

CIB2007-022

Ethics and Authenticity of Leadership in the Construction Industry

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ABSTRACT

The construction industry now faces greater leadership challenges while it continues to suffer from a poor social image and poor record of ethical and moral practices. Construction professionals are more concerned with the job accomplishment and less apprehensive of ways and means through which they accomplish the jobs. In doing so, they tend to overlook the needs of their fellow employees, the organizations they work for, and the society they live in. Also, the usual performance criteria in the construction industry promote profit enhancement rather than improving employee satisfaction and well-being, ethical and moral practices, and a culture where authenticity of actions is valued. This study aims to gauge the satisfaction of construction professionals with the authenticity and ethics of the leadership under which they operate on construction projects. For this purpose, preliminary results of a global survey are presented here which sought to measure the authenticity and satisfaction of construction professionals at several levels of construction firms in different countries around the world. Initial results of responses from Singapore reveal low satisfaction of professionals with the level of authenticity and ethics of their leaders as well as the overall leadership in their organization and industry. The paper makes recommendations for leadership development and improvements for authentic leadership practices in the construction industry, and discusses further research and practical implications of the findings from this study so far.

Keywords: Authenticity, Leadership, Construction Industry

1. INTRODUCTION

With the growing movement of positive psychology, interest in the study of authenticity has also grown. Although the concept of authenticity was discussed by philosophers and sociologists during the mid-twentieth century, it was not explored and examined in depth. Contemporary studies on authenticity are being conducted in various fields including psychology, sociology, philosophy, and managerial sciences. However, in-depth understanding, measurement, development, and sustainability of authenticity are some of the challenges researchers continue to face. To validate the construct at large scale, researchers have argued that it should be well studied and developed, and tested in various contexts. The different perceptions of authenticity in different cultural contexts have resulted in a plethora of measurement challenges and research questions. Validating the construct of authenticity in the form of self-administered questionnaires and 360 degree measures is currently underway in several research undertakings across the globe.

This study of authenticity in the construction industry was inspired by wide recognition that it suffers from a poor social image (Ofori, 1993), ethical and moral difficulties (Toor and Ofori, 2006) and fragile professional practices (Toor and Ofori, 2006). Corruption in the construction industry remains at a high level and situation seems to be worsening across the world. For these reasons, it is necessary to increase the awareness of authenticity, positive organizational behaviour, positive organizational scholarship and authentic leadership in the construction industry.

This paper is dedicated to understanding of authenticity, its foundations, current research trends, future research directions, and above all, its implications in the construction industry's managerial practices. The paper begins with an overview of authenticity, and discusses relevant issues that include cost and benefits of authenticity, the role of authenticity in leadership, and measurement and development issues pertinent to authenticity. The paper then reports on a study on 'authentic leadership development in construction project professionals' that has been launched at the National University of Singapore and presents preliminary results of the 'global survey on ethics and authenticity'. The paper ends by presenting a future research agenda for the study of 'authenticity' in leadership.

2. AUTHENTICITY IN LEADERSHIP

Bass and Steidlmeier (1999) argue that "it is the behavior of leaders—including their moral character, values and programs—that is authentic or inauthentic". Luthans and Avolio (2003) define the 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 behaviours on the part of leaders

and associates, fostering positive self-development. They describe authentic leadership in the following way: "as a positive construct, descriptive words include genuine, reliable, trustworthy, real, and veritable." Knowing oneself and being true to oneself are essential qualities of authentic leadership. Kellett et al. (2006) describe authentic leadership as developing an honest, open, and transparent relationship between leaders and followers. George (2003) asserts that compassion ("heart") and relationships with followers are elements in authenticity of leadership.

The proponents of authentic leadership label it as "root construct" of all positive and effective forms of leadership (Avolio and Gardner, 2005; Avolio et al., 2004; Gardner et al., 2005) and believe that this root construct transcends other theories of leadership and helps to understand what is and what is not the "genuine" form of leadership (Avolio et al., 2005). However, it is recognized that the current definition poses difficulties for measuring the authentic leadership (Cooper et al., 2005); this broader and more inclusive definition seems to make sense (Avolio and Gardner, 2005). Cooper et al. (2005) provide several recommendations to further refine the definition of authentic leadership at this early in the process of theory-building. They believe that authentic leadership researchers will need to identify the key dimensions of authentic leadership and then create a theoretically-based definition of the construct. They recommend that qualitative methods might be a particularly useful way of identifying these specific dimensions.

