

THE ALCHEMY OF LEADERSHIP

LESSONS FROM A PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN

FIONA KENNEDY

DARL KOLB

- ▶ Getting "authenticity" wrong can be dangerous for both leaders and followers.

LENGTH: 13 min (3420 words)

IT WOULD BE EASY to write off the 2016 US presidential election as a once-in-a-lifetime media circus, but we believe that it deserves some thoughtful reflection. Not just because it is a race for one of the most powerful leadership roles on the planet, but also because this time around "authentic" leadership has had a starring role at both ends of the political spectrum. If authenticity is the key to explaining this historic moment, then the events on the campaign trail shed light on what authentic leadership is, and what it is not. We consider why and how the notion of authenticity has become more than a leadership buzzword and ask: What is the role that followers play in co-creating authentic leaders?

THE CRUCIBLE OF AUTHENTIC LEADERSHIP

Their data underscored the problems of authoritarian leadership, suggesting that New Zealand managers would rather be seen to be in the know ('right') than expose their vulnerabilities (be 'real').

In the late 1990s the notion of transformational leadership was seriously questioned as a result of growing cynicism about the integrity of business and community leaders. The *Harvard Business Review* carried articles with titles such as 'Managing the Dark Side of Charisma' and 'Narcissistic Leaders.' This growing disenchantment was exacerbated by events such as the Enron scandal in the early 2000s. Proponents of transformational leadership responded by positioning authentic leadership as a positive qualifier to transformational leadership. Researchers began speaking of "authentic transformational leadership" and contrasting this with what they termed "inauthentic or quasi-transformational leadership." Authenticity became a litmus test that could reveal false prophets. In a New Zealand study published in the *University of Auckland Business Review* in 2007, Lester Levy and Mark Benson drew on empirical evidence to describe managers who were "more right than real". Their data underscored the problems of authoritarian leadership, suggesting that New Zealand managers would rather be seen to be in the know ('right') than expose their vulnerabilities (be 'real'). Counter to our cultural myth of homespun honesty, the findings suggested that New Zealand managers felt it was risky to admit ignorance, though that would have been the authentic thing to do.

Sociologist Rebecca Erickson of the University of Akron connected the accelerating interest in authenticity with questions raised by postmodernism about what was and was not real. Erickson argued that authenticity became increasingly important as this quality came to be experienced as rare and at risk in a world that emphasised a multiplicity of values and perspectives, and the erosion of scientific certainty, identity, and 'truth'. In the emerging postmodernist environment social distinctions that maintained inequities of class, race, and gender began to weaken and space was created for new voices, including those who had been marginalised. The renewed interest in authenticity could be seen as a platform for those whose centrality and power was becoming less certain.

During the 1990s the ground had also shifted in others ways. Traditional images of leadership involving leading from the front and heroic leadership were challenged. The promise of authenticity was directly linked to "Leadership for a New Century" and framed as an antidote to cynicism and the culture of

artifice. As a label, authenticity went well beyond referring to those who had a deep knowledge of themselves. It came to imply a range of attributes including being contextually aware, optimistic, resilient, and of high moral character.

Who could possibly object to such qualities? Researchers Bruce Avolio of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and William Gardner of Texas Tech University drew on American literary critic Lionel Trilling to make a crucial distinction between authenticity and sincerity. While the latter focuses on being true to others, Avolio and Gardner argued that "recognition of the self referential nature of authenticity is essential to understanding the construct". An authentic self is seen as one "that exists wholly by the laws of its own being... one acts in accord with the true self". This self has a firm degree of autonomy and is not buffeted by the needs and expectations of others.

However, it is precisely this self-referential quality that we see as posing problems by vastly oversimplifying the relational dynamics between leaders and followers and the associated responsibilities of that relationship. As we discuss below, focusing on one's inner self runs the risk of leading to contemplation, rather than experimental action; of producing self-obsessed leaders who are immune to doubt or to viewpoints that are disruptive to their own. More importantly, we suggest that framing authenticity as an enclosed quality promotes leaders who encourage their followers' fantasies, rather than asking those followers to face complex realities.

In summary, authentic leadership entered the stage as a much needed corrective to leadership that was destructive and unethical, and as a wake-up call to those who relied on authority and self-protection to get things done. But, does it allow one to hover above the clamour of the social world? We suggest that the pursuit of detached self-actualisation ignores the fundamentally social and relational dynamic of leadership. We also see problems with the promise of authenticity as a corrective stabiliser in an uncertain world. We next consider these issues from the perspective of the campaign trail.



