders as well as anyone, have to be a bit pragmatic and adapt to what is required in the moment.

Ramsay:

“I think if the board does their job well, they will recruit a CEO that has an authentic leadership that fits with the organization. I think it is good to be authentic and true to myself, but in the short term the focus is more to deliver good numbers this week or this month.”

Ramsay believes that being authentic is something positive for him personally, yet recognizes that authenticity as a leader can be difficult to achieve in practice, due to competing short term demands. Ramsay also underscores that the particular leaders’ authentic self has to fit the organization, suggesting that it is not enough to be authentic, but a leader has to be the right type of authentic.

Robert:

“My immediate response is ‘that guy [Pfeffer] is just full of shit’. It’s absolute BS [bullshit] in my view, but there might be something there that’s probably worth exploring and trying to understand. But it depends on how you define authenticity. Because if there is a set of values that you have that guide how you present yourself, adapting your leadership is simply the ability to have the EQ to know what is the proper way to react or respond in different situations.”

Robert is the leader in this study that is the most positive towards authentic leadership. However, even though he completely rejected Pfeffer’s statement at first, on second thought he accepted

that this perspective might also hold some truth. Robert argues that being able to adapt according to the situation is only about emotional intelligence, and that this does not contradict being true to your core values.

5.1.1.1 Analysis of Leader Voices on Authenticity

Scholars argue about the usefulness and empirical validity of AL theory (Gardner et al., 2021; Iszatt-White & Kempster, 2019), and advocates and critics to AL are reluctant to recognize each other's views. However, in our empirical findings, the leaders, when asked to reflect on illustrative quotes from both sides of the aforementioned debate, provided a more complex and nuanced view of leader authenticity, allowing for the coexistence of the ideas that scholars deem to be stark contrasts.

All leaders, to greater or lesser extent, agree that “being yourself”, is something good. None of the leaders completely disregarded any of the provided perspectives, but sought to find value in both of them. However, they also perceive authentic leadership, as described by George, to be idealistic and aspirational, and consider it difficult to achieve in practice. It also became evident that most of the leaders did not consider the contrasting statements to be contrasts at all. Although most leaders expressed that they preferred one view over the other, the consensus seemed to be that both statements could be true simultaneously. Thus staying true to oneself and adapting behaviors to those around oneself does not necessarily seem to be mutually exclusive ideas, as the scholarly debate would let on.

In sum, and contrary to the ongoing scholarly debate, the leaders illustrated a paradoxical line of reasoning regarding being authentic as a leader. A clear example is Robert, who first called Pfeffer's quote “absolute BS”, to then turn and say: “but there might be something there that's probably worth exploring and trying to understand”. The leaders' reflections describe a reality that is more complex than expressed by the two opposing views on AL, which both seem to have value yet fail to capture reality as it is experienced by the leaders.

5.2 Intrapersonal Dimension

The intrapersonal dimension focuses on how factors internal to the leader drive or limit the leaders perceived need and ability to be their true selves. First, focus will be on leader experience and confidence (5.2.1), and secondly we will shed light on the leaders' short versus long term approach to authenticity (5.2.2).

5.2.1 Leader Experience and Confidence

One of the fundamental recurring challenges that the leaders have is to make decisions without having perfect information; there is typically a significant amount of judgment required from the leaders as decision makers. The leaders search for guidance in decision making both internally (e.g. values and experiences) and externally (e.g. observing others and mimicking role models). Arya says: "I use Google", she laughs, and continues "It's not a joke - external sources can give you new perspectives." In difficult situations, though, many leaders consider the most valuable source of guidance to be previous experiences of similar situations, whenever such experiences are available. Arya again:

"When facing uncertainty in how to handle a leadership challenge, my previous experiences both as a follower and as a leader are typically where I turn to for guidance."

Like Arya describes, the experiences leaders use as benchmarks that can come both from leader and follower experiences. They use these experiences to translate the consequences of their actions to the current situation. The leaders explain that, in their early leadership careers, it was difficult to know instinctively what to do, which increased the reliance on external sources of guidance, such as mentors, role models, books on leadership, etc. Most commonly, though, the leaders observed how other leaders around them acted, and adopted the same approach. Catelyn explains:

"I had a mentor when I was fresh in the leader role, and he had an amazing way to always stay calm, objective and interested in tough situations."

Later in the interview, it becomes clear that she tries to adopt his style when faced with the difficult situation of giving notice to an employee. Several other leaders also describe how they copied snippets of their former leaders' behaviors in order to simplify decision making. For example, Ramsay says:

“I got to see how the founder ran the organization on a large scale here [Sweden] and copied everything on a smaller scale there [UK].”

In this way he copied his superior's approach when establishing a new branch of the company. However, with experience and a track record of delivering results, the leaders express that they gain higher confidence in their ability to make judgements based on internal sources, such as their own experiences and beliefs. Jorah tells us: “Now that I'm older, I know more how to act and what people want.” He further tells us that nowadays he can rest assured in knowing what people expect from him as a leader, and he does not turn to external sources for guidance as much. Ramsay also describes how he increasingly relies on his own beliefs when making decisions:

“You grow into your role and you get more confidence when you've done it well for a couple of years - then you feel like you can take liberties and do things the way you personally think is right.”

A third example is Robert, who elaborates on when he had to decide whether or not to give notice to an employee. He explains how he relied on his own experience of being fired, which in his case was “for the best”, and let this experience guide his decision:

“... if you think about what's best for the person, it's easy to get away from the emotion. They may not like what you're saying, but it's the right thing for the person.”

Relying on his own experience in this way, he could feel confident that his decision was right. However, all leaders do not feel this confidence, even as experienced leaders. Several leaders describe feeling like imposters and doubting themselves. Jorah explains how he still feels like he

is faking being a leader: “You feel like you do that every day, in some way”. These less self-confident leaders consider leadership a learning process, where one has to be open to change. Arya tells us:

“... you learn as long as you live, and sometimes you have to accept that things turn out wrong. Otherwise you’re locked in and don’t dare to try out new approaches. I think that as a leader it’s good to be a bit ‘fluid’, so that you don’t get stuck.”

Confident or not, the leaders, surprisingly perhaps, do not bring up values as an important guide in decision making. Au contraire, Ygritte states: “Values are overestimated, as long as we don’t start killing children or something like that”. She means that values are not often contemplated upon when making decisions, as challenges often are rather mundane, and seldom pose ethical dilemmas.

5.2.1.1 Analysis of Leader Experience and Confidence

Within the AL construct the role of values is prevalent, and a focal point is how authentic leaders should use their own core values as a guide in making decisions (Walumbwa et al., 2008). Our findings suggest that the leaders hold this to be true on a philosophical level, however, when making decisions, experience seems to triumph values as a source of guidance. Further, experience also instills confidence to make decisions based on the leaders’ own beliefs. The influence that experience has on enabling decision making based on the leaders’ own beliefs seems to be overlooked in previous literature.