Articulating the notion of authenticity, George (2003) defines authentic leaders as those who possess a sense of purpose, practice solid set of values, lead from heart, establish enduring relationships, and demonstrate self-discipline in their lives. According to Avolio et al. (2004), authentic leaders are "those who are deeply aware of how they think and behave and are perceived by others as being aware of their own and others' values/moral perspectives, knowledge, and strengths; aware of the context in which they operate; and who are confident, hopeful, optimistic, resilient, and of high moral character". Shamir and Eilam (2005) believe that authentic leaders have the following characteristics: "(1) rather than faking their leadership, authentic leaders are true to themselves (rather than conforming to the expectations of others); (2) authentic leaders are motivated by personal convictions, rather than to attain status, honours, or other personal benefits; (3) authentic leaders are originals, not copies, that is, they lead from their own personal point of view; and (4) the actions of authentic leaders are based on their personal values and convictions."

Shamir and Eilam (2005) also believe that: authentic leaders are originals, not copies and that they do not fake their leadership. Rather than trying to imitate leadership role models, authentic leaders develop their own leadership style and capitalize on what they have learnt through a deeper self-awareness and self-regulation. Goffee and Jones (2005) have coined the phrase "authentic chameleon" to describe the capability of authentic

leaders to play different roles whilst remaining true to their own identity. They believe that these qualities must be real to be useful and beneficial.

They further maintain that leadership is not about adopting the styles or traits of other successful leaders and imitating what others have done. It is about “being yourself with knowledge and skills”. Authentic leadership demands internalization of beliefs and convictions which comes through introspection and heightened self-awareness. Those who skip the necessary stages of self-development could adopt “false” personas that are not true to their own values or beliefs.

Authentic leaders exhibit a higher moral capacity to judge dilemmas from different angles and are able to take into consideration different stakeholder needs (May et al., 2003). Such leaders are not necessarily transformational, visionary, or charismatic leaders. They are the leaders who take a stand that changes the course of history for others; these may be organizations, departments or just other individuals (May et al., 2003). Other researchers posit that authentic leaders, “by expressing their true self in daily life live a good life (in an Aristotelian way), and this process results in self-realization (eudaemonic well-being) on the part of the leaders, and in positive effects on followers’ eudaemonic well-being” (Ilies et al., 2005). This initial conceptualization about authentic leaders is multi-dimensional and multilevel and contains elements from diverse domains (Cooper et al., 2005). Moreover, the observers or perspectives involved vary from the leader, to followers (at various “distances”), to possibly additional observers. Moreover, levels of analysis at which the authentic leadership phenomenon may function can include the “...individual, team and organizational levels” (Avolio et al., 2004).

3. GLOBAL SURVEY ON ETHICS AND AUTHENTICITY OF LEADERSHIP

Considering the importance of authenticity and the recent attention it has obtained in literature, the current researchers decided to conduct a global survey on ethics and authenticity of leadership—shortly termed as SEAL. The underlying motivation for the global survey was to explore how authentically leaders in the construction industry behave and are perceived by their followers. It explores the construct of authenticity both at micro and macro levels of the industry. At the micro level, within construction firms, findings will provide guidance to improve the organizational culture. While at the macro level, it will be easier to assess overall industry culture in various countries, regions, and continents. This world-wide information about the authenticity of leadership is vital as it will help to provide an understanding of the industry culture of various countries. The results of this survey will also help the participants of cross-cultural projects to understand each other better and develop sufficient tolerance for, and better understanding of different cultures.

This survey forms part of a larger study titled 'Authentic Leadership Development in Construction Project Professionals'. The survey was disseminated to: construction professionals around the world through their personal e-mails; various construction firms; and e-mailing groups of different professional bodies. The survey asked questions related to 'leadership ethics and authenticity', some important demographic details, and particulars of their organizations. Initial response was encouraging although the survey was disseminated just before Christmas and New Year Holidays. Although additional measures are being taken to improve the response rate, at the time of writing this paper, only 18 responses had been received from Singapore where more than 200 e-mail invitations were sent to professionals. Though 18 responses are too small a number to perform statistical analysis, the results can be considered as a pilot study which will help to introduce the concept of ethics and authenticity of leadership to the global audience participating in the CIB Congress. It is expected that initial dialogue and suggestions during this world-wide gathering of researchers will help the authors for possible improvements in this global study.

4. DEMOGRAPHIC DETAILS

Table 1 provides demographic details of the respondents from Singapore. It is clear that most of them are young professionals, mostly males with over five years of industry experience, working in entry and middle level management positions, having educational levels of a bachelor's and above, and belonging to a mix of organizations.