THE NEW 'IT' FACTOR

There will be much to remember from the 2016 US presidential campaign, not the least of which is that it marks a time when authenticity became a critical and distinguishing factor between would-be world leaders. The campaign provides examples of authentic leaders – in the form of Trump and Sanders – who "tell it straight", and of Clinton, who by contrast faces the curiously postmodern dilemma of needing to somehow quickly forge an authentic image. Such authenticity is not a simple or peaceful panacea; it is a cauldron of hubris, desire, social need, and distress. In this sense, the Presidential campaign is as 'real' a contest as one could wish for. It is also a source of insights into what authenticity is and where it comes from.

LESSON 1: AUTHENTICITY MATTERS

Authenticity is not just a "Trump" card. It is also associated with the other surprising radical on the campaign trail, Bernie Sanders. The University of Southern California's Professor of Entertainment, Media and Society, Martin Kaplan, goes so far as to argue that it is the defining issue of the 2016 campaign. In a blog post he wrote:

What Biden has, what nervous Democrats fear Clinton lacks, is authenticity, the new It factor. The old It was ideological (Do they hate big government or racism as much as I do?), positional (Are they with me on guns or climate change?), demographic (Do they care about people like me?) and personal (Who I want to have a beer with?). The new It is ontological: Who's real? Biden is real. His personal tragedies testify to that. He's not a politician, he's our brother...

Two candidates in the race are running on It (authenticity). Bernie Sanders is drawing the biggest crowds of the campaign because he seems as honest as his hair. But his manifest authenticity ("Yeah, I'm a socialist") may make him unelectable – the same fate Clinton is feared to be facing, though for the opposite reason. Donald Trump has It, too, but, like his hair, there's artifice about it. Is Trump real? Or is he "real"? Trump works both sides of that aisle.

However, watching the 2016 campaign trail we see there is more to authenticity than merely the 'genuine' leader. While some have pointed fingers at the media for building up these caricatures, it is the followers who have made Trump and Sanders 'real' contenders in this race. Social context is not just the wind in the candidates' sails; the crowds are part of the fabric of the sail itself.

LESSON 2: AUTHENTICITY IS A RELATIONSHIP

Manifest authenticity is not achieved when followers are spectators but rather when they are stirred to imagine a new reality for themselves. An authentic candidate on his or her own does not necessarily produce something beyond themselves. Trump and Sanders moved into the space between leader and followers where followers can taste a 'new real.'

Sanders does not have Clinton's problem when it comes to appearing down-to-earth. In fact, with his crumpled shirts and unruly white hair he comes across as everyman, which resonates authenticity as traditionally defined. He knows who he is and what he stands for. However, there is more. Sanders' followers are largely university-educated millennials who are still living at home, working part-time, and attended to by anxious middle-class parents. He offers the prospect of joining a movement and recasting the country. Being a revolutionary is an entirely different identity in the world than that of a large, educated baby, fussed over by mum and dad, and living in their furnished basement. Under these circumstances we can imagine that the call to revolution as an authentic experience is indeed sweet. Trump also offers followers the prospect of new identities. No longer powerless,

voiceless, marginalised, and excluded from the wealth of America, they become scrappy fighters who are willing to do and say what it takes to make America great again. This, we believe, is the alchemy of authenticity. In short, leaders do not exist without followers, no matter how well they know themselves or how in touch they are with their own life stories.

From a leadership perspective, authenticity is connected to performing a reality-shaping function for others.

We also challenge the notion that we have one true self, to the exclusion of other selves. The truth is that we are a social species and the self is defined in relation to others. To freeze the self is to deny the possibility of new types of interactions as roles and circumstances change. Moreover, the self is context-dependent. Contingency models of leadership have long acknowledged the fact that effectiveness depends on responding to the circumstances and conditions in which the problem is situated. From a leadership perspective, authenticity is connected to performing a reality-shaping function for others. In this context, Trump and Sanders are connecting with, and igniting fears and possibilities for, identities on different sides of the political spectrum.

The authenticity of Trump and Sanders that has gained traction in the 2016 campaign has offered large proportions of the US population a glimpse of themselves, living a new part in



“Without these troubled multitudes who project onto him their uncertainties, nightmares and desires, Trump would not exist.”

a different story. Erikson argues that in a postmodern world people are less confident about authenticity as a stable phenomenon and therefore seek authenticating experiences that yield insight into who they really are. Sanders and Trump call up something that is 'true' or 'real' for followers and which previously may have been too vague to articulate or too painful or controversial to handle. Authentic leadership then, may be benign shorthand for very powerful social dynamics. The 2016 presidential campaign has taught us that a crowd of leaders and followers who each want to change the world represents an experiential chemistry that neither could achieve on their own. Writing in *Time* magazine, Chilean novelist Ariel Dorfman bluntly addressed just this dynamic with respect to Trump and his followers, arguing that "Without these troubled multitudes who project onto him their uncertainties, nightmares and desires, Trump would not exist."