Our findings indicate that letting values guide decision making seems far-fetched for the leaders in their daily organizational lives. In reality, the challenges leaders face are much more mundane than the dramatic events and scandals that triggered the development of the AL construct. The examples of challenging situations given by the leaders almost exclusively concerned staff related issues, which is a practical rather than moral issue, and where consequences are far from as severe as for example frauding investors or exploiting child labor.

The leaders describe relying increasingly on internal sources of guidance the more leadership experience is gained. Turning inward for guidance in challenging situations, as described in the AL construct (Walumbwa et al., 2008), seem to appear first when leaders gain confidence from experience and build a track record of delivering results.

Additionally, in their early careers, the leaders tend to rely more on external sources when facing difficult situations, as they do not yet have enough experience and confidence in their own abilities and judgment. The leaders describe how they in their early careers leveraged a broader repertoire of external sources. Up until the point when leaders feel confident enough to rely on internal sources to guide behavior and decisions, they depend heavily on external sources.

Moreover, leaders who expressed a strong inclination to rely on internal sources of guidance seemed less interested in considering others' thoughts and opinions. The more a leader has proven his or her ability to deliver results, the more trust the leader gains from others in the organization and the more inclined the leader seems to feel to turn inwards for guidance when facing challenging situations. That is, the perceived ability to use internal sources of guidance seem to be enabled by the feelings of trust that come with experience and confidence. This is similar to what Walumbwa et al. (2008) would call an *internalized moral perspective*. However, according to our findings the moral component seems to play a less prevalent role than AL theory claims.

Furthermore, we find that an increased reliance on internal sources of guidance may lead to *overconfidence*. This can manifest itself as a perception of having superior reasoning and decision making abilities. Robert, for example, seems to be confident in judging what is best even for other people, as he has strong faith in his moral reasoning ability. When leaders put too much trust in their internal sources of guidance the risk is that they become overconfident, resulting in a rigidity of mind and reluctance to change. Like Ibarra (2015) puts forward: "When we look only within for answers, we inadvertently reinforce old ways of seeing the world and outdated views of ourselves". In this way, an internalized moral perspective, looking inwards for answers, seems to be on contradictory terms with balanced processing, or seeking external guidance from all relevant sources before making decisions. Yet other leaders describe how they

struggle with confidence from time to time, and even feel like imposters. This seems to make leaders more open to change and adapt as they continuously question their own abilities and seek external input.

5.2.2 Short and Long Term Perspectives

Another theme that recurred throughout our interviews was the distinction that leaders made between *short and long term* behavior. Ramsay describes:

“I think it’s good to be authentic and true to yourself, but I think you have to make a distinction between short and long term [...] In the short term, I, at least, feel that you have to deliver good numbers for this week and this month - I have to do this because I owe the organization and the stakeholders that.”

Ramsay continues by explaining that he does not believe in micro management, but in order to deliver in the short run, he sometimes has to step in and micro manage, even though it goes against his beliefs:

“I might change things for just one week, ‘chop, chop’, and then we’re back to how it was. The more short term, the more I feel like I have to do what is demanded in the situation. And in the longer run, I want to do what I personally think is right.”

Thus insinuating that going against his personal beliefs in the short term is a necessity of daily organizational life. Several other leaders also described situations in which they had to act in contradiction to their beliefs in the short term, but justified it by explaining that it can be a means to achieving what is right according to their beliefs in the longer run. For example, Ygritte tells us:

“Sometimes you’ll have to do things that you’re not 100% behind. [...] I think the advantage is that you probably will get a bit further in the long run. You have to compromise a bit now, but we’re continuing towards a higher objective.”

Like Ygritte shows above, the leaders acknowledge that they must act pragmatically on a day-to-day basis, to achieve something greater in the longer run.

5.2.2.1 Analysis of Short and Long Term Perspectives

When leaders have to make decisions that may be contrary to their personal beliefs and values, they can distinguish between their short versus long term behavior. In this way, the leaders can justify short term inauthentic behavior, and postpone having to deal with reflections of whether they are true to themselves or not. In the short term, they prioritize being pragmatic in order to achieve organizational goals, rather than contemplate personal principles. This is in line with Jackall (1988), who argues that in a bureaucratic world, a premium is always placed on a “functionally rational, pragmatic habit of mind”, where short term goals would be prioritized. Acting in accordance with one’s personal values and beliefs is something that rather seems to be a long term aspiration. The leaders are willing to compromise in the short term in order to (hopefully) achieve something greater in the longer run. However, they do not seem to consider by-passing personal principles in the short run as something that would make them less authentic. Interestingly, though, while authenticity mainly is considered to be performed in the long run by the leaders, what is defined as “the long run” is left out in this line of reasoning.

5.3 Organizational Dimension

The organizational dimension focuses on how organizational factors drive or limit the leaders’ perceived need and ability to be true to themselves. This section will first shed light on the impact of size and hierarchical dynamics of the organization (5.3.1). Next, we will explore the influence of organizational values (5.3.2), and lastly, focus will be on organizational objectives and processes (5.3.3).

5.3.1 Size and Hierarchy

The leaders describe how the size and type of organization affects the way they work and the challenges they are faced with. For example, in larger organizations there are naturally more stakeholders to consider. Ygritte describes:

“If you’re supposed to lead like I do, in a large corporation with a hundred different wills and divisions [...] you have to adapt a lot more to the situation and context to create results.”

Catelyn describes similar challenges with working in a large corporation. She explains how she used to have much stronger opinions and pushed her own agenda to a higher extent, but when entering a leader role in a large corporation, she found that approach to be counterproductive:

“Early on, I had very strong opinions, and I did everything to push them and get my will through. It was a bit ‘my way or the highway’. But in a large corporation you quickly realize that does not work...”

However, when asked if she feels like she has been shaped by the organization, she says: “No, I don’t want to believe that” and laughs. Catelyn means that as a leader you have to listen to others and be willing to adapt in order to get things done and to survive in an organization. Both Ygritte and Catelyn describe how they need to act as information filters between the hierarchical levels both above and below. Jamie, CEO of a venture capital firm, agrees that as an organization grows, it becomes more complex and the leader has to accept sometimes doing things that one might not agree with. Jamie explains that it is not necessarily a bad thing, but it becomes more difficult to do things in the way you personally believe to be right.

The leaders also describe other types of organizations where it might be easier to be “yourself”. Ygritte contemplates:

“When I think about being yourself as a leader, I think it’s more relevant in a start-up organization where there’s one charismatic and strong-willed person who just does things in their way and has others adjust to that.”

Ramsay is an example of the type of leader that Ygritte describes; as CEO of a small scale-up company, he considers it his responsibility to shape the organization in accordance with his own

beliefs, rather than to accommodate the needs of other stakeholders. As CEO of a small start-up, Jon follows suite:

“When I think too much about others’ in the organization and having to satisfy their need, then I lose my direction and purpose of leadership”

Here, Jon shows that he does not feel pressured to adapt to others; on the contrary, he believes that the organization will benefit from him not being too concerned with what others think of him.

5.3.1.1 Analysis of Size and Hierarchy

In previous AL literature, the characteristics of the organization is not highlighted as a critical factor influencing the authenticity of leaders. Luthans and Avolio (2003) bring up organizational context in their model; however, the “context” is limited to the cultural context of the organization. Critical researchers Liu (2017) and Nyberg and Sveningsson (2014), among others, argue that contextual factors affect leader authenticity. However, modest attention is given to one contextual factor that recurred throughout our interviews: the size of the organization and the hierarchical dynamics within it. Our findings suggest that the organizational setup and size does in fact have a considerable impact on the leaders’ perceived need and ability to be their true selves.

In larger organizations, there is a larger number of stakeholders to consider, ultimately requiring more effort from leaders trying to balance different wills and priorities. This poses a challenge for leaders striving to be their true self, as leaders are instead required to be very pragmatic and rational and adjust to different stakeholder demands. This is in line with Jackall (1988): in large organizations, organizational bureaucracy will premier pragmatism and focus on the rational, here-and-now-ways of reaching specific goals. In our findings too, pragmatism and flexibility, not the leaders “being themselves”, seems to be required, and being true to oneself is quite difficult. The leaders have accepted this and adapted more or less consciously. Contrastingly, in smaller organizations, it seems easier for the leaders to be themselves. In fact, they perceive

being themselves as something expected and beneficial for the organization, as the examples Ramsay and Jon show.

Organizational size is, of course, closely related to the leaders' position in the organizational hierarchy. In larger organizations, there are naturally more "middle managers" than in small start-up organizations. We observed how leaders on different levels of the hierarchy behaved in different ways. Jon and Ramsay, both CEOs, are examples of leaders that base their actions on personal beliefs. In contrast, Ygritte and Catelyn, both middle managers, express a stronger need for adapting their behavior and style to stakeholders both below and above them in the hierarchy. It seems thus as leaders located in the middle of the organizational hierarchy have less room to act and base decisions on their own personal beliefs.

5.3.2 Organizational Values

Many leaders bring up and reflect upon how their personal values relate to the formal or informal values of the organization. Jorah describes that in his organization, the formal organizational values have a very pronounced importance, which affects the way he acts. He describes using the corporate values to guide his decision making, and says: "My relationship to them is very strong; I know that they work well". He also describes feeling tightly connected to the organization and the way of working, which also shows in the way he expresses himself, saying: "*we* like to do it this way" or "*we* think like this". Ygritte describes similar experiences. At her previous workplace, people in the organization truly lived by the organizational values, which often served as a guide for decision making and behavior:

"It was a part of the culture and everyday life, and it was fantastic. It was a super-power to be able to say: wait a second, now we need to "*keep it simple*", and proceed even though things are not 100%."

However, in her current organization she considers the organizational values to be more of a "paper product" that no one really cares about, and which cannot be leveraged in any useful way. However, in organizations where formal values have a more pronounced importance, several

leaders describe how these values are even being used in the recruitment and development of employees. Catelyn says:

“We want to have an inclusive culture *and* for people to be in a specific way. We talk a lot about ‘*growth mindset*’ and ‘*curious mind*’ for example, that is how we want the teams to be but if someone isn’t like that, how does that relate to the expectations [of an inclusive culture]?”

Here, Catelyn highlights the importance of having an inclusive culture, but also says that the organization expects the employees to behave in a “specific way”, and questions whether these expectations are in opposition to one another. Jorah provides a similar example: “When we recruit, we recruit on these values, it permeates the entire company”. Here, organizational values seem to serve as a blueprint for its members.

Some leaders instead actively try to shape the organizational values according to their personal beliefs. Jamie states: “I believe in being who you are, and I think that people who buy into that will gravitate towards you”. Here, he shows that he believes his personal values can shape the organization as “being himself” will naturally attract like minded people to the organization. Another example is Robert, who found himself in clash with the existing organizational values. He describes that he was leading the company’s London team, when the CEO came up with a new set of corporate values. However, Robert and his employees in the London office were not fond of these new values and Robert decided to create a parallel set of values that were more in line with his, and the team’s, beliefs:

“My team here in London hated those values [...] I couldn’t change our corporate values, so we came up with something that we call our ‘Shared DNA’. [...] This is what all the people here value, and what we think brings us together in a unique way.”

Evidently, he was not willing to accept corporate values that wouldn’t create the “right” culture. Another leader who actively attempts to influence the informal organizational values is Ramsay:

“I am very clear that I view being sick as a matter of attitude, and people know that I think that. They also know that I am very competitive, and that probably shines through more and more. Employees notice that I like people with a ‘winner-attitude’ and also notice that I dislike people with bad attitudes, or ‘loser mentality’ as I call it.”

Ramsay continues by describing how he handled a situation with an employee he considered being sick too often:

“You can’t forbid people to be sick, but in my opinion it’s a matter of attitude... I had to make it very inconvenient and painful for her to be sick. And then she felt that I had lost trust in her, she felt kind of excluded [...] and then it didn’t take many days before she left the company.”

Here we see that he is aware of the strong influence his personality has, and he consciously uses this in order to create informal values in the organization. This is only one of several examples Ramsay provided where the influence of his personal opinions and beliefs has created serious tension and even workplace disputes, causing employees to feel hurt or even leave the company. Arya, when reflecting on the relation between her own and the organization’s values, highlights the potential danger with “pushing your own beliefs onto the organization”. She argues that there is a risk of letting a single person shape the organizational values, as the space for other types of attitudes and behavior becomes quite narrow.

5.3.2.1 Analysis of Organizational Values

A critical component in the AL construct is that authentic leaders should lead from their core values (George, 2003; Luthans & Avolio, 2003; Walumbwa et al., 2008). However, our findings suggest that in many cases it is instead the organizational values that guide the leaders’ behavior. Broadly speaking, when it comes to organizational values, the leaders seem to relate to them in two major ways; either they adopt and enforce the existing organizational values, or they try to change them to align with their personal beliefs.

Many of the leaders show signs of being highly influenced by organizational values. For example, several leaders highlight how organizational values shape, and limit, how employees (including leaders) are expected to behave in the organization. Some leaders question if this is entirely positive, fretting that perhaps this will create a more homogenous and confirmatory organization. Diversity is appreciated in the organization, however, organizational values limit the acceptable variances, and leaders strive to hire “like-minded” or “the right type of” people. The positive side of like-mindedness could be a reduced friction in the organization. However, when one does not subscribe to the organizational values, it becomes more challenging to be oneself, and possibly more difficult to thrive in the organization. Thus, the degree of resonance between personal and the organizational values seem to both drive and limit the possibilities for leaders (and followers) to be their true selves.

Interestingly, we find that for leaders more tightly connected with the organizational values, organizational values can act as a stand-in for personal values and beliefs. This may facilitate day to day decision making, as using organizational values can be used as a means to objectively defend decisions from the organizational perspective. Using organizational values in this manner seems to help the leaders rationalize decisions that may go against their personal beliefs. Jackall (1988) states: “bureaucratic work causes people to bracket, while at work, the moralities that they might hold outside the workplace or that they might adhere to privately and to follow instead the prevailing morality of their particular organizational situation”. Our findings suggest Jackall’s statement is likely to be accurate in many circumstances, as personal values seem to be secondary to those of the organization for most of the leaders.

However, and as a contrast, some of the leaders describe how they actively and deliberately attempt to shape the organizational values according to their personal beliefs. This seems to be more prevalent in smaller and younger organizations where organizational values have not yet been rooted. In these cases, the leaders seem to *influence* the organizational values rather than being *influenced by* them.

Here Arya takes on the role as the devil's advocate, and highlights a potential danger with “pushing your own beliefs onto the organization”. Indicating that the risk of letting a single

person shape the organizational values is that the space for other types of attitudes and behavior becomes quite narrow. Ramsay provides an example of the potentially negative effects a leader shaping the organizational values according to their own beliefs can have. It appears as though him shaping the company's values and culture causes tensions and excludes employees with divergent beliefs. We agree with Ford and Harding (2011), who state that ignoring the "dark" sides of leaders is naive. Being open and true to one's personal beliefs might be best suited for leaders with values commonly regarded as good. Then, of course, what "good" values or motives are, is a subjective matter.

5.3.3 Objectives and Processes

Although an organization's responsibilities often go beyond financial returns, delivering on the organization's goals still seems to reign supreme in guiding the leaders' behavior. The leaders perceive the "softer" aspects of being a leader important, but acknowledge that the ruling principle of managing a profit making business is inevitably to achieve organizational objectives. Jorah says:

"When you get to work you think about profits, that you have to deliver, the clock is ticking. In that sense it becomes quite competitive, and then you don't really act as you would in other circumstances."

He here exemplifies how the objective of reaching organizational goals affects the way he thinks and acts. Another leader contemplating the importance of organizational goals is Ramsay:

"There is a certain tension in that we place very high demands of what people should achieve, yet still being a "nice" employer. I mean, I also want to be a "nice" employer, but there are situations where I really have to push the team to get to the results I want, and if someone doesn't fit in, then you might want to make that person feel that it's time to leave. And then you may have to be a bit nasty or give hints that maybe it's time for them to move on."

In the example above, Ramsay describes how he has to balance between the objective of being a “nice” employer and having his employees perform. On the other hand, some leaders describe that a joint focus on organizational goals can help reduce friction and simplify organizational life. Robert provides a practical example:

“I think if you are clear on the strategy that you’re trying to follow, most of the tension that exists in a business is about relationships, human relationships. And when you focus on the purpose and the strategy and how you best execute, you are able to remove the human part of that tension fairly easily.”

Above, Robert shows how focusing on the organization’s purpose and strategy can reduce friction. Additionally, structured organizational processes can be helpful in guiding leaders’ behavior and decisions. An example brought forward on several occasions is the organizational processes that facilitate recruiting and firing employees, two prevalent challenges for the leaders. Catelyn describes a situation early on in her leadership career, where a team member had been underperforming, and where processes from HR helped guide her actions:

“To be very objective and to document conversations is one approach that helped. Because it is actually objective matters we are talking about, it has nothing to do with the person, and that is a way of removing the emotions that are always there in these cases.”

She demonstrates here how formal processes, and focusing on objective organizational matters alleviated this emotionally difficult situation. Another challenging situation for the leaders is giving feedback. Catelyn says:

“I think we are only human and it is a little unpleasant and uncomfortable telling people negative things about them without hurting them.”

Formal feedback procedures are brought forward as an example of a systematized way of working that can help leaders’ in these challenging and uncomfortable situations. Jamie elaborates:

“It is still tough [to give feedback] [...] But it’s about setting the right expectations, because if you’re clear on what performance and ambition level you aim for, then it’s very easy to come back and say ‘we’re not there yet, and this has to be improved’.”

On the other side of the equation, several leaders state that followers usually restrain from sharing honest opinions about a leader until asked. Ygritte describes how systematized feedback provides a structured way for her followers to be honest with her:

“There is something unspoken between how one talks to employees on a daily basis, where all indicators point towards them being happy and nothing is hard or too challenging, but then getting a result [from the feedback survey] that is a catastrophe.”

Ygritte explains here that there is a discrepancy between the way followers communicate with her on a daily basis, and what is revealed in formal anonymous feedback. Another example of structured organizational processes are team-building exercises that are meant to make team members connect on a personal level. Catelyn explains how these exercises help both with expressing one’s own personality, which she believes has value in itself, but also in understanding how to adapt behaviors according to others’ preferences and thereby enable a more efficient teamwork.

5.3.3.1 Analysis of Objectives and Processes

Even though leadership includes reaching common goals, how organizational goals affect leader authenticity is not a focus of existing AL literature. Yet, throughout the interviews, it became clear that organizational goals to a great extent influence how leaders behave. First, it is evident that for many leaders, reaching organizational objectives triumphs the leaders’ aspiration to be “themselves”. This is in line with what Jackall (1988) describes: in bureaucratic work places a premium on a “functionally rational, pragmatic habit of mind that seeks specific goals”, which will put the organizational needs and objectives in front of a leaders’ individual principles. However, aiming to reach organizational targets does not mean that one cannot or should not try

to be oneself; many times it is possible to combine the two. But ultimately, while important, being oneself is a secondary need.

Furthermore, we see that bureaucratic processes and frameworks can help leaders navigate and balance how and when to be themselves in organizational life. We find that organizational processes and frameworks can be used by leaders as tools to decouple themselves from the behavior that the organization requires of them. These findings are congruent with Jackall's statement: "Bureaucracy transforms all moral issues into immediate practical concerns". An example of how moral issues are turned into practical concerns is how leaders use formalized feedback forms, tightly connected to specific organizational objectives, to assess their followers, as described by Catelny. When relying on bureaucratic processes and frameworks such as these, the leaders' ability to act in line with their personal values and beliefs is limited, which significantly facilitates making difficult decisions. This does not mean that the leaders cannot try to put their own personal "touch" on how to deal with situations like these, but the extent to which personal values and opinions steer behaviors seems to be limited.