Table 1 Demographic Details of Respondents

Category	Sub-categories	Frequency
Gender	Males	12
	Females	6
Average Age		32 years*
Average Relevant Experience		8.4 years*
Average Experience in Current Organization		6 years*
Job Level	Entry Level Manager	12
	Middle Level Manager	5
	Executive Level Manager	1
Education	Diploma	2
	Bachelors	8
	Masters	6
	PhD	2
Type of Organization	Client/Developer	2
	Consultant	8
	Contractor	2
	Designer	1
	Other (Supplier, etc)	5

* Average for the relevant field

Table 2 Authenticity of leaders

No.	My leader ...	M	SD
1.	Is ethical	4.05	0.53
2.	Acts in the best interest of my organization	4.05	0.93
3.	Has a good ability to understand different situations and contexts	3.94	0.87
4.	Is trustworthy and transparent	3.88	0.90
5.	Has a strong vision	3.88	0.83
6.	Gives me freedom in my job	3.88	1.07
7.	Acts as a genuine/authentic individual	3.77	0.64
8.	Behaves in a manner consistent with the organizational values	3.72	0.95
9.	Is optimistic and looks forward to positive outcomes of team effort	3.72	0.89
10.	Follows a solid set of personal values and principles	3.72	0.75
11.	Leads from heart and soul	3.66	0.59
12.	Is highly self-disciplined	3.66	1.02
13.	Has the ability to say "no" when necessary	3.66	1.02
14.	Well deserves to be in the leadership position	3.66	1.23
15.	Makes me feel that my contribution is important for the organization	3.55	1.04
16.	Has a good balance between his work/task and people/relationship orientations	3.50	1.15
17.	Is consistent in his/her statements and actions	3.50	0.98
18.	Is futuristic and has a strategic orientation	3.50	0.70
19.	Is progressive and likes positive changes	3.50	0.85
20.	Helps me to develop my personal strengths	3.50	1.20
21.	Is a person I have complete confidence in and I can count on him/her	3.44	1.19
22.	Is fair in decision making	3.38	1.14
23.	Is creative and encourages innovative solutions	3.38	1.24
24.	Admits when mistakes are made by him/her and by collective team effort	3.33	0.90
25.	Makes efforts to establish strong and positive relationships	3.33	1.13
26.	Says exactly what he/she really means	3.27	0.82
27.	Inspires others by setting a good examples	3.27	1.07
28.	Makes efforts to train the subordinates as entrepreneurs	3.22	1.00
29.	Makes personal sacrifices for the benefit of others	2.88	0.90

5. ANALYSIS

Table 2 shows the mean (M) and standard deviations (SD) of the responses to the questions asked in the first part of the survey. In this section, respondents were asked to rate their immediate leaders on various points. A five point likert scale was chosen where 1 = "strongly disagree" and 5 = "strongly agree". From the results, the majority of the questions obtained a mean score of less than 4 (agree). The mean scores of the responses to some of the some questions give cause for concern. For example, the leaders' attributes of setting a good example, training followers as entrepreneurs, making sacrifices for subordinates, and meaning the statement on behalf of leaders received very low scores. Results in Table 2 also give an impression that the respondents are not very satisfied with their leaders. The overall rating of leaders on various aspects of authenticity is fairly low and near to neutral on the rating scale. In the next section of 'SEAL', respondents were asked some questions about the prevalence of authentic practices within their organizations in general. Table 3 shows that mean scores for all questions is below 4 (agree). Some items in this section are particularly important. For example, items 7 and 8 received quite low scores. However, item 10 is encouraging in which the respondents have shown their disagreement the occurrence of 'unethical professional practices and transactions'. It should be noted that the overall ratings of all items that exhibit the concerns of respondents regarding various ethical practices within construction firms are lower.

Table 3 Ethical and authentic practices in organizations

No.	Statement	M	SD
1.	I am developing as a competent professional in my organization	3.77	0.80
2.	I am proud to tell people about my organization	3.66	0.90
3.	Overall environment of my company encourages ethical and moral practices	3.61	1.14
4.	I get respect from my organizational leaders	3.44	0.98
5.	I am confident of the prosperous future of my organization	3.38	1.09
6.	I am satisfied and happy working in my organization	3.38	0.91
7.	I am comfortable to give constructive feedback to my colleagues and bosses about the organizational environment	3.33	0.84
8.	My organization is highly concerned about employee's welfare	3.27	1.22
9.	My company's fundamental policy is to increase more value rather than making profit from the jobs	3.11	1.13
10.	In my company, I have personally experienced, observed, or heard of professional acts or transactions that I would consider unethical	2.77	0.87

In the next section, respondents rated various items that asked about their perception of the ethical and professional environment of the industry. Similar to previous results, mean scores of various items in this section (Table 4) are below 4 (agree); that shows dissatisfaction of respondents regarding the overall environment of the industry. The last three items in Table 4 are worthy of discussion. Respondents have shown their discontent with the professional and ethical environment of the industry. Item 9 shows that professionals would seize every opportunity they would get to switch to another industry. However, item one demonstrates a hope for improvement in the professional and ethical environment in the future.