We are not the first to draw attention to the social dimension of authenticity. After all, self and society are two sides of the same coin. Dr Helen Nicholson of Lund University and Associate Professor Brigid Carroll of the University of Auckland Business School reposition authenticity as something in between an individual and a social virtue. They draw, in part, on the work of philosophers Charles Taylor and Charles Guignon, who reject the pursuit of a self that retreats from the social world in order to become more whole. Taylor, who is Professor Emeritus at McGill University, argues that shutting out the social world is a route to "eliminate[ing] all the candidates for what matters". He argues that to be authentic, one must be true to others and that this involves being mindful of history and the duties of citizenship. For Taylor the authenticity that arises from looking inward can only be trivial. Nicholson and Carroll therefore pose the question about authenticity: Is it for me, or for something beyond me? The question is important because it shifts authenticity from something one has (or does not have) to something one does with, or for, others and for a purpose. This take us to lesson three...

LESSON 3: THE RELATIONSHIP CARRIES RESPONSIBILITY

Recognising the relational and social dimension of authenticity takes us to leaders' responsibility. We have suggested that the alchemy of authenticity taps into, and kindles, the often subconscious fears and desires of followers. Psychoanalytic perspectives help shed light on this dynamic. University of Bath sociologist Yiannis Gabriel, for example, notes that "relations between leaders and followers frequently stimulate powerful emotional experiences and are liable to unleash formidable fantasies."

From a psychoanalytic perspective the alchemy of authenticity is not

unexpected. Gabriel refers to an emotional 'resonance' between leaders and followers that is "linked to unconscious wishes, desires and fantasies". Recognising this dynamic, he argues that leaders have a responsibility to focus and tame the emotional energy of followers. However, on the campaign trail, Trump actually intensified the outrage that underlay outbreaks of yelling, stomping and chanting "build the wall, build the wall" by shouting back. These occasions can be seen as the alchemy of authenticity run amok as a blunt instrument is used to stir a crowd seeking easy answers to complex social issues. This raises the question of what a leader can or should do when he or she is both inciting and riding a social stampede. Is it enough to be 'real' once the gates are opened? Probably not. Ironically, and unfortunately, a leader who suddenly wants to 'slow things down' or moderate social reaction may in fact be powerless to do so – as Sanders discovered when he attempted to align his followers with the Clinton camp after she gained the Democratic Party nomination. It is a point not lost on those who feared the possibility of Trump actually winning the Presidency.

LESSON 4: TRIAL BY FIRE IS NOT GOING AWAY

The final lesson concerns authenticity as a metaphoric trial by fire. For would-be or developing leaders, becoming more authentic or 'real' is likely to proceed amid accusations of being disingenuous, or pretentious. Writing for the *Guardian* newspaper Dan Fox reflected on how such accusations are used as a weapon in power plays and moral judgements. He notes that the Latin root for pretend was 'praetendere' which meant "to stretch in front." Not until 1725 did the notion of 'pretend' come to be associated with ostentatiousness.

There is an assumption that who we are is relatively fixed and that attempts to be different are signs of inauthenticity. Authenticity is understood to be a direct and firm connection between true self and action, and therefore anything experimental or unfamiliar must be considered suspect and framed derogatively as 'fake'. Trump knows exactly who he is. He is wealthy and so he brazenly shows up at a country fair in his private helicopter. The danger here is that having one true self rules out the possibility of alternatives, suggesting that the rich braggart Trump can be right for all situations.

Clinton, by comparison, faces complaints that she appears aloof and difficult to connect with as a person. However, when observed putting on her Sunday show face, she is perceived as



inauthentic. Thus she is caught in the 'authenticity doom loop' – a term used by media critic Brendan Nyhan, who observes the impossibility of extending one's repertoire for self while remaining the same.

In a 2015 *Harvard Business Review* article, 'The Authenticity Paradox: Why feeling like a fake can be a sign of growth,' Herminia Ibarra, an organisational behaviourist at INSEAD, considered the dilemma of needing to 'fake' a new leadership approach until it feels genuinely yours. Ibarra's research suggests that, as our careers advance, we find ourselves in situations where we are torn between being true to 'who we are' and the requirements of a new role. In order to be effective, we must act in ways that are not natural, and this can make us feel like we are faking it. Ibarra's analysis urges managers not to turn weapons of authenticity against themselves. It is no platitude to say that stepping into the space between our old and new self takes considerable courage.

It is no platitude to say that stepping into the space between our old and new self takes considerable courage.

Ibarra's contribution is to encourage leaders not to be cowed by weapons of authenticity. However, her perspective is less helpful for negotiating the alchemy of authenticity. She would probably point out that Clinton's attempts to mingle with common people may indeed look awkward, but is the only way for a formal and conservative high-achiever to learn to relax in down-to-earth settings – much as Barack Obama has had to work at not appearing aloof, while maintaining his natural statesmanlike demeanor. However, the alchemy of authenticity would suggest the problem for Clinton is more complex, and is entwined with followers' emotional

needs. Drawing on his own research and psychoanalytic theory, Gabriel notes that one of the four most pressing needs of followers is that the leader is seen and felt to be accessible. His research suggests that being "aloof, distant and inscrutable" constitutes a recurring problem that is less related to what leaders do than to the underlying dynamic between leaders and followers.

CONCLUSION

We have argued that authenticity matters and that it is not helpful to think of it as something one does or does not have. Following the 2016 presidential campaign, we have suggested that the experience of authenticity emanates from an alchemy between leader and followers. This alchemy also points to particular responsibilities for leaders engaged in creating authenticating experiences for their followers. Developing authenticity goes beyond conscious and rational acts, such as practicing new behavior or "faking it until you make it." Moreover, those genuinely attempting to develop their leadership may nonetheless encounter claims of inauthenticity deployed as a political weapon or as the projection of a need for certainty in a complex and ambiguous world. Though we cannot counter the social construction of authenticity, it is somewhat problematic that the conditions that call for consideration and caution, such as ethnic integration and global warming, can result in social movements based on loud and clear answers that may inflict long-term damage on the world.

We would like to end with a recent example from outside the campaign that reveals something of the alchemy of authenticity handled with a firm grasp of purpose and responsibility. In early 2016 the influential management writer Tom Peters visited one of the authors' Business School classes. He chatted with students, shared some stories and ideas, and invited them to ask questions. Toward the end of the conversation, a student asked Peters to talk about one of the most challenging experiences in his career. Rather than recounting any of a number of challenging consulting and diplomatic situations, he offered several deeply personal examples, and did so with humility and a word of caution. Why did he do this, rather than present the heroic tales that had been anticipated and expected?

During the class, it had been obvious that something of the alchemy of authenticity was at play. Peters was 'straight up' and thoroughly engaging and the students responded by becoming more like a select group of people who were on their way to outstanding business careers. When he offered personal stories of caution, he interrupted rather than inflamed their imaginations. Thus, the alchemy was handled with great responsibility, cutting through flights of fancy to offer students an unexpected, yet valuable picture of a whole and complex life.

Repositioning authenticity as social and relational – as an alchemy between leaders and followers – disrupts the notion that it is possessed, or is discovered, through contemplation. At the beginning of this article we noted that the growing interest in authentic leadership responded to the conditions of postmodernism, offering certainty at a time of unprecedented flux. We believe

it is important to acknowledge that longing, while recognising that certainty creates its own dangers.

Looking back at the presidential election of 2016, it may be difficult for anyone to understand Trump's meteoric ascendancy and his disruption of a 100-year-old political party. The alchemy of authenticity may be one part of the answer. When life gets hard we sometimes say "things got real." The campaign lit fires under many Americans who were looking for solutions tough enough to tackle their problems – and they came from both ends of the political spectrum. The unprecedented and unanticipated rise of both Trump and Sanders tells us much about authentic leadership. Regardless of the political outcome, the lessons from the 2016 campaign are valuable because the demand for authenticity will be a leadership challenge for years to come. ■



KEY TAKE-OUTS

- Authenticity has become a platform for those whose social and economic position is under threat.
- Focusing on one's "inner self" risks producing leaders who encourage their followers' fantasies rather than asking them to face complex realities.
- For effective leadership, authenticity must be appreciated as both social and relational, and handled with a firm grasp of purpose and responsibility.



Dr Fiona Kennedy is a researcher and senior leadership facilitator at the New Zealand Leadership Institute, which is based at the University of Auckland Business School. She is an experienced executive coach, and has consulted in organisational development, and worked as a senior manager in the Ontario public sector.

f.kennedy@auckland.ac.nz



Darl Kolb is Professor of Connectivity in the University of Auckland Business School's Graduate School of Management and is a pioneering theorist on social and technical connectivity. His current field research explores how individuals manage digital media flow for performance and wellbeing.

d.kolb@auckland.ac.nz

Acknowledgement

This article is based on a longer paper, 'The alchemy of authenticity', that first appeared in the journal *Organizational Dynamics*.