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Empathy as a Vehicle to Authentic Leadership and Followership in Latin America: A Practitioner Perspective

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Despite the current interest in empathy, existing research about empathy related to authentic leadership is limited, and generally connected to the broader topic of emotional intelligence. While a large body of knowledge about empathy exists, the literature rarely targets the role of empathy in the workplace. By extension, the connection between empathy and authentic leadership, particularly in Latin America, has not been thoroughly investigated. Trends gauging movement over time suggest the current landscape of employee engagement in Latin America continues to remain stagnant (AON Hewitt, 2016). In my experience as a leadership development practitioner, employees often cite tension around leaders who focus on profit over people. This inspired me to wonder if leaders can effectively engage followers using empathy and how empathy relates to authentic leadership. Existing research also indicates there is an opportunity to further extend research by exploring the cultural nuances within and between cultural contexts as it relates to authentic leadership (Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing, &

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Peterson, 2008). The background that follows will provide a definition of authentic leaders and followers, describe how empathy relates to authentic leadership, and explain the benefit of incorporating a global perspective with a focus on Latin America.

What Are Authentic Leaders?

Authentic leadership has recently gained popularity as an effective means of leadership in organizations. Persons who practice authentic leadership have been defined as leaders who have achieved high levels of authenticity in that they know who they are, what they believe, what their values are, and can act upon those values and beliefs while transparently interacting with others (Avolio, Gardner, Walumbwa, Luthans, & May, 2004). Four major attributes of authentic leadership have been put forward: internalized regulation, balanced processing of information, relational transparency, and authentic behavior (Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May, & Walumbwa, 2005). This collective set of behaviors attracts followers. The relational transparency attribute, which refers to leaders who present themselves to followers in a genuine manner, is particularly relevant. This is the attribute most likely to link empathy to authentic leadership because empathy is about genuinely relating to others by demonstrating understanding of their experiences and responding in a congruent manner.

Followership Related to Authentic Leadership

Followers are individuals in the workplace motivated to follow leaders. In this chapter, I will refer to followers as those who follow leaders who demonstrate core elements of authentic leadership. Gardner, Fischer, and Hunt (2009) posited that individuals who choose to follow the leader may or may not be members of the leader's formal organization. In organizational settings, followers can appear as team members of a leader with a formal reporting relationship, as part of a project, as prior direct reports,

or as admirers. In addition, followers who admire and are motivated to follow the leadership of authentic leaders often do so partly because they have a personal connection with the leader's values (Burns, 1978; Yukl, 2002). I will refer to followership as the process of individuals actively following the leader.

Empathy Related to Authentic Leadership

Empathy has several possible links to authentic leadership via emotional intelligence. As defined by Goleman in his groundbreaking book *Emotional Intelligence* (1995), empathy is “the ability to understand the emotional make-up of other people” and “the skill in treating people according to their emotional reactions” (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002, p. 50). They described empathy as a critical competency to what they call “social awareness” which allows for “resonance” with their followers. Further, Kellett, Humphrey, and Sleeth (2006) described emotionally intelligent leadership as the creation of a bond between the leader and the follower. It's possible to infer that empathy, as a component of social awareness via the skill of responding to others based on their emotions, contributes to this bond. Empathy may also link to authentic leadership through the relational transparency attribute.

A Global Perspective

In Western cultures, we know followers are more engaged, voluntarily offer discretionary work effort, and increase productivity if they feel their manager is supportive of their work (Shuck, Rocco, & Albornoz, 2011). In their highly regarded book *Primal Leadership*, Goleman et al. (2002) stated that, “empathy makes a leader able to get along well with people of diverse background or from other cultures” (p. 255). Yet, 98% of leadership theory hails from research conducted in the United States (House & Aditya, 1997), so an opportunity exists to extend research into less economically developed regions and regions with diverse cultures, such as Latin America.

Focus of the Study

Through this research study, I explore whether the commitment of followers in Latin America is affected when leaders use empathy as one element of authentic leadership and whether the Latin American culture influences the use of empathy. I will identify key themes and trends about empathy as they relate to authentic leadership using an interpretative qualitative approach to understand the leader and follower's actual experiences in the workplace, along with context from my experiences as a leadership development practitioner. I will bring to life existing research findings while identifying opportunities for further research.

My key research question aims to discover the following: Do leaders in Latin America use empathy as a vehicle to authentic leadership, does empathy affect their followership and followership commitment and what are the cultural implications? As it relates to authentic leadership, my research specifically explores the following in Latin America:

- What is the role of empathy?
- Does the national culture influence adoption of empathy?
- What similarities and differences across Latin American country culture exist when empathy is used?
- Do leaders increase followership and followership commitment by using empathy?

The following sections describe the interview approach and findings along with the benefits and drawbacks of this approach. The final section offers recommendations for future research.

Interview Approach

I conducted semistructured one-on-one interviews with 11 leaders and 22 of their followers from multiple organizations, industries, and geographies across Latin America. In advance of each interview, I provided a written overview of the research project, a definition of authentic

leadership and empathy, and a set of open-ended questions to initiate dialogue. I began each interview with open-ended questions, listened to responses and probed for further information or detail based on the leader's or follower's response.

Leaders and followers represented the following countries: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Colombia. Most of the leaders currently hold leadership roles in well-known Fortune 500 organizations, and a majority of the followers formally reported to one of these leaders. The leader interviews were all conducted in English, and the follower interviews were conducted both in English and Spanish, depending on the language preference of the follower. I reviewed and analyzed the data that emerged from these interviews and identified key themes. In several instances, leader quotes contain unedited grammatical errors to preserve the integrity of the comments because English is not the leader's primary language.

Findings

The findings suggest there appears to be a relationship in which empathy serves as a vehicle for authentic leadership in Latin America. When leaders use empathy, they open a window to understanding. This expands the relationship with the follower, most frequently through a deepening of trust and greater understanding of the follower. When a follower feels understood and has a more trusting relationship with the leader, the follower is more willing to follow the leader.

An overwhelming majority of the leaders interviewed reported they regularly use empathy as part of their leadership. While only half of the leaders indicated they have followers that follow them because of their use of empathy, an overwhelming majority of the followers indicated the leader's use of empathy made them want to follow the leader.

Key Themes Emerging from Research Questions

Several themes arose from the leader and follower interviews. The following sections explore the themes in each of the focus areas of the study.

Empathy Has a Role as Part of Authentic Leadership

The findings surfaced examples where empathy played a role when it comes to authentic leadership. Specifically, themes emerged around working relationships, communication, and trust with a connection to improved work or business results. In addition, leaders indicated follower and follower commitment occurred when using empathy, even when the organization operated incongruently.

Most leaders used empathy regularly within their everyday interactions with followers, and as an intervention, when needed. In contrast, leaders who indicated they used empathy on a periodic basis described its use primarily as an intervention. Empathy was most frequently described in a way indicating it serves as a compass to guide leader responses. Most leaders also indicated they self-initiated their investment in empathetic behaviors and were self-motivated to do so.

Empathy appears to serve as a container where deeply collaborative relationships thrive. As a result, these relationships were reported as translating to increasingly effective and efficient business outcomes. Leaders indicated the elements of the empathetic container include approaches for deepening trust, creating partnerships, placing a greater focus on results, encouraging a willingness to embrace change, increasing motivation, increasing engagement, and affecting both direct and indirect relationships. When mixed with the other attributes of authentic leadership, empathy may serve as a springboard to strengthen relationship outcomes of authentic leadership.

The use of empathy relates to relational transparency, a core attribute of the authentic leader. While a leader may be designated as an authentic leader within the context of other attributes such as competence, reliability, concern for followers, and standards of performance (Fields, 2007), empathy was not assigned any specific contextual attributes. However, leaders did acknowledge empathy must be used in an authentic way to achieve improved relationship or business outcomes. When asked about the connection to authentic leadership, Carolina (participant names are pseudonyms) highlighted, "I think people respond to that. They admire when you truly care and you cannot care without empathy." Rafael described an inauthentic attempt to practice empathy: "You can use it

fake, but it doesn't come from inner, and over time it shows up that you didn't really care. It shows up in a transactional environment. If you think about long-term relations, it has to be used in an authentic way."

Within this empathetic container, several empathetic leadership approaches stood out. The most frequently cited result included a deepening of trust. This appeared in a variety of ways, from the leader actively taking trust into consideration, to using emotion to develop or enhance mutually trustworthy relationships.

In a study by Avolio et al. (2004), they defined trust as a critical element in the efficiency of the leader. In my experience as a leadership development practitioner, I've routinely observed trust emerge through relationship development between the leader and the follower in a variety of contexts. In my research, many followers suggested the leaders they follow use empathy to contribute to a solid foundation of trust. This trust results in extending the relationship beyond that of a leader into a long-term trusted advisor. Phyllis described her interaction with her leader: "I feel so comfortable to work with her and I trust her. Not just on the project, but I trusted her help me to contribute with other topics. I could share similar situations. If the situation is not good at the company and if I feel something is not going well and I need someone to trust and share an opinion, she always has an answer."

Followers described empathy leading to an increase in the depth of trust. Miguel stated: "I made a connection with her. Our connection started to be more emotional. I used to tell her everything. When we have an open conversation, everything got better." Myrna described the relationship bond: "He shows closeness. He is not by the book. He is human."

These deeper levels of trust may be established or enhanced using empathy. Leaders described the deepening of trust as supporting and anchoring a more effective partnership. They noted the more the leader used empathy, the greater the trust. This translated to a better partnership between leader and follower because followers felt as though they could put forth their best effort without feeling as if they were simply doing as they were told or being manipulated to do additional work.

Communication arose as a theme. Through communication, empathy played a role in increasing motivation and inspiring the willingness of the follower to embrace change and increase engagement. This occurred in

multiple ways. First, empathy opened up greater willingness to receive communication from the leader. This can affect the receptivity to explore a change, motivate an action, or increase engagement. One leader, Claudio, explained: “When you use empathy, it’s like you transmit a message that you are someone who stands on the same position to the other person, even without being there.”

Secondly, leaders claimed that balanced dialogue was key. While there was often a formal reporting relationship between a leader and a follower, several leaders reported they eschewed hierarchy. As a result, followers reportedly felt a power balance in which the dialogue was between colleagues, rather than between leader and subordinate. Parry used empathy to tease apart a subtle difference between viewing employees as a vehicle to complete work and viewing employees as individuals. He shared: “I like to see employees as a person with unique emotions and a way of seeing the world. I am not trying to see them as an instrument.”

Followers appeared to favorably receive this approach. A follower, Maureen, explained how her leader led her to feel a balance of power because her leader used empathy to treat her like a peer and colleague. Maureen shared this about her leader: “His door is open; he is not hierarchical.”

Finally, followers who were recipients of empathetic communication indicated they were more willing to follow and, together with their leader, crack open a space for a deeper working relationship. One follower shared that the commitment to her leader was not solely her own willingness to follow, it extended to the broader team as well. Her team symbolically referred to the leader as the “company logo” – something they looked up to – and it represented the type of willingness they had to follow her.

Jorge expressed his approach like this: “I try to establish communication. The empathy is something really, really important. If I don’t understand the other side, I will not reach the best result.” Empathy further served to guide leader responses and to influence productive results. One leader identified multiple positive results when using empathy. Rene said: “When I use empathy, I can see more participation in the decisions, more motivation in the team, embracing change, focus on results, team work cross functionally.” Another leader described the results achieved when using empathy. Marcela shared:

The District Managers were working out of fear with previous leaders. When you sit down and hear what the employees feel, it's easier to identify how to help them and put yourself in their shoes. You might identify how to create confidence, or if motivation is lacking.

It was not just the leaders who identified these results. Followers described very similar results. Manolo described it like this: "It is important to have empathy, and my result regarding engagement and results to bring new business increased."

Leaders indicated some of the ways they differentiated themselves as authentic leaders is by using empathy for career development, conflict management, or as an intervention. Carolina communicated: "I gravitate to developing people, and there's a certain amount of empathy to use to stretch them, but not let them crack."

Several leaders described employing empathy as an intervention in specific situations to engage a follower in a challenging conversation such as managing performance or navigating conflict or organizational change. In those circumstances, they intentionally planned an empathetic dialogue or conversation in advance. Jaime explained: "I tend to use empathy the most for organizational change especially. I try to put myself in their position first, before talking to them." Jaime described his approach in action:

The Human Resources Manager is always trying to be the short-term winner and be on the good side of everyone. I need this guy to function. I spoke to him privately. It was empathetic, but planned. He's afraid that he doesn't win. I decided to be just as honest. Having done that, I created a loyalty needed to get out of the slump and make appropriate business decisions.

Rafael empathized with a follower to coach them on their performance. This follower happened to be a leader, trying to drive organizational change. Rafael noticed the follower was taking a less effective approach. The follower was engaging with one of his own followers to drive toward a result. He offered some advice on the follower's performance using empathy. Rafael described making his follower aware that when he takes a particular approach, he solves the business problem but

simultaneously reveals that someone was not performing. This results in increased support from his leadership but decreases support from followers. He explained: “By using empathy, I was able to successfully coach the leader and help them understand that when trying to drive change, they can do it in a constructive or destructive manner.” Rafael also voiced that he used empathy in times of conflict to help him examine the other perspective and then turn the mirror on himself. He discovered that often during times of conflict, the responsibility was his, stating:

I like to use it in conflict management. One thing that I have in my assumption is people do things in the wrong way but not with the wrong intent. 90% of the time I think that I was wrong because I didn't have the full picture.

Lastly, Carolina expressed an example of her use of empathy as a situational lever. She read the situation and determined the degree of empathy warranted and adjusted accordingly. She described using empathy as a radar, stating: “Situationally, I might tighten it more as a volume lever. If someone is going through a tough time, my radar gets broader. Certain times, it has to get higher.”

The National Culture Influences Adoption of Empathy

Use of empathy as part of authentic leadership may be influenced by national culture. Leaders differed in their opinion of whether they were influenced by the national culture. Some leaders indicated the national culture directly or indirectly influenced their use of empathy while others indicated no influence whatsoever. What emerged is an early indication the national culture may influence the leaders' use of empathy based upon the specific cultural norms of the respective Latin American country. For example, leaders based in Brazil overwhelmingly indicated the elements of their national culture influenced their use of empathy in their leadership. Jorge, a Brazil-based leader stated: “The Brazilian culture affects the way I do things. We are very informal and close to everyone. This part of the culture helps me to be more open in any discussion.”

Julia, another Brazilian leader shared: “In Brazil, we are very open and accept that people approach us. People give you the space so you can connect at a different level than the business itself.”

Conversely, in Chile, the opposite may be in effect. Leaders in Chile indicated a preference for large power distance, as described by Hofstede’s (1984) model of cultural dimensions. They also indicated that hierarchy and competition are highly valued. These two areas might appear diametrically opposed to using empathy as part of authentic leadership. Jaime, a leader based in Chile, declared the hierarchy as “a class system.” Another Chile based leader, Parry, stated that the culture in Chile is: “...very competitive. Not empathetic at all. That’s why I am a little different.”

While both countries are in Latin America, it appears the national culture influences use of empathy in a somewhat polarized way. Another perspective arose where meaningful connections could be derived using empathy. Regardless of the national culture, leaders opined that empathy can be used to make connections to break through cultural barriers and even build a bridge between cultures. