

MEDIATING ROLE OF EMPLOYEE EMOTIONS IN THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN AUTHENTIC LEADERSHIP AND EMPLOYEE INNOVATION

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Although researchers emphasize that the construct of authentic leadership (AL) is relevant to resolving different kinds of failures and inadequacies of leadership, it remains unknown whether or not, and how, authentic leadership style intrinsically evokes employees' innovation. Using multilevel data from 76 teams sourced from 5 enterprises in China, we applied hierarchical linear modeling and found a positive relationship between AL and employees' innovation. Employees' positive emotions were found to have a mediating effect in this relationship, whereas employees' negative emotions did not act as a mediator. Our study results extend AL theory by revealing the cross-level effects of authentic leadership, and provide practical implications to help leaders perform relevant interventions in promoting employee innovation.

Keywords: authentic leadership, leadership style, employee innovation, positive emotion, negative emotion.

Authentic leadership (AL) has been an area of great interest in leadership literature for decades. AL is regarded as the root construct underlying other positive forms of leadership, and the leadership style that will resolve most leadership failures and inadequacies (Rego, Sousa, Marques, & Pina e Cunha,

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2012, 2014). Being true to the self and maintaining consistency with one's internal values and beliefs is embedded in the theory of AL (Gardner, Coglisser, Davis, & Dickens, 2011), and holding to these beliefs and values could be used by the leader to promote intrinsic innovation among employees. According to social support theory and social learning theory, when people recognize that they have support from their leaders and learn from the behaviors of role models whom they perceive as being attractive and authentic, they are able to achieve excellence (Hinojosa, Davis McCauley, Randolph-Seng, & Gardner, 2014).

The intrinsic motivation perspective dominates employee innovation literature (Gumusluoglu & Ilsev, 2009). Many employees regard innovation in the workplace as a risky action and an extraordinary effort (Vinarski-Peretz, Binyamin, & Carmeli, 2011). According to the model constructed by Janssen (2004), *employee innovation* comprises three stages that embrace *idea generation*, *idea promotion*, and *idea implementation*. In contrast creativity involves the production of novel and useful ideas or solutions about products, processes, or services, and procedures. Thus the scope of employee innovation is much broader (Yuan & Woodman, 2010). Researchers (e.g., Gumusluoglu & Ilsev, 2009; Ma, Cheng, Ribbens, & Zhou, 2013) have studied the role of specific leadership styles, such as transformational leadership and ethical leadership, in promoting employees' creativity, and Rego et al. (2012, 2014) even linked AL with creativity, but these previous researchers generally did not take into account the factors of idea promotion and idea implementation. Our aim in the current study was to explore whether or not, and if so, how, AL triggers employee innovation.

Emotions, as a motivation factor, are embedded in the authentic leadership process (Avolio, Gardner, Walumbwa, Luthans, & May, 2004), but few previous researchers have investigated the mechanism of the impact of emotions. Avolio et al. suggested that authentic leaders could alter follower behaviors via developing their emotions to better adapt to setbacks and stressors, yet the theoretical framework awaits further empirical testing. In this study we empirically explored the effect of AL on employee innovation, and the mediating effect that emotions have on this relationship.

We used a cross-level design because authentic leadership is a multifaceted construct and scholars have called for research beyond the single level (Yammarino, Dionne, Schriesheim, & Dansereau, 2008). Our aim was to provide a better understanding of the relationship between employee innovation and AL development, especially in relation to leader-follower interactions in the team environment. Our findings could be beneficial to human resource development specialists and leaders seeking to develop their skills.

Literature Review

Authentic Leadership and Employee Innovation

Instances of malfeasance in both corporate and government entities, and an urgent call for a new type of genuine and value-based leadership, have led to researchers (e.g., Avolio et al., 2004) putting forward the construct of authentic leadership. *AL* is defined as “a pattern of leader behavior that draws upon and promotes both positive psychological capacities and a positive ethical climate, to foster greater self-awareness, an internalized moral perspective, balanced processing of information, and relational transparency on the part of leaders working with followers, fostering positive self-development” (Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing, & Peterson, 2008, p. 94). As a root construct, authentic leadership is considered an individual style inherent to the leader, heightening segmented constructs like transformational and ethical leadership (Rego et al., 2012). Authentic leaders possess self-awareness and use this knowledge to learn from themselves and to develop their followers (Neider & Schriesheim, 2011). In the *AL* approach, leaders with a high level of self-awareness may influence the followers’ thinking, motivation, and choice of behaviors in the following ways: *balanced processing* allows authentic leaders to practice relatively unbiased information processing from a more holistic perspective; *internal moral perspective* guides leaders to insist on upholding moral values and behave in a prosocial and ethical manner in the face of adversity and conflict with tradition; *rational transparency* refers to leader behaviors of sharing information and creating honest, open, and trustful exchanges with followers (Walumbwa et al., 2008).