Moreover, the organization often assists leaders in being "honest" with their followers. For example, in formal feedback processes, leaders are often guided in what to say and do, thus the organization defines and delimits how honest and transparent the leaders can be. In this way, organizations may provide leaders with tools to deliver a sort of "packaged" honesty, where the leaders' personal thoughts and opinions are curated into an organizational format. Like Jackall states: "Bureaucracies create many mechanisms that separate men and women from the consequences of their actions". Formal feedback thereby offers a chance for leaders to decouple themselves from the tough feedback they sometimes have to give. In a similar way, referring to organizational objectives help leaders deliver negative feedback, as Robert says: "...when you focus on the purpose and the strategy and how you best execute, you are able to remove the human part of that tension fairly easily." Referring to organizational objectives in this way enables feedback to become less personal.

We also find that some organizational activities can help leaders to understand how to adapt to others' expectations and requirements. Feedback is an example of this, where leaders sometimes

change their behavior according to followers' opinions. This adaptation to others' opinions is something that is also facilitated by team building and workshops, where organizational members are expected to openly and honestly share their personal thoughts and opinions. Thus, these activities can become a means for members of the organization to learn how to adapt to each other. As a consequence, friction within the organization is reduced, but at the same time the opportunity for leaders (and followers) to be their "true", authentic selves is curbed.

5.4 Interpersonal Dimensions

The interpersonal dimension is focused on how leaders' relations and interactions with followers and other stakeholders drive or limit the leaders' perceived need and ability to be "true" to themselves. We will first focus on how leaders' balance between their personal and professional selves (5.4.1). Secondly, light will be shed upon the leaders' image (5.4.2).

5.4.1 Balancing the Personal and Professional Self

Overall, the leaders regard connecting with followers on a personal level as something positive, but they also perceive there to be a trade-off between being personal and maintaining a professional distance. Even though the leaders have different philosophies regarding how personal to be, they all subscribe to the notion that adapting one's communication depending on the person or group is important. Several leaders stress the notion of "reading the room" in order to sense what level of personal exchange a follower or other stakeholder would be receptive to. Catelyn explains that she is very open as a person and happily shares her personal sides in order to build closer relationships with her followers:

"I prefer getting to know my colleagues in private essentially because I think that helps me be a good manager."

However she also acknowledges that not everyone is keen to talk about their private lives, and in those cases she adapts to that, even though it's not what she would prefer. At the other end of the spectrum, Jamie perceives the kind of relationship building that Catelyn enjoys, as forced and ultimately a burden:

“In general I wish to avoid bonding efforts all together and just focus on building companies. But I also understand that it is expected and I try to be a bit accommodating in that regard.”

Thus, Jamie engages in these efforts even though he would prefer not to. Ygritte also highlights the importance of flexibility when it comes to how personal one should be, stating that there is no “one-size fits all”. She strongly believes that when it comes to interactions with other individuals the leader must always adapt to the specific situation, being the same person with everyone would, according to Ygritte, be “bananas”.

When reflecting on the topic of being personal versus professional, several leaders recount playing different roles in different circumstances. Robert is an example of a leader that seems to (perhaps unconsciously) play different roles depending on the context. When asked to elaborate on how personal one should be as a leader, Robert initiated his answer by saying: “So I’m gonna talk first ‘corporate side’ and then ‘personal side’”, indicating that there is a difference between the two. Jorah, along with Robert reflected upon his job self:

“I have a work personality, that’s for sure, and another one in private, I’ve realized that. You can’t fake who you are completely, I mean values and so on applies in both settings. But privately I’m much more laid back than I am at work and not as competitive.”

Evidently, Jorah perceives his work-personality to be a true representation of himself, yet something different from who he is privately. The leaders seem to regard it as obvious that they are someone else at work compared to other settings. Interestingly, even though the leaders agree that it is positive to be their “true” selves and to connect with followers on a personal level, some leaders express a concern that it may sometimes be damaging. Catelyn frets:

“I know a very charismatic leader, but if you start digging and get to know him, he is not a person whose opinions I would have wanted to come out in any organization.”

Catelyn thus insinuates that, while she believes being personal is something good in general, some leaders should avoid it. Additionally, throughout the interviews, the leaders describe situations in which they build relationships and connect with their followers in order to achieve favorable outcomes for the organization. Robert tells us that he loves getting to know new people, but being personal and open also seems to be done with the purpose strengthening the organization:

“...in my conversations with people I want to get to know who they are, but I also want to guide the discussion to sort of reinforce the ‘shared DNA’ element and try to connect it back to our mission. Because if I can make those connections, those people are gonna be here and they’re gonna love what they do and they’re gonna bring friends and talk about this as the best place to work.”

He acknowledges that his behavior in this instance serves an organizational purpose, but is also something he enjoys on a personal level: “It’s self serving in that respect, but it’s also that I love getting to know people and I’m curious”.

Throughout the interviews, some leaders also describe ways in which they change their behavior in relation to others for the good of the organization, even though it might feel uncomfortable. Jorah explains:

“I’m of the opinion that you have to adapt to the situation. You have to be a bit like a chameleon.” He continues: “Sometimes people want something that is not my natural thing, and then I have to give that to them.”

Thus, Jorah behaves in a way that might not be his “true” self, but which is expected by members of the organization. Ygritte describes similar thoughts:

“You are untrue to yourself because you have a higher purpose”. Ygritte reflects on her answer and adds: “Gosh, that sounds very unpleasant, a bit like a psycho-person.”

She thus shows how she occasionally restrains from acting in accordance to her true self for the organizational good. Jamie seems to agree reluctantly. As CEO of a venture capital firm, he is used to working long hours and accepts that he has to give up some other things in life. He tells us:

“... my view on things might clash with a new generation of talent [...] It’s hours and grinding that matters, and that perspective is missing. But then I’ve realized that maybe you’re not supposed to build companies the way I’ve done it... Maybe you can get to the same point with a better work-life balance and that might be a healthier mindset”.

Jamie is skeptical of the new generation’s attitude. However, he adapts his behavior to suit this generations’ needs and requirements, in order to reduce friction within the organization.

5.4.1.1 Analysis of Relations and Interactions

Relational transparency is one of the cornerstones of the AL construct, which involves the leader presenting their authentic self, and building trust by sharing true thoughts and feelings and displaying appropriate emotions (Walumbwa et al., 2008). However, our findings indicate that the leaders to a high extent adjust how much of their personal self they display in different situations. Rather than always presenting their true feelings and thoughts to their followers, they tweak their behavior in order to align with the followers’ expectations and needs. However, the leaders themselves do not consider this way of acting as being untrue to themselves; but simply a natural and seemingly uncontroversial part of the leader's everyday life.

Acting against one’s true thoughts and feelings in relation to others in the organization seems to sometimes be necessary for leaders. Jackall (1988) describes organizational relationships as being: “multiple, contingent, and in flux” and therefore “managerial moralities are always situational, always relative”. In line with what Jackall argues, our findings, too, indicate that there is a lack of fixedness in leaders’ behavior in relation to others. However the leaders still regard themselves to be their “true” selves, even though a “lack of fixedness” may be considered inauthentic in theory.

