

POTENTIAL PHD RESEARCH TOPIC

The next evolution of authentic leadership.

Supervisory Team

Principal Supervisor: [Dr Andrei Lux](#)

Abstract

Authentic leadership understanding has evolved considerably in recent years with a new definition based on signalling theory. Significant avenues for new research arise from this latest development. Reframing authentic leadership as dynamic and context-sensitive signalling behaviour enables new insights into how leaders navigate competing demands and how authentic leadership is signalled, constructed, and experienced. Projects may investigate authentic leadership signalling as discrete behaviour across identities, role demands, digital contexts, and with diverse cohorts, as well as the associated cognitive, emotional, and social costs. Research proposals are invited that engage with and meaningfully extend this view. Qualitative or experimental research designs will be preferred.

Further Details

Authentic leadership is a dominant approach to contemporary business leadership (Lux, 2024), and its beneficial outcomes are supported across a proliferation of research (for a meta-analysis, see Zhang et al., 2022). Academic interest in authentic leadership is in a state of rapid growth (Gardner et al., 2020) and fuelled by robust theoretical debate (e.g., Gardner et al., 2021). In response to prior critiques, a more nuanced and dynamic conceptualisation of authentic leadership is emerging; see the 20-year review Special Issue in the *Journal of Management & Organization* (Lux & Lowe, 2024).

Lux and Lowe (2024) redefined authentic leadership as “concordant, values-based leader signalling of self-awareness, internalised moral perspective, balanced processing, and relational transparency (p. 1636). Four dimensions thus comprise authentic leadership (Gardner et al., 2024). Self-awareness involves understanding leaders’ own strengths, weaknesses, and values, and behaving accordingly. An internalised moral perspective means making decisions based on personal values rather than norms, expectations, or external pressures. Balanced processing is about objectively analysing information, acknowledging limitations, and considering different perspectives when making decisions. And relational transparency is about being open and honest in interactions.

Signalling theory explains how individuals convey information about themselves to others through observable phenomena (Connelly et al., 2025). In a leadership context, signalling is the process of sending signals to leadership stakeholders, such as followers, peers, other leaders, and onlookers. Signals include everything about leaders that can be perceived and provide a basis for followers to infer ideas about the leaders and their leadership. Signalling thereby captures ‘what’ authentic leaders do (Fischer et al., 2023). The four dimensions broadly endorsed in the literature (Gardner et al., 2024) specify what kinds of signals authentic leaders send (or emanate).

Authentic leadership signals are ‘values-based’, meaning that they reflect the leaders’ true principles and ethical convictions, and ‘concordant’ to indicate a deep alignment between what leaders believe and what they signal, which enables a more dynamic interpretation of what that means over time, across contexts, and in sensitivity to others’ needs (Lux & Lowe, 2024).

This new definition acknowledges the situational complexities that leaders face while maintaining the core principles of authentic leadership. It embeds authentic leadership as a dynamic process of value-signalling behaviour, which can adapt to context without compromising leaders’ integrity. In practice, leaders must be conscious of how their signals are perceived by diverse audience cohorts to ensure that their value-driven actions resonate accordingly. Authentic leadership thereby offers practitioners a more realistic and effective framework for managing real-world leadership demands.

The following sections introduce six significant avenues for new research that arise from these latest developments.

Signalling behaviour

Leader behaviour refers to observable actions or inactions made in response to internal or external stimuli. These behaviours include decisions, communications, and reactions that followers and others can perceive. In leadership studies, researchers often use perceptions or evaluations of leader behaviour rather than the behaviour itself (Banks et al., 2023; Fischer & Sitkin, 2023). This limits understanding of what leaders actually do to signal leadership. Each authentic leadership dimension can be signalled through constellations of specific, observable behaviour (Fischer, 2023). Research is needed to develop a taxonomy of discrete behaviours (cf. Eva et al., 2024) that convey authentic leadership signals, by theorising what actions represent each dimension and testing their effects. Sense-making interpretations will vary between followers and across contexts, which creates further complexity. Understanding the discrete behaviours that can signal authentic leadership is essential to support ongoing construct development.