Employee innovation means employees’ behaviors that are directed toward the initiation, intentional introduction, and application of new and useful ideas, processes, products, or procedure that are valuable to the organization (Janssen, 2004). Despite diverse ways of understanding about the components, there is much support for Janssen’s trilateral construct of idea creation, idea promotion, and idea implementation (Tu & Lu, 2013). Employee innovation also implies conducting tasks beyond team, group, or organization routine, including a willingness to take risks (Yuan & Woodman, 2010). Compared with creativity, which is focused solely on idea creation, the factors of idea promotion and implementation are given the same weight in the concept of employee innovation. That is to say, after developing novel ideas, an individual needs to find support from his or her leaders to realize those ideas by applying them to work roles, teamwork, or the overall organization (Tu & Lu, 2013).

AL may emerge as a collective phenomenon (Yammarino et al., 2008). At the team level, authentic leaders are concerned predominantly with collective benefits and interests. By reflecting on their own selves and others, authentic leaders are

better able to grasp the moral implication of a specific circumstance and can keep their team members engaged for the benefit of the collective (Avolio et al., 2004). In line with this reasoning, innovative behaviors have been described as the basis for team development and competition (Suliman, 2013). AL allows team leaders to remain realistically hopeful and trustworthy, and to build a secure leader–follower attachment style (Hinojosa et al., 2014) that leads members to believe that the team leader supports and values their talents. Therefore, when there is AL in an enterprise employees are more willing to express their new ideas that challenge the routine, and are more committed to persuading their leaders and coworkers to turn these ideas into reality (Janssen, 2004; Shalley & Gilson, 2004; Tu & Lu, 2013). Furthermore, the authentic leader will solicit employees' ideas without any form of self-censorship so that, over time, employees view the leader as a credible source of input and feedback (Walumbwa et al., 2008). Employees with leaders who use an AL style also become willing to find different pathways for solving problems and taking risks, because they believe that their leaders want to see each of them perform well (Avolio et al., 2004). In addition, leaders' demonstrations of authentic innovative behaviors set them up as role models to be imitated, and through these behaviors the leaders gain reciprocity from employees in the way of persistent attention to innovation (Weischer, Weibler, & Petersen, 2013). Accordingly, we formed the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: There will be a significantly positive correlation between authentic leadership of a team and employee innovation.

Authentic Leadership and Employees' Emotions

Emotions are conscious or unconscious multicomponent response tendencies that evolve and manifest over relatively short period of time (Fredrickson, 2001). In their study Kaplan, Cortina, Ruark, LaPort, and Nicolaides (2013) demonstrated that leaders' everyday interactions with followers largely dictate followers' emotions. Self-awareness enables authentic leaders to better understand followers' strengths, weaknesses, and emotions. Transparent leader–employee relationships encourage employees to display their authentic emotions (Weischer et al., 2013). A strong internal moral perspective and balanced processing promote pursuit of value-based missions and unbiased self-relevant information in authentic leaders, which accords with the collective benefits of employees; thus, leaders may accurately gauge and help to build the emotional state of employees.

Positive emotions are more easily recalled than negative emotions because humans prefer exposure to the positive (Rego, Vitória, Magalhães, & Ribeiro, 2013). Followers who perceive their leaders as authentic are more likely to feel and show more positive affection compared with those who perceive their leaders as less authentic (Gardner et al., 2011). Based on social support theory, authentic team leaders who act as a source of social support elicit more positive

emotions from followers. Further, based on social learning theory, compared with less authentic leaders, authentic team leaders are more likely to express positive emotions within the team as role models and, therefore, to get similar responses from their followers (Avolio et al., 2004). In addition, AL is positively related to *team virtuousness*, that is, team contexts in which good habits and actions are practiced and supported and that facilitate team members' positive emotions (Rego et al., 2013). Contrary to the body of research available on positive emotions there has been little research conducted in which the focus has been on whether or not, and if so, how, negative emotions are aroused in employees by AL (Weischer et al., 2013). Rego et al. (2013) demonstrated that AL can buffer team members from the negative effects that can arise through team virtuousness. Thus, we formed the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 2a: Authentic team leadership will have a significantly positive effect on individual employees' positive emotions.

Hypothesis 2b: Authentic team leadership will have a significantly negative effect on individual employees' negative emotions.

The Mediating Effect of Employees' Emotions on the Relationship Between Authentic Leadership and Employee Innovation

Through constant interaction and emotional contagion, authentic leaders develop a working environment where individuals reciprocate with increasingly greater affective commitment. Increasing cooperation with coworkers further reinforces each individual employee's intention to contribute new ideas toward fulfilling team goals (Weischer et al., 2013). Authentic leaders help followers in both positive emotion generation and negative emotion handling (Kaplan et al., 2013). Fredrickson stated that positive emotions expand the individual's thought-action repertoires, so that employees with highly positive emotions are, accordingly, more likely to put forward new ideas, and develop thinking and acting patterns necessary for idea implementation (Fredrickson, 2001; Vinarski-Peretz et al., 2011). Surrounded by the supportive work climate that AL promotes, employees are likely to feel positive, broaden their thinking, and feel increased interest in their work, leading to intrinsic motivation for behaviors above and beyond those required for standard job routines (Hammond, Neff, Farr, & Schwall, 2011; Rego et al., 2013). Additionally, compared with leaders who communicate in a less authentic style with their employees, leaders who communicate authentically are more aware of employees who are emotionally exhausted when they are solving problems as they follow a novel path. This greater awareness of the authentic leader then increases the likelihood that he or she will refrain from assigning overly challenging tasks to followers and, thus, will avoid the followers experiencing any undue distress (Kaplan et al., 2013), thereby facilitating positive engagement of employees in unconventional idea sharing and discussion, and increasing employees' confidence in overcoming

barriers to idea implementation. According to issue-selling theory (Dutton, Ashford, O'Neil, & Lawrence, 2001), once employees are confident about the outcomes that their ideas will bring, they willingly act as change agents to sell novel ideas to the executives in their company and do their best to put these ideas into practice. Further, even if a an innovation fails, employees who perceive that their working environment is supportive will be more likely to maintain a positive view of their own innovative behaviors, which, in turn, elevates the incidence of innovation in the team in the long term (Vinarski-Peretz et al., 2011). Thus, we hypothesized that:

Hypothesis 3a: Employees' emotions will mediate the relationship between authentic team leadership and employee innovation.

Hypothesis 3b: Authentic team leadership will influence employee innovation through evoking followers' positive emotions.

Hypothesis 3c: Authentic team leadership will influence employee innovation through the handling of followers' negative emotions.

The hypothesized theoretical model is summarized and shown in Figure 1.

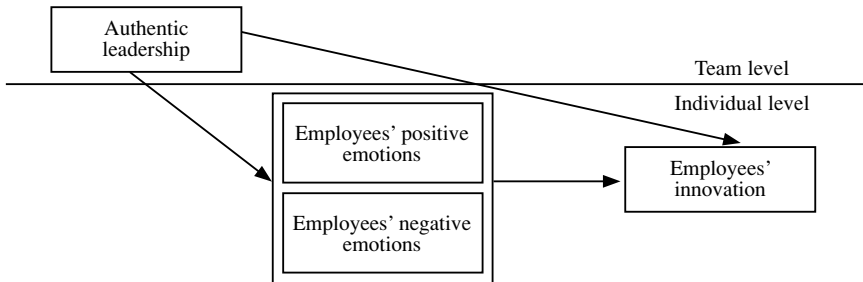


Figure 1. Hypothesized theoretical model.

Method

Participants and Procedure

The participants for the study were sourced from five manufacturing enterprises located in Taiyuan, in Middle China, Wulumuqi, in Western China, and Shenzhen, in Eastern China. Four of the enterprises were state-owned, and one was privately owned. From these five enterprises, we asked 500 employees in 100 teams to report their perceptions of AL in regard to their direct leaders, their own emotions, and their own innovative behaviors. Of the 500 employees who provided information to us, 388 followers in 76 teams provided usable data. Men comprised 67.2% of the sample and women 32.8%; the average age was 30.2 years ($SD = 6.65$) ranging from 21 to 50; and the average length of job tenure was 8.57 years ($SD = 7.09$). The average size of the teams was 5.11 members ($SD = 3.41$).

Measures

Authentic leadership. AL was measured using the 16-item Authentic Leadership Inventory (ALI) developed by Neider and Schriesheim (2011) ($\alpha = .924$). Sample items include “My leader says exactly what he or she means,” and “My leader asks for ideas that challenge his/her beliefs and actions.”

Employees' emotions. We adopted the 14-item Job Emotion Scale developed by Cole, Bruch, and Vogel (2006) to measure employees' emotions. The positive emotions subscale ($\alpha = .911$) is composed of assessment of six specific positive emotional states, including courage and enthusiasm. The negative emotions subscale ($\alpha = .934$) includes assessment of seven negative states, such as sadness and frustration, and one reverse-scored item “calmness.”

Employee innovation. To measure employee innovation we employed the nine-item scale ($\alpha = .918$) developed by Janssen (2004). Participants respond to items listed under the question “How often do you perform the following work activities?” with sample items including “Creating new ideas to solve difficult issues,” and “Transforming innovative ideas into useful applications.”

Control variables. We set gender, age, education level, job tenure as control variables at the individual level and team size at the team level, to control the confounding effect on relationships among variables.

We used a Chinese version of the survey, which was translated from English. A double-blind backtranslation procedure was used to ensure the reliability and validity of the translation. Responses to all variables were given on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree* and 5 = *strongly agree*).

Data Aggregate

With the aim of researching team members' shared perceptions about AL, we aggregated individual-level AL to the team level. To check the reliability of this aggregation, we calculated within-team agreement ($\text{rwg} = .745$; above the recommended minimum of $.700$), intraclass correlations ($\text{ICC1} = .276$; above the recommended minimum of $.120$), and the reliability of the means ($\text{ICC2} = .715$; above the recommended minimum of $.700$) with significance set at $p < .01$. The results indicate our conceptualization of AL at the team level was appropriate

Results

Descriptive statistics relating to variables at both individual and team levels are presented in Table 1. Results show that there was a significant positive relationship between employees' positive emotions and employee innovation at the individual level.

Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics and Correlations at Individual and Team Levels*

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Individual level									
Gender	1.28	0.42	1						
Age	30.2	6.65	.02	1					
Education	2.36	0.88	.03	-.29**	1				
Job tenure	8.57	7.09	.01	-.82**	-.36**	1			
AL	3.77	0.51	.06	.14	-.08	.09	1		
EPE	3.48	1.00	.04	.02	-.09	.03	.33**	1	
ENE	2.17	0.96	-.04	-.25*	-.21*	-.19	.00	-.18	1
EI	3.80	0.55	.00	.04	.13	-.04	.37**	.43**	.00
Team level									
Team size	5.11	3.41	1						
AL	3.66	0.43	0.40	1					

Note. AL = authentic leadership, EPE = employees' positive emotions, ENE = employees' negative emotions, EI = employee innovation; $N_{\text{individual}} = 388$, $N_{\text{team}} = 76$; * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

The results of investigations into the main effects of authentic leadership and mediating effects of employees' emotions are presented in Table 2. The ICC(1) value produced by the null model in hierarchical linear modeling was 17.1% [$0.061/(0.061+0.295)$], which means that 17.1% of the variation in the employee innovation was derived from between-team variation, whereas 82.9% was derived from within-team variation. Therefore, the between-team variations should be considered.

Model 1 was used to test the effect of control variables. After controlling the abovementioned variables, we found that team AL was positively associated with members' innovation and H1 was, therefore, supported. Team AL was positively related to employees' positive emotions, which provides support for H2a. However, Model 3b failed to support H2b and, consequently, H3c. Model 4 shows that the effect of team AL on employee innovation was significant when considering employees' positive emotions, and employees' positive emotions were positively related to employee innovation. This result implies a partial mediating effect of employees' positive emotions on the cross-level relationship between AL and employee innovation, supporting H3b.

