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The high impact leader:

moments matter in accelerating authentic leadership development

Bruce J. Avolio and Fred Luthans. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 2006

262 pages, hard cover.

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Why another book on leadership? This question is rightly asked by Bruce Avolio and Fred Luthans in the opening chapters of *The high impact leader*. Implicit in this question is the sceptical challenge from the time-pressured entrepreneurial leader: "Why should I dedicate my valuable time to reading another book on leadership and not spend my time on something else with perhaps a higher return on the time invested?" Well, the authors justify this specific book on the premise that this is a valid question, and with the hypothesis that many leadership development programmes fall short of delivering the intended developmental results. They argue that this situation can be corrected if we as leaders learn more from our life experiences and work with our authentic selves. In other words, shifting the attention away from what typically occurs in formal leadership development programmes to lifelong learning from all moments and events that could possibly impact on one's personal and professional growth facilitates the development of authentic leadership.

This pragmatic approach followed in *The high impact leader* should resonate well with the entrepreneurial leader who is often less interested in formal leadership qualifications than in obtaining practical tools to use as a leader. Moreover, the entrepreneurial leader has often gained much personal, life and professional experience to capitalise on in order to grow and develop further as a leader. The intention of this book is to guide leaders practically through an effective and insightful journey of accelerated development as an authentic leader. The authors answer the opening question with the positive impacts of entrepreneurs as authentic leaders on work performance, employee satisfaction, happiness and commitment (Jensen & Luthans, 2006b; Peterson & Luthans, 2003); one could rather question whether any entrepreneurial leader can afford *not* to read a book that addresses these issues in such a pragmatic way.

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It is good to see that the well-known authors and leadership scholars, Bruce Avolio and Fred Luthans, do not preach the concept of authentic leadership in *The high impact leader*, but rather explain the concept and provide readers with some practical tips on how to build and develop their own skills as authentic leaders. The book will appeal to a wide audience of entrepreneurial leaders who are looking for a no-nonsense book on one of the current "hot" topics in leadership, namely "authentic leadership", made popular by Bill George (2003). The discussions in the book are based on the wide experience gained in leadership consulting work and leadership research by the two authors and their interaction with leaders, and also on the data gained from worldwide research on leadership by the Gallup Leadership Institute.

The authors have provided a practical framework to help readers to understand and develop their own authentic leadership. They provide a broad range of exercises at the end of every chapter, including tips and suggestions on how to develop one's own authentic leadership skills. These include crucial questions for reflection on one's own personal and leadership life journey. Fortunately, the authors stop short of giving recipe-like prescriptions on what to do, and *The high impact leader* is not degraded to the level of another superficial self-help, how-to book like those already cluttering many bookshelves.

Another contribution to this practical framework is the fact the book is packed with anecdotes and real-life stories about several political and business leaders. These stories make for interesting reading and make the context of authentic leadership and how to build one's own leadership authenticity interesting, relevant and practical. This is specifically helpful to the entrepreneurial leader, as the authors tell anecdotes and stories not only about leaders from huge corporations, but also about those from smaller organisations. Though some of these leaders and their companies may not be that well known to the South African audience, this is preferable to being bombarded by more stories about Jack Welch or Bill Gates, as if they are the only leaders of note. Reading about what other leaders did in certain circumstances or what approaches they took may make it easier for the reader to transpose the story to his or her own circumstances and to reflect on how to deal authentically with such situations. Although the book is based on much research, this approach makes it less "academic" in its feel and accessible to leaders from virtually all business backgrounds.

So what does the book offer? The discussion on Authentic Leadership Development (ALD) commences with a discussion of how significant life and leadership events or situations

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("moments that matter") influence leaders and authentic leadership. Avolio and Luthans propose that by learning from our life journeys, acting authentically during moments that matter, being aware of and "building-out" our authentic selves, each of us can build our authenticity as a leader, and they claim that this should also lead to better bottom-line results in business. They argue that significant moments that come into our paths during life trigger the potential within us. As the title indicates, "moments that matter" is a theme running throughout the book. The way we act, react, respond to or deal with these moments brings the future into the present and can as such be life-changing.

Interesting research data by the Gallup Leadership Institute, obtained from the Gallup Poll on Authentic Leadership, create a solid foundation for most of the discussions. It is of particular interest to the entrepreneurial leader of a smaller organisation to note that the research data from the US population indicates that employees in smaller organisations (of less than 100 employees) were more likely to rate their leaders as displaying authentic leadership. Perhaps it is the personal closeness to their leader in smaller organisations that creates this experience? At any rate, this is a point in favour of leaders in smaller organisations and is an aspect that the entrepreneurial leader should not lose sight of.