Research Question: How do leaders signal the authentic leadership dimensions through discrete behaviours?

A costly signal

Credible signals are costly to produce and difficult to emulate (Connelly et al., 2025). Signalling authentic leadership imposes cognitive, emotional, and social costs (cf. Akstinaite et al., 2024). Leaders must reflect on their personal values, reveal limitations, and remain open to dissent. Such behaviours require emotional control, moral clarity, and consistency across time and context. Signalling self-awareness, an internalised moral perspective, balanced processing, and relational transparency exposes leaders to challenge as they face scrutiny from followers, peers, and superiors. Leaders take risks when they speak honestly, adjust decisions in response to feedback, or express uncertainty. These actions can incur reputational costs in competitive or hierarchical environments. Authentic leadership signalling therefore demands cognitive acuity, emotional stability, humility, and a willingness to be vulnerable. It is important therefore to theorise and test when, why, and to what extent authentic leadership signals incur costs. Studying these costs can advance understanding of how authentic leadership signals influence followership and organisational outcomes.

Research Question: How do leaders experience and manage the costs of authentic leadership signalling?

Dynamic authenticity

A dynamic model of authentic leadership signalling depicts a process shaped by self-regulation and cognitive control (Bunjak et al., 2024). Rather than assuming a single, fixed self, this view recognises that leaders draw from multiple identities that shift across contexts (Nieberle et al., 2024). Leaders regulate their behaviour by activating individual, relational, or collective identities, depending on situational demands (Dietl & Reb, 2021). This process involves managing tensions between personal values, expectations from others, and social norms. Leaders may signal authentic leadership differently based on which identity is active. Signals grounded in personal values reflect individual identity, while signals shaped by relationships or group membership reflect relational or collective identities. Self-regulation strategies such as concentration or suppression influence how these signals are expressed. Research is needed to examine how identity activation shapes authentic leadership signals across time and situations. Questions remain about how leaders manage identity conflicts, how signals vary between their identities, and how audiences interpret those signals within different cultural and organisational settings.

Research Question: How do leaders experience and regulate authentic leadership signalling across shifting identities?

Bounded authenticity

Authentic leadership signalling involves balancing genuine self-expression with the expectations and constraints of formal leadership roles (Kark & Cohen, 2024). Leaders often face conflicting demands between who they are and what their role requires them to be (Kark et al., 2022). Leadership roles come with social norms and scripts that can limit the ways leaders express authenticity. Leaders must decide when to prioritise personal convictions and when to align with institutional demands. This tension influences how authentic leadership is signalled. Followers may perceive deviations from role expectations as more authentic, yet these actions can also affect leaders' perceived competence or authority (Cha et al., 2019). Research is needed to examine how leaders adjust authentic signalling based on the structure and flexibility of their roles, as well as how role expectations interact with identity, power, and follower perceptions. Investigating these avenues will be critical for understanding the role-boundaries of authentic leadership signalling in practice.

Research Question: How do leaders navigate the tension between role expectations and authentic leadership signalling?

Digital environments

Digital platforms, such as video conferencing, instant messaging, and collaboration software now mediate the majority of leadership interactions in many organisations, raising critical questions about how authentic leadership is signalled through these channels. In face-to-face settings, leaders can draw upon a rich repertoire of verbal and non-verbal cues to convey their authenticity through tone, body language, eye contact, and spontaneous interactions. However, the move to digital communication often strips away many of these cues, limiting leaders' ability to send the same depth of signals. As the boundaries between work and personal life continue to blur, understanding

how to send and sustain authentic leadership signals in the remote work era becomes increasingly important.

Research Question: How do leaders adapt authentic leadership signalling to virtual environments using digital communication tools?