Discussion

In this study we proposed a theoretical framework to explore the cross-level effects of team AL on employee innovation. The results increase empirical support for the theory of AL, demonstrating that leaders using an authentic leadership style encourage employee innovation through evoking positive

Table 2. Hierarchical Linear Modeling of Employee Innovation: Authentic Leadership as a Cross-Level Mediator

Variable	Null model	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3a	Model 3b	Model 4
γ_{00}	3.778 (0.061)***	3.746 (0.081)***	3.712 (0.054)***	3.285 (0.111)***	2.276 (0.102)***	3.739 (0.064)***
Gender		-.011 (.165)	-.236 (.170)	.062 (.287)	.030 (.321)	-.172 (.135)
Age		.014 (.023)	.022 (.023)	-.010 (.045)	-.065 (.026)*	.010 (.023)
Education		.017 (.074)	.017 (.059)	-.034 (.090)	.272 (.142)	.098 (.062)
Job tenure		-.011 (.015)	-.021 (.016)	.011 (.037)	.038 (.023)	-.015 (.016)
Team size		.031 (.014)*	.015 (.011)	-.019 (.016)	-.069 (.019)**	.013 (.015)**
AL (L2)			.653 (.167)***	.687 (.257)*	.521 (.323)	.482 (.132)**
EPE (L1)				.281 (.066)***		
Individual-level variance (σ^2)	.295	.167	.166	.585	.474	.095
Team-level variance (τ)	.542	.408	.407	.764	.688	.308

Note. AL = authentic leadership, EPE = employee positive emotions; $N_{\text{individual}} = 388$, $N_{\text{team}} = 76$; * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

emotions in their individual team members. To our knowledge, we are the first to investigate the mediating effect in this relationship.

Recent researchers found only a direct relationship between authentic leadership and creativity (see e.g., Rego et al, 2012, 2014). Baer (2012) stated that the link between creativity and the other elements of employee innovation is not always positive and straightforward. In our study we expanded the general framework from creativity to include idea promotion and implementation as two of the factors that constitute employee innovation. We did not examine the third innovation factor of idea generation in this study.

In addition, some researchers regard AL as a multifaceted construct and have called for a multifaceted research design, especially at the team level (Avolio et al., 2004). Our results in this study support the idea that AL has a team-level effect on employee innovation.

Our findings with regard to the mediating role of employees' positive emotions in the relationship between AL and employee innovation have obvious theoretical implications. Avolio and Mhatre (2012) stated that there is an urgent need to explore the broader range of mediating mechanisms in the relationship between AL and performance outcomes. Our results reveal that, compared to less authentic leaders, highly authentic leaders may encourage more innovation in their employees. When leaders are perceived as authentic, employees are more likely to experience positive emotions, such as courage and enthusiasm. Consequently, employees who perceive their leader as authentic are also more likely to propose innovative solutions to improve upon the routines used by their leaders or colleagues, to have increased confidence to sell ideas for implementation, and to be able to deal more easily with both problems and opportunities. These findings are consistent with the preliminary theoretical deduction of Avolio et al. (2004), that authentic leaders impact follower behaviors through followers' positive emotions.

Our study has significant implications for leaders. It is beneficial for team leaders to insist on authenticity, emphasizing the four dimensions of self-awareness, balanced processing, relational transparency, and an internalized moral perspective, to stimulate employee innovation. Practical interventions by leaders to promote employees' positive emotions would be using methods such as helping employees clarify their contributions to the team, giving them consistent encouragement and showing appreciation, pushing them to find a better fit in their strengths, and take on new challenges. Leaders who show positive emotions may arouse employees' positive imitation. In addition, the fact that controlling employees' negative emotions as a mediator was not supported by the empirical data we obtained in our study, means that, in order to encourage and stimulate employee innovation, leaders should regularly assess the emotional state of their employees and should pay more attention to increasing individuals'

positivity in practical ways than to buffering their negativity. Further, we suggest that leaders should create more opportunities for employees' to participate in team decision making and information sharing in order to evoke employees' innovation potential. Team leaders need to regularly assess the emotional state of their employees, especially frontline workers, and to pay more attention to their emotional labor and innovative labor and to individuals' positivity rather than their negativity. Team leaders who show positive emotions may arouse employees' positive imitation. In addition, leaders should regularly assess employees' emotional state, and should pay more attention to individuals' positivity than to negativity in order to provoke employee innovation.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

There are some limitations to this study and further work needs to be done in the future. First, data from samples of employees and leaders outside of the manufacturing industry could be gathered to increase the generalizability of our findings. Second, although we controlled the survey process strictly, self-reported surveys may still be biased by common method variance. Third, the use of a cross-sectional research design may have influenced causal inferences. Diverse research designs, such as longitudinal or experimental studies, are recommended to examine the relationship between AL and employee innovation more deeply. Because we only identified a partial mediator, other variables that play an important mediating role in the mechanism need to be assessed in future studies.

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