On a similar note, the leaders take on different roles at work and in personal settings, clearly distinguishing between their work and personal selves. In our findings, the leaders seem to do this in order to ease the challenge of having to balance between being personal and maintaining a professional distance to their followers. That the leaders align their behavior to the social expectations tied to their leadership role, is something that resonates with what Moeller and D'Ambrosio (2019) defines as “sincerity”. It seems like acting in sincere ways is the *modus operandi* for the leaders, while always being true to themselves is put aside in favor of pragmatism.

AL theory can almost give the impression that leaders should act authentically and morally correctly just for the sake of it. However, there are different purposes with being authentic, and it is not necessarily only done because being transparent and personal is a good thing. For example, leaders can leverage being transparent and personal with followers as a tactic to reach organizational goals. In previous literature, the phenomenon of “strategic” authenticity has been touched upon by e.g., Spoelstra (2018), who considered it a contradiction in terms, meaning that something cannot really be considered “authentic” if it’s done with a purpose. However, without any element of foresight or purpose, the usefulness of authentic leadership as a concept has to be questioned from a practical standpoint.

5.4.2 Leader Image

Throughout the interviews the leaders express being aware of their image and highlight the fact that what they choose to say and not say, is what creates the perception others have of them. Arya explains:

“Ultimately, the impression you create of yourself in others is the result of what you chose to tell and not to tell people.”

Thus Arya acknowledges that how a leader is perceived by others is a product of their own making and, at least to an extent, can be controlled. Apart from being mindful about what she chooses to share with others, Arya also describes how she dresses consciously according to what

image she wants to convey of herself in different situations. This awareness of one's image can also affect how the leaders' conduct themselves at work. Robert describes:

“I think a good leader is very self aware, not only when it comes to what you say, but also how you act. Because people often listen a little bit, but watch a lot. [...] You should always conduct yourself as if you were on the frontpage of the New York Times.”

Thus, Robert illustrates how his behavior is guided by thinking about the image he would convey if displayed on the New York Times frontpage. Several leaders also convey how important it can be to create a personal brand or leader-persona in certain circumstances. A “leader brand”, as Arya describes it, can manifest itself in different ways:

“Steve Jobs was very mindful about how he presented himself and always wore the same clothes, for example. That's part of *his* brand as well. I think you can choose whether you are a leader who represents the organization or if you represent yourself and your own brand as well.”

Here Arya implicitly says that you are always representing some kind of brand; either your own or the organization's. Jon is an example of a leader that uses his image to represent the organization. His company is still small and everyone knows each other, and Jon is convinced that “being himself” is the best way to create a strong company culture. His personal passion for the product and the mission is part of his persona, which he considers an important factor in attracting people to come work with him. For example, he has occasionally dressed up as a shark on company events, in order to enforce his image as a passionate and gritty start-up founder (the company is in the seafood industry). Yet, he struggles with balancing between his personal and professional self at activities such as afterworks:

“I'm not convinced about what direction is the best; to have fun and be yourself and partying with your employees, and then be back at work and deliver and get respect from that [delivering]... But somehow I know from previous experience as an employee that it

can be nice to have a space where you are allowed to be less professional, and that the relationship with the manager should remain very professional.”

This illustrates how Jon is aware of how his actions affect his image. He perceives that being himself and going out with his colleagues, while fun, might have a negative effect on his professional image.

While the leaders agree that creating a persona or image as a leader is often useful, several also emphasize that they do not wish to think too much about how they are perceived by others. Jon describes struggling with trying to live up to others' expectations but that he tries not to care about it too much:

“When I think too much about it, I try too hard to satisfy everyone else, and then I lose the direction of the leadership.”

Thinking too much about his image may thus be distracting. Jamie experiences similar difficulties. He has to consider how he presents himself to others, but he does so reluctantly, as he believes it diverts him from what he does best, building new companies.

5.4.2.1 Analysis of Leader Image

The leaders care about how others perceive them to a varying extent, but they all agree that they have an image of some sort, and that this image has to be managed. Being aware of one's image, and caring about, can pose a challenge for leaders to be their authentic selves. As Ibarra (2015) puts it: “How we present ourselves—not just as executives but as people, with quirks and broader interests— has become an important aspect of leadership. Having to carefully curate a persona that's out there for all to see can clash with our private sense of self.” Jon and Jamie are leaders illustrating that clash as they feel like they have to nurture an image of themselves as professional and respectable, but that also care about displaying their personal and more relaxed selves. Jon and Jamie express that focusing too much on trying to be one's true self as a leader causes a shift of focus from what the leader should do (lead), to who the leader is as a person. This dual mission can be difficult to balance. But at the end of the day, leadership is largely about

dealing with social norms and navigating complex situations, not just displaying one's "true self".

Additionally, we find that some leaders display behavior reminiscent of what Moeller and D'Ambrosio (2019) refer to as proficility. Robert, whose identity to a large extent is built around being an authentic leader, is an example of this. For him, it is of great importance that he is not only behaving in line with his own values and beliefs, but also that he is recognized by others as an authentic leader. Thus displaying what Moeller and D'Ambrosio's (2019), would define as a 'profilic' identity, where identity is viewed through a lens of second order observation. Robert demonstrates this, saying: "You should always conduct yourself as if it was on the frontpage of the New York Times' ". In this case it is his image, through the lens of second-order observation, that needs to be distinctly authentic, not only his behavior. Jon is another leader who is mindful about second order observation of his leadership, stating that how others perceive him will affect their inclination to follow him. Thus he will make sure to behave in ways that will strengthen the reasons for others to do so. For these leaders it is clear that the notion of second order observation will affect their leadership in practice. In this way, their leadership, authentic or not, is partly steered by external opinions and validation.

6. Conclusions

Our conclusions are organized to answer the research questions. Section 6.1 the first research question: “How do leaders experience authenticity in their daily organizational lives?”. Sections 6.2, 6.3, and 6.4, answer the second research question: “What key factors drive or limit the leader's perceived need and ability to be authentic?”. In section 6.5 we will share some outstanding thoughts and reflections that emerged through our research and that are not directly related to the research questions.

6.1 Leader Voices on Authenticity

In contrast to the ongoing polarized debate within the AL research field (Gardner et al., 2021), the leaders provide a complex and nuanced view of authenticity in their leader roles, allowing for coexistence of the ideas scholars deem to be stark contrasts. The leaders describe a reality in which they can behave both authentically and inauthentically in seemingly uncontroversial ways. In fact, contemplating whether they are authentic or not seems to play a marginal role in their everyday lives.

6.2 Intrapersonal

In AL theory, values are the most important source for guiding decision making (Avolio et al., 2003; Walumbwa et al., 2008). However, our findings indicate that experience seems to triumph values as a source of guidance in decision making. The influence that experience has on enabling decision making based on the leaders' own beliefs seems to be overlooked in previous literature.

Reliance on external sources for guiding behavior and decision making in challenging situations is predominant early in the leaders' careers. As leaders gain experience, they become more confident and instead rely increasingly on internal sources of guidance. However, too much reliance on internal sources of guidance may lead to overconfidence in one's abilities.

When considering how “true” they are to themselves, the leaders seem to distinguish between the short and long term perspective. In the short term, the leaders accept acting against their true selves in order to achieve something greater in the long run. They do not consider deviating from their personal beliefs in the short term as something that would make them less true to themselves. This temporal perspective is unexplored in previous AL literature.

6.3 Organization

Earlier literature within the AL research field pays limited attention to how organizational factors may influence leaders’ ability to be their true selves (Liu et al., 2017; Nyberg & Sveningsson, 2014). Our findings, however, suggest that the organizational size and hierarchical position seem to greatly affect the leaders perceived ability to be true to themselves. The larger the organization and the more towards the middle the leader is located in the hierarchy, the more challenging it seems to become for leaders to be their “true” selves.

Organizational values seem to affect leaders’ perceived need and ability to be their true selves. In organizations with strongly ingrained values, leaders adopt and enforce the values to a great extent, and may use them almost as a stand-in for personal values. They do so in a seemingly uncontroversial manner. Contrarily, in organizations where the values are less strongly rooted, the leaders are able to shape or recreate the organizational values according to their own beliefs to a greater extent.

For many leaders, achieving organizational objectives triumphs the leaders’ aspiration to be themselves. It does not mean that they cannot be themselves, but it is a secondary need. In addition, organizational bureaucracy facilitates leaders’ decision making in challenging situations, and allows leaders to decouple their “true” selves from the difficult situations. As organizational processes can instruct leaders on *what* to do, action based on personal values is out of scope and “authenticity” becomes a question of *how* to do things.

6.4 Interpersonal

Overall, the leaders seem to adjust how much of their personal self they display in different situations. As they constantly manage a balance between being personal and professional, they do not always seek to be relationally transparent. Behaving in ways that may go against the leaders' "true" selves seems to be a necessary and natural part of the leaders' everyday lives.

The leaders distinguish between their work and personal selves. Even at work they seem to take on different roles in different settings, aligning their behavior to the perceived role-based expectations, in line with Moeller and D'Ambrosio's writings on sincerity (2019). Thus, the leaders' perceived need and ability to be true to themselves seem to depend on the roles they take on in different situations.

The leaders' seems to consider image as something important. However, being aware of and caring about one's image can pose a challenge for leaders to be their true selves. Focusing too much on trying to be one's true self can cause a shift of focus from what the leader should do (lead), to who the leader is as a person. Lastly, second order observation is important for some of the leaders, and thus the extent to which the leaders perceive themselves as authentic is partly steered by external opinions and validation, in line with what Moeller and D'Ambrosio (2019) would call proficility.

6.5 Reflections

In AL theory, leaders develop authentic behaviors over time through a process of extensive internalized reflection in order to reach self awareness (Walumbwa et al., 2008). However, in our findings, it seems as though much of what the leaders are today is the accumulation of external influences. In the leaders' early careers, they "copy" other leaders' behavior to a great extent, until they have gained enough experience and confidence to turn inwards for guidance in making decisions. This makes one wonder: how much of that perceived "being oneself" is in fact only a myriad of external influences that have been internalized over time.

Confidence and turning inwards for guidance in challenging situations is an important part of AL (Walumbwa et al., 2008). Increased confidence might enable leaders to listen to their “true” selves to a higher extent, but is this really what is needed from a leader? Is there a risk of confidence leading to a rigidity of mind and reluctance to change? Like Ibarra (2015) puts forward: “When we look only within for answers, we inadvertently reinforce old ways of seeing the world and outdated views of ourselves”. We ask ourselves, like many before us, if a somewhat self-doubting leader is actually to prefer.

The leaders seem to accept being untrue to themselves in the short term to achieve something greater in the long term. However, what constitutes “the long term” is never defined. This spurs the question: when, if ever, does the long term take place, or is it merely an ideal? It seems like contemplating whether the leaders are true to themselves is mainly done in hindsight and with a certain degree of post rationalization. In the moment of making everyday decisions, notions of authenticity seem conspicuous by its absence.

In organizations with well ingrained values, the leaders seem to use them almost as a stand in for their personal ones. This can be beneficial in the sense that it makes life easier and work more effective, but perhaps there is a risk of decreased critical thinking in the long run. But at the end of the day, for whom does it matter if the leaders use their personal or the organizational values, if the outcome would be the same anyway?

We wish to question that Authentic Leadership is reserved for leaders with good values and appropriate emotions. We find that leaders being their “true” selves can also have negative consequences for the organizations, and what “good” values or motives are is highly subjective. Walumbwa et al. (2008) emphasize that only “appropriate” emotions are to be displayed - but doesn't this insinuate that they may be inauthentic? Perhaps, what is actually relevant is what a leader displays. Then, does it really matter whether that is a true authentic representation of the leader, if the outcome is positive?

Leaders highlighted situations in which they purposefully amplified parts of their “true” personality in order to fulfill a purpose, reminding of what Spoelstra (2018) calls “strategic”

authenticity, insinuating that it is in fact inauthentic. However, if a leader cannot use authenticity as a means to achieve something, what is the point of it? After all, leaders are primarily concerned with solving practical challenges and often have little to no use of merely theoretical ideas and ideals.

7. Concluding Discussion

The concluding discussion commences with outlining the contributions of this thesis (7.1). Next, the limitations and generalizability of the study is discussed (7.2). Lastly, suggestions for future research are presented (7.3).

7.1 Contributions

Firstly, the study makes an empirical contribution as there is a lack of qualitative research within the AL field, which today is dominated by questionnaire-based approaches (Alvesson & Einola, 2019). Thus, this study may contribute to a better balance between quantitative and qualitative research within authentic leadership research.

With this thesis we have contributed with a middle ground perspective to the ongoing debate within the AL research field. We contribute with a more nuanced perspective to a field that has been increasingly influential but also increasingly criticized in the past decade.

There is also limited empirical understanding for the contextual factors that influence the need and possibility for authentic leadership in practice, a topic covered in this study.

We also contribute by exploring the differences in the lived everyday experience of leaders in different types of management positions in the organizational hierarchy.

Another empirical contribution of this study is that we explored leaders' lived experience of authenticity in a mainly Scandinavian (Swedish) context. This allows for insights specific to the Scandinavian work related context, and opens up for comparisons to other regions.

Moreover, we contribute empirically with describing how experience and confidence enhance the leaders propensity to behave authentically.

The thesis also contributes empirically by adding a temporal perspective, the distinction between short and long term, that leaders consider in relation to authentic leadership. This has not been explored in previous research.

Walumbwa et al. (2008) name *balanced processing* and an *internalized moral perspective* as two key components constituting authentic leadership. However, this study indicates that the way leaders engage in balanced processing and applying an internalized moral perspective are at odds with one another, making success in the pursuit of scoring high on both parameters unlikely.

An additional contribution is that our findings indicate that bureaucracy, as discussed by Jackall (1988), has a great impact on the leaders' perceived need and ability to act in accordance to their "true" selves. Suggesting that organizational dynamics such as bureaucracy, should be considered within the AL construct to a higher extent.

With this study we also contribute by challenging the notion of authenticity in leadership as something internally located. On the contrary, our findings indicate that leaders largely perceive authenticity to be shaped in symbiosis with external perceptions and expectations, reminding of prolificity as described by Moeller and D'Ambrosio (2019).

7.2 Limitations and Generalizability

We applied an explorative qualitative method and our main focus has been to study individual leaders' lived experiences and reflections. Our empirical and theoretical contributions are hypothetical and not intended to represent any hard truths applicable to all leadership situations, but rather to reveal new insightful pathways worthy of exploring further in future research.

Moreover, the leaders studied are active in a Scandinavian context; thus there may also be cultural factors limiting the generalizability of the study to other geographies.

Lastly, the majority of leaders studied in this thesis have leader positions high up in the organizational hierarchy. How the results would compare for leaders further down in the organizational hierarchy remains uncertain.

7.3 Suggestions for future research

A first suggestion for future research is to carry out studies similar to ours in other geographies, to reveal if there are culture-specific patterns to be found.

We would also suggest qualitative studies that focus on exploring how leaders experience authenticity in larger or smaller organizations respectively, to find if the tendencies of differences depending on organizational size we found in our study hold true. Furthermore, qualitative studies exploring how leaders experience authenticity depending on their respective hierarchical position is suggested.

Lastly, it would be interesting to explore how leaders experience being authentic in organizations in industries where leaders are more exposed to ethical dilemmas, and where the outcomes of leaders' decisions may be morally or ethically questionable.

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9. Appendices

Appendix 1. The Authentic Leadership Self-Assessment Questionnaire

Authentic Leadership Self- Assessment Questionnaire

1: I can list my three greatest weaknesses	1	2	3	4	5
2: My actions reflect my core values	1	2	3	4	5
3: I seek others opinions before making up my own mind	1	2	3	4	5
4: I openly share my feelings with others	1	2	3	4	5
5: I can list my three greatest strengths	1	2	3	4	5
6: I do not allow group pressure to control me	1	2	3	4	5
7: I listen closely to the ideas of those who disagree with me	1	2	3	4	5
8: I let others know who I truly am as a person	1	2	3	4	5
9: I seek feedback as a way of understanding who I really am as a person	1	2	3	4	5
10: Other people know where I stand on controversial issues	1	2	3	4	5
11: I do not emphasize my own point of view at the expense of others	1	2	3	4	5
12: I rarely present a false front to others	1	2	3	4	5
13: I accept the feelings I have about myself	1	2	3	4	5
14: My moral guide what I do as a leader	1	2	3	4	5
15: I listen very carefully to the ideas of others before making decisions	1	2	3	4	5
16: I admit my mistakes to others	1	2	3	4	5

The Authentic Leadership Questionnaire, ALQ, by Walumbwa et al., 2008.

Appendix 2. Example of Pre-Interview Warm-up Questions

1. What does leadership mean to you, and what constitutes a good leader?
2. How would you describe yourself as a leader?
3. Before the interview, if you have time, please think about a situation or situations in general when you experience challenges in your role as a leader.

Appendix 3. Main Interview Questions

1. We will read a statement to you: as a leader, you have certain expectations on you regarding how to behave. Would you agree with this statement?

- a. Why?
 - b. From what different types of stakeholders do these expectations come?
2. Would you say you have tried on different leadership styles throughout your career? E.g. in a new role or unfamiliar situation, or in “selling your ideas” to subordinates?
 - a. Why? Why not?
 - b. How did this manifest itself - explain with a short example.
 - c. Have you ever felt uncomfortable in a leadership style? Why? Why not?
 - d. How would you describe the leadership style you have today? Reflect upon it - why do you stick with it?
 - e. Do you often reflect upon how you are being perceived by others? Why/why not? Are there benefits to doing one over the other?
3. Have you ever received negative feedback regarding/someone wanting you to change your leadership style?
 - a. Why?
 - b. How did you respond to this?
4. Do you often share personal experiences, thoughts or ideas at your workplace?
 - a. Why? Why not?
 - b. Can you describe a time when you shared something personal with your employees?
5. Are there or have there been instances when you withheld personal opinions, experiences or information to your employees or team members?
 - a. Why? Why not?
 - b. Can you give an example?
 - c. What would you never talk about at work/never share with your followers?
6. It is common to talk about *values* in organizations. Can you tell us about a situation when you have experienced a clash between your own values and what was necessary in your role as a leader?
 - a. Do you have any examples of this from your own career when you felt you were *not* true to yourself?
 - b. Have you experienced a situation in which an employee’s expression of values has been inappropriate/caused tensions?
7. Would you say that your experience in leadership roles has in any way affected your values or beliefs? How has this affected you as a leader?
 - a. Why have you changed your values?
 - b. Is it ok to tell a white lie?
8. Do you think it has become more important to “be (true to) yourself” for leaders?
 - a. Why/why not?
 - b. Do you find this change positive or negative?

Appendix 4. Overview of Interviewees

No.	Gender	Alias	Industry	Role	Location	Interview type	Interview length	Interview date
1	F	Arya	Music	President	Stockholm, Sweden	Face-to-face	1h 02 minutes	24/08/22
2	M	Robert	Life Science	CEO	London, UK	Microsoft Teams	1h 07 minutes	25/08/22
3	M	Jon	Food	CEO	Stockholm, Sweden	Face-to-face	55 minutes	25/08/22
4	M	Ramsay	Tutoring	CEO	Stockholm, Sweden	Microsoft Teams	1h 31 minutes	29/08/22
5	F	Ygritte	Consumer goods	Head of Digital Transformation	Stockholm, Sweden	Face-to-face	1h 04 minutes	30/08/22
6	F	Catelyn	Industrial equipment	Head of Marketing & Portfolio	Lund, Sweden	Microsoft Teams	58 minutes	31/08/22
7	M	Jorah	Education	President Digital Learning	London, UK	Microsoft Teams	56 minutes	31/08/22
8	M	Jamie	Venture Capital	CEO	Stockholm, Sweden	Microsoft Teams	1h 12 minutes	01/09/22