Diverse cohorts

Modern workforces comprise a broad spectrum of age, culture, gender, and other demographic factors. Cohorts of employees may experience discrete leadership behaviour and signals differently (see Lord et al., 2020). Leaders must navigate a multiplicity of cultural values, expectations, and interpretations. This diversity demands a more nuanced approach to authentic leadership signalling, with leaders attuned to the different ways that varied audiences receive their signals. Leaders must also be aware of how their own identity and background intersect with their followers, shaping the authenticity they convey. In increasingly multicultural and multigenerational workforces, the ability to align personal values with a wide range of follower expectations is critical.

Research Question: How do leaders adapt authentic leadership signalling to account for diverse interpretations across follower cohorts?

Research Questions

The research questions outlined above are intended to be indicative, rather than an exhaustive list, and many other relevant questions can be construed in this line of inquiry. Proposals are invited that engage with the evolving view of authentic leadership as signalling behaviour and target pertinent opportunities for further development that meaningfully advance these arguments.

Methods

The present research topic lends itself to exploratory qualitative approaches (e.g., interviews, diaries, and thematic analyses) and quantitative approaches that look to test specific hypotheses (e.g., experiments, statistical analyses), depending on the nature of the final research questions.

Quantitative proposals are encouraged to pursue robust experimental methods (Lonati et al., 2018) that can make reliable causal claims (Antonakis et al., 2010), including sequential experiments that model causal chains (Dadich et al., 2024), and field experiments (Eden, 2017).

Following emerging research method developments (Ratten et al., 2025), qualitative (Pratt, 2025) or experimental (Amari et al., 2024) research designs will be preferred. Proposals that rely exclusively on survey research designs will not be considered (Fischer et al., 2023).

The following articles provide a backdrop of the relevant literature. Successful proposals will demonstrate a grasp of the literature cited here.

References

Akstinaite, V., Jensen, U. T., Vlachos, M., Erne, A., & Antonakis, J. (2024). Charisma is a costly signal. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 35(6), 101810. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2024.101810>

- Amari, P., Banks, G., Bourque, L., Holladay, H., & O'Boyle, E. (2024). Effect size benchmarks: Time for a causal renaissance. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 36(1), 101855. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2024.101855>
- Antonakis, J., Bendahan, S., Jacquart, P., & Lalive, R. (2010). On making causal claims: A review and recommendations. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 21(6), 1086-1120. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2010.10.010>
- Banks, G. C., Woznyj, H. M., & Mansfield, C. A. (2023). Where is “behavior” in organizational behavior? A call for a revolution in leadership research and beyond. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 34(6), 101581. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2021.101581>
- Bunjak, A., Lord, R. G., & Acton, B. P. (2024). Rethinking authentic leadership: An alternative approach based on dynamic processes of active identity, self-regulation, and ironic processes of mental control. *Journal of Management & Organization*, 30(6), 1669-1698. <https://doi.org/10.1017/jmo.2024.69>
- Cha, S. E., Hewlin, P. F., Roberts, L. M., Buckman, B. R., Leroy, H., Steckler, E. L., Ostermeier, K., & Cooper, D. (2019). Being your true self at work: Integrating the fragmented research on authenticity in organizations. *Academy of Management Annals*, 13(2), 633-671. <https://doi.org/10.5465/annals.2016.0108>
- Connelly, B. L., Certo, S. T., Reutzel, C. R., DesJardine, M. R., & Zhou, Y. S. (2025). Signaling theory: State of the theory and its future. *Journal of Management*, 51(1), 24-61. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01492063241268459>
- Dadich, A., Abbott, L., Lux, A. A., & Lowe, K. B. (2024). The use of experimental designs to examine causality in authentic leadership: A scoping review. *Journal of Management & Organization*, 30(6), 1728-1747. <https://doi.org/10.1017/jmo.2024.48>
- Dietl, E., & Reb, J. (2021). A self-regulation model of leader authenticity based on mindful self-regulated attention and political skill. *Human Relations*, 74(4), 473-501. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726719888260>
- Eden, D. (2017). Field experiments in organizations. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, 4, 91-122. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-041015-062400>
- Eva, N., Howard, J. L., Liden, R. C., Morin, A. J. S., & Schwarz, G. (2024). An inconvenient truth: A comprehensive examination of the added value (or lack thereof) of leadership measures. *Journal of Management Studies*, 1-46. <https://doi.org/10.1111/joms.13156>
- Fischer, T. (2023). Measuring behaviors counterfactually. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 34(6), 101750. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2023.101750>
- Fischer, T., Hambrick, D. C., Sajons, G. B., & Van Quaquebeke, N. (2023). Leadership science beyond questionnaires. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 34(6), 101752. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2023.101752>
- Fischer, T., & Sitkin, S. B. (2023). Leadership styles: A comprehensive assessment and way forward. *Academy of Management Annals*, 17(1), 331-372. <https://doi.org/10.5465/annals.2020.0340>