A helpful and nifty bonus to the practicality of the book is the supporting web site, www.e-leading.com, onto which the authors provide access to the reader through a PIN code. Through the website the reader gains access to three relevant psychological instruments to develop authentic leadership: "The Authentic Leadership Survey", "Your own psychological capital assessment", and "A mapping of your social networks and relationships". All instruments are easy to access, easy to complete, and provide practical insight into one's own style and authenticity. The web site also compares one's own score with an international norm (the average score from all participants that completed the questionnaires from all over the world). The authentic leadership survey and social networks analysis is to be forwarded to colleagues or subordinates to complete in order to obtain a more objective and thus accurate assessment.

I found the open and honest reflection on the effectiveness of the last 100 years of leadership interventions, development and research particularly refreshing. It was encouraging to read that the authors challenge the impact and outcome of most existing leadership development programmes. Many of us have the same doubts and sometimes privately question the effectiveness of such programmes, yet they are not often questioned openly; especially not by

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esteemed Business School professors who make their living from them. Avolio and Luthans conclude that although leadership development programmes are not always all they are claimed to be, and may fall short of delivering the intended developmental results, yet research still confirms that leadership interventions can work. This is especially true if such programmes can be augmented by incorporating learning from all possible moments and experiences that could possibly impact on one's personal and professional growth.

ALD is then introduced as consisting of four basic core components: self-awareness, self-regulation, self-development and "a new level of ALD" (although it is not clear at this point what this component means). Self-awareness as a component of authenticity makes intuitive sense, but in addition the authors clearly illustrate the importance of self-awareness (past, present and future) to leadership and authenticity development. They also demonstrate the importance of self-efficacy (the confidence in one's mind that one will be successful in taking on a particular challenge) to success – research data indicate that self-efficacy improves work-related performance by a mind-boggling 28 percent.

In the extensive discussion on the links between one's authentic self and possible self, and how movement occurs from one to the other, the authors contend that there is no such thing as a single self. They argue that we can and should develop a vision of a future self so that we are ready to act with self-discipline to realise it when the right moment that matters arrives. The difficult question of when to change or when not to change is then addressed. The authors suggest that by crafting a new leadership and life story or narrative, and living it, as planned or unplanned moments that matter arise, our future self can become our authentic self if we consistently work on it with discipline. By having a narrative of one's life story, self-regulation can provide the discipline and compass to tilt the delicate balance for a leader to change (when necessary for growth or development) or not to change (when the change is not congruent with one's authenticity or life story) in the correct direction.

Two other valuable chapters address the construct of Psychological Capital (PsyCap), and how leaders and followers can go about developing and enhancing the value of their PsyCap. The main components of PsyCap are hope (to have a will and a way), optimism (a positive sense of what can be accomplished), and resilience (the ability to bounce back). PsyCap also has specific relevance for entrepreneurs as authentic leaders. Relationships have been found between the PsyCap and self-perceptions of authentic leadership in business founders of

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relatively new and small organisations (Jensen & Luthans, 2006b). Again, self-awareness and self-efficacy are critical aspects for understanding and building-out one's own level of PsyCap. The authors suggest the Pygmalion effect (self-fulfilling prophecy) as specifically helpful to building PsyCap in others. Showing confidence in others raises their hope and self-efficacy and thus leads to raised expectations and attainment of success.

The next chapter covers what constitutes sustainable and veritable leadership performance in a changing world. This is a more general discussion on leadership effectiveness and developing effectiveness as a leader. The example of Warren Buffet as an authentic leader and ALD is a useful way to conclude the "instructional" part of the book. Finally, the chapter entitled "Sounds like a plan for your ALD" provides a more specific suggested structure for developing one's own ALD plan. Stimulating questions, several guidelines and suggestions, and a checklist to check the plan makes this a practical end to a worthwhile book.

Of course, *The high impact leader* is not without faults. The first problem is encountered in the title of the book, where the authors equate high-impact leadership with authentic leadership. Although the authors explain why they regard authentic leadership as having a high impact, this is confusing, as several other definitions or views exist on what high-impact leadership means (e.g. Traversi, 2007:14; Harkins, 2006:3).

There is not a visible enough clear structure and storyline, and this detracts somewhat from the clarity of the message and its applications. Interesting and important concepts and constructs are presented and discussed early in the book, but without a clear flow of the thinking or argument. It is only on page 35 that the authors define what they mean by the term "authentic leaders." Even then they only state the particular definition for authentic leadership used in a Gallup poll and the reader has to infer that this is also the definition of authentic leadership that is used in the book. What, then, *is* the definition of an authentic leader in the book? It is only on page 64 that the authors get to discuss the basic components of Authentic Leadership Development (ALD). They posit that ALD rests on the core components of 1) self-awareness, 2) self-regulation, 3) self-development, and 4) "a new level of ALD." Not only is it unclear why they chose these four constructs as the core components and how they are linked to the definition of authentic leadership, but what is meant by the fourth component is confusing. These four components are not used consistently as the overarching structure for the discussions on ALD, which contributes to the somewhat confusing structure of the book.

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Throughout the book the authors posit that "moments that matter" are crucial to authentic leadership and the development thereof, so surely this concept should be one of the core components? The lack of a clear structure, storyline and clear definitions may partly block the message to the reader who is not familiar with the concept of authentic leadership.

Perhaps one reason for the lack of clarity and structure is to be found in the emphasis on anecdotes and exemplary stories. As Rosenzweig (2007) notes, we must be cautious of anecdotal storytelling that masquerades as science. Although Avolio and Luthans themselves caution against relying on opinion and anecdotal evidence (page 48), they border on relying too much on stories and anecdotes themselves. Although these provide interesting reading and help the non-academic reader to gain a practical understanding of the constructs being discussed, they detract from a clear storyline, what is being discussed and why. This is especially true as the context or rationale for including some of the stories in the text is not obvious, while other stories appear to be out of place. For instance, the story of the police chief (page102) is interesting and an example of some technical insight. But can it really be used as an example to demonstrate the concept of the future self?

I found the distinction between authentic self and possible self somewhat problematic. To consider my "possible self" to be on a higher order of existence than my "authentic self" surely denies the notion of authenticity? Authenticity includes developing my potential and thus living to my full potential, while I am true to who I am at all times. This includes growth and development and becoming a better human being through learning from my mistakes and my successes, while I live my life consistently with integrity and according to a clear set of values. This means I become a better self by not focusing on it, but by being more authentic where I am.

Authenticity in essence means "not counterfeit or copied" and "worthy of belief". This means I cannot copy my leadership actions or leadership style from others, or even base it on what worked for others. My leadership style must be aligned with who I am, not who I want to be, and presented as such as worthy of belief and worthy of following in my particular context. As Goffee and Jones (2005: 90) note: "if a leader is playing a role that isn't a true expression of his authentic self, followers will sooner or later feel like they've been tricked". Some of the real depth of authenticity is lost in all the anecdotes of important and well-known leaders. They create the impression that I can copy from these great leaders how they dealt with difficult

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situations, especially in becoming my possible self. Not enough emphasis is put, or light shed, on how to fathom my own authenticity, how to be true to it, build-out this particular aspect of myself, or how to be authentic in my context. Perhaps this omission is understandable; as it is difficult to go deeply into as personal a concept as authenticity, and to demonstrate to the reader how to develop it, without destroying authenticity by providing examples of what others did or a recipe on how to do it. After all, real authenticity cannot be copied; what is authentic to you might not be authentic to me!

The huge amount of data provided on leadership research are very interesting, mostly useful and add to the theoretical soundness of the book. But some research data appear to be more about general leadership effectiveness than about developing one's own level of authentic leadership. For instance the data from research provided on pages 38 and 39 have little to do with the authors' definition of authentic leadership, and are not clearly linked to ALD. These data focus on diversity and gender issues, how leaders pick new employees, and whether leaders make people to feel that they contribute to the organisation. These are very important issues to address, but how are they linked to transparency, self-awareness or self-regulation? As such, most of Chapter 9 is biased towards leadership performance in just about any aspect of leadership, with too little emphasis or clarity on the role of authenticity of ALD in these aspects. This is confusing and may take the reader out of the deeper reflection mode about his or her authenticity as a leader into a consideration of more general leadership actions and traits.

Lastly, although the importance of values is discussed briefly in Chapter 9, and they are implicit in many of the discussions, for instance those on the authenticity and integrity of Warren Buffet, I would have expected more focus on values. Values are normative standards by which we judge and choose between alternative modes of behaviour, those principles that we regard as conducive to our welfare (Elizur, 1984). Values lay the foundation for motivations and attitudes, influence perceptions, weigh up the degree of importance of certain behaviour in a life area. The role of values, personal and organisational, is thus fundamental to authentic leadership and authentic leadership development.

Nevertheless, *The high impact leader* by Bruce Avolio and Fred Luthans is an enjoyable read and a worthwhile source of information for enhancing one's development journey as a leader. It is packed with enough practical examples and triggers for the entrepreneurial reader to stimulate thinking on leadership and authenticity, supported by practical ideas to build-out this

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aspect of one's leadership profile. It should find wide acceptance with business readers as well as academics. This is good news for the entrepreneurial leader who looks for an easy read, but one with enough solid meat to make a real difference.

In conclusion, Bruce Avolio and Fred Luthans succeed to a large extent in their intention to effectively guide leaders through an accelerated journey towards authentic leadership development. But as with most books or sources, the real value lies not in the reading, but in its application. The leader-reader who is not interested in recreational reading only, but who works diligently through the book, answering the questions, completing the exercises (including the instruments on the web site) will gain the most from the book. Such a leader should get much assistance in his or her development as a leader.

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