In the next section of the survey, respondents were asked two key questions on their perception of who was most responsible for professional and ethical problems in the industry. The respondents rated the contractors at the top and consultants at the bottom. In response to the question of improvement, respondents were most satisfied with role of major construction players and least satisfied with the role of academia.

Table 4 Perception of ethics in overall industry

No.	Statement	M	SD
1.	I am hopeful for improvement in professional and ethical environment of this industry in the future	3.77	0.73
2.	Environment of the construction industry is progressive and innovative	3.61	0.69
3.	It is getting increasingly hard to retain people already working in this industry	3.50	0.98
4.	In terms of management practices, this industry has a lot to offer to other industries	3.44	0.85
5.	I am proud to tell people about professional environment of this industry	3.38	0.91
6.	It is getting increasingly hard to attract people to work in this industry	3.38	1.03
7.	Environment of the construction industry is highly professional	3.16	0.92
8.	Environment of the construction industry is ethical and moral	2.88	0.67
9.	I will not change the industry if I get an equally attractive job in another industry	2.77	0.94

Table 5 Roles and responsibilities of various stakeholders

No.	Statement		M	SD
1.	The major professional and ethical problems in this industry are due to:	Contractors	3.83	0.92
		Clients	3.61	0.85
		Designers	3.27	0.82
		Consultants	3.33	0.90
2.	To improve the overall professional and ethical environment of this industry, I am satisfied with role of:	Construction players	3.94	0.63
		Professional Bodies	3.77	0.80
		Government	3.50	0.78
		Academia	3.33	0.84

6. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

It is premature to make any definite statements or explicit conclusions on the basis of the above results which were obtained from the initial response to the 'SEAL'. However, the results are revealing in many ways and explain various preliminary trends. First, the respondents are not very satisfied with the authenticity of their leaders. Most of the respondents rated their leaders neutral or below the benchmark of "agree". Similarly, responses regarding authentic and ethical practices within organizations also showed a similar trend where respondents appeared not to be satisfied with the overall organizational environment. Likewise, the overall perception of the ethical and professional environment of overall construction industry is not healthy.

Respondents appear to consider contractors as being mainly responsible for the situation. However, this finding may be biased as only two respondents out of total 18 belonged to contractor organizations and rest belonged to clients, consultants, and designers. The analysis also showed the discontent of the respondents about role of government agencies as well as academia. Role of academic institutions in can be improved by introducing relevant courses on ethics, authenticity, and personal and interpersonal skills in disciplines on engineering and construction. Though the government of Singapore has shown keen interest in improving the professional environment and it can be seen from the efforts like the "Construction 21" review, this preliminary study reveals the need for further improvement in the role of government agencies in these regards.

7. IMPLICATIONS

Leadership is a core need of construction project managers and its authenticity is a critical need today. Therefore, it is important that the construct of authenticity in the specific context of the construction industry

be studied in more depth. Several directions for future research can be explored. For example, Kernis and Goldman (2006) discusses a number of issues linked to authenticity, satisfaction, performance, well-being, self-esteem, depression, negative affectivity, psychological well-being, optimal self-esteem. Other researchers have also argued that authenticity has great influence on performance, interpersonal relationships, effectiveness, and behaviours of individuals (Kernis and Goldman, 2006). These factors are directly related to leadership. Hence, it can be inferred that authenticity has a strong correlation with leadership effectiveness and performance. Gardner et al. (2005) posit that “more as opposed to less authentic leaders will create “proximal” organizational climates that are more inclusive, caring, engaged, and more oriented towards developing strengths.”

Hence, if a project leader is authentic, it is likely that overall performance on the project will be superior thereby resulting in reduced costs, and efficient completion of the project. Since authenticity takes into account the components of self-awareness as well as self-regulation, it is likely that authentic project leader would not suffer from personal bias and self-interest. Moreover, an authentic project leader will develop better interpersonal relationships which will result in reduced disputes and conflicts on the projects. Authenticity will also help the project manager to manage his team in a better fashion and will eventually result in enhanced team performance. In the context of overall organizations, it is expected that employees of more authentic organizations enjoy better interpersonal relationships, satisfaction, well-being, and working atmosphere. They also possess positive organizational behavior and have higher levels of psychological capital. Moreover, organizations with higher authenticity have a better chance to grow in challenging times. It is also fair to posit that an industry with higher authenticity will benefit from higher standards of ethics, morality, and professionalism. Moreover, higher levels of authenticity will result in openness, innovativeness, and a forward looking approach.

8. FURTHER DEVELOPMENTS

Results in the earlier sections reveal that the respondents are sceptical in their perceptions of authenticity and ethics of leadership at personal, organizational, and industry. This low level of satisfaction of respondents about authenticity and ethics of leadership suggests that these areas suffer from lack of attention in the industry at all levels. Based on the preliminary results presented in this paper, there seems much more to be done in this regard. First, future research should systematically examine the perception of leadership authenticity and ethics of all major stakeholders of the construction industry around the world. Such assessments can be helpful to devise appropriate solutions to bring about improvements in leadership authenticity and ethics. . The work done in this paper will be taken further when larger samples of contractors, clients, consultants, suppliers, and

designers obtained in the global survey are analysed. This will help to diagnose the roots of problems and thus formulating an adequate solution.

The analysis of the preliminary data does not consider factors such as gender, age, education, work experience, job level, company size, company turnover, and type of company. Also, the analysis has been carried out in the context of Singapore; hence, the ethnicity and citizenship of the respondents were not considered. In the next stage of the study, further analysis will take into account the personal demographics of respondents to examine potential differences in the perceptions of respondents belonging to different ethnicities, nationalities, size and types of organizations, and so on. Comparison of such perception in terms of different countries, regions, socio-economic conditions, and several other factors can provide additional insights. The study will map the overall perception of authenticity and ethics of leadership at all levels of industry around the world. This would help to find joint solutions and a common platform of learning for different countries. Further, future research must not ignore the possible relationship of authenticity and ethical practices with countries' socio-political and economic factors. It is likely that perception of authenticity and ethics of leadership may be low in countries with low per capita income, low corruption index, low literacy rate, and high percentage of population below the poverty line. It is also likely that countries with less developed construction industries have lower perceptions of authenticity and ethics of leadership.

Another possibility would be that countries with larger population of international firms suffer from low perception of authenticity and ethics due to cultural differences. It could also be the other way round as companies, while going international, try to develop a positive image. However, these propositions can only be tested with a larger and more inclusive sample size. Once these diagnoses are made at the next stages of the study, it will be possible for decision makers to focus on the areas which need immediate attention. Also, the industry can then focus on leadership development and ethics awareness programs. Particular areas of research for the future are: formulating specific leadership development programs that are customized to meet the needs of construction professionals; and designing the leadership interventions for authentic leadership development.

Theory and study of authenticity of leadership is still emerging; therefore researchers need to incorporate a number of alternative designs for further research. Since authentic leadership is a multifaceted construct (Avolio et al., 2004; Luthans & Avolio, 2003), it calls for multifaceted research designs. They also argue that considering only one level of analysis can cause researchers to miss or improperly identify effects of this emerging leadership phenomenon. Ilies et al. (2005) have also developed a series of propositions for future research. These propositions represent testable hypotheses that can be pursued in empirical research. Prior to testing many of these hypotheses, however, it will be necessary to develop

a measure of authentic leadership that assesses each of the four components outlined earlier. Various authentic leadership scholars (Avolio et al. 2004; Ilies et al., 2005; Cooper et al., 2005) also suggest that future research should examine how authentic leadership relates to other leadership constructs such as transformational leadership, relational leadership approaches, and leader behaviours. This direction should not only consider developing a sound theoretical base but a sizable focus should also be given to empirical differentiation of authentic leadership construct from other forms of leadership.

9. CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper presents the fundamental concepts of authenticity and authentic leadership. It discusses various implications of authenticity and authentic leadership in project management. It is argued that authenticity is useful for project management practices and project leadership. However, the preliminary results of 'SEAL' reveal that leadership authenticity has been rated significantly low in the Singapore construction industry. In addition, ratings on questions on ethics, professional practices, and overall environment of the industry are also low. It is important to note that these results are only preliminary, and based on a small sample size comprising the initial responses. The 'Global survey on authenticity and ethics of leadership' is still in its early stages. The authors are optimistic that they will be able to map the environment of the construction industry around the world in terms of leadership authenticity, and ethical and professional practices. A healthy and conducive environment of construction must erect its structure on foundations of professional ethics, leadership authenticity, and positive organizational behaviour. Together, the construction industry stakeholders can bring a change in culture and environment that remains conventional despite calls for transformation. Investing in academic curricula, professional development, employee welfare, and above all, a broader alliance of various stakeholders of the construction industry can be helpful for betterment of professional ethics and authenticity.

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