- Gardner, W. L., Karam, E. P., Alvesson, M., & Einola, K. (2021). Authentic leadership theory: The case for and against. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 32(6), 101495. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2021.101495>
- Gardner, W. L., Karam, E. P., Noghani, F., Coglisier, C. C., Gullifor, D. P., Mhatre, K., Ge, S., Bi, R., Yan, Z., & Dahunsi, D. (2024). 'Let's get real' ... when we lead: A systematic review, critical assessment, and agenda for authentic leadership theory and research. *Journal of Management & Organization*, 30(6), 1642-1668. <https://doi.org/10.1017/jmo.2024.68>
- Gardner, W. L., Lowe, K. B., Meuser, J. D., Noghani, F., Gullifor, D. P., & Coglisier, C. C. (2020). The leadership trilogy: A review of the third decade of *The Leadership Quarterly*. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 31(1), 101379. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2019.101379>
- Kark, R., & Cohen, B. S. (2024). The Crown must always win: Rethinking authentic leadership through 'The Crown' series. *Journal of Management & Organization*, 30(6), 1699-1727. <https://doi.org/10.1017/jmo.2024.70>
- Kark, R., Meister, A., & Peters, K. (2022). Now you see me, now you don't: A conceptual model of the antecedents and consequences of leader impostorism. *Journal of Management*, 48(7), 1948-1979. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01492063211020358>
- Lonati, S., Quiroga, B. F., Zehnder, C., & Antonakis, J. (2018). On doing relevant and rigorous experiments: Review and recommendations. *Journal of Operations Management*, 64, 19-40. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jom.2018.10.003>
- Lord, R. G., Epitropaki, O., Foti, R. J., & Hansbrough, T. K. (2020). Implicit leadership theories, implicit followership theories, and dynamic processing of leadership information. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, 7, 49-74. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-012119-045434>
- Lux, A. A. (2024). *Leadership: A reflective and student focused approach*. Sage Publications.
- Lux, A. A., & Lowe, K. B. (2024). Authentic leadership: 20-Year review editorial. *Journal of Management & Organization*, 30(6), 1634-1641. <https://doi.org/10.1017/jmo.2024.59>
- Nieberle, K. W., Acton, B. P., Braun, S., Lord, R. G., & Fu, Y. (2024). Leader identity on the fly: Intra-personal leader identity dynamics in response to strong events. *Journal of Business and Psychology*, 39(3), 755-778. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10869-023-09906-7>
- Pratt, M. G. (2025). On the evolution of qualitative methods in organizational research. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, 12(1), 109-131. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-111722-032953>
- Ratten, V., Nanere, M. G., Cunha, M. P., Fujimoto, Y., Intezari, A., García-Fernández, J., Dhakal, S., Omri, W., Saura, J. R., Lux, A. A., Sajjad, A., Lisboa, A., & D'Souza, C. (2025). Hot management trends. *Journal of Management & Organization*, 31(2), 420-442. <https://doi.org/10.1017/jmo.2025.6>
- Zhang, Y., Guo, Y., Zhang, M., Xu, S., Liu, X., & Newman, A. (2022). Antecedents and outcomes of authentic leadership across culture: A meta-analytic review. *Asia Pacific Journal of Management*, 39, 1399-1435. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10490-021-09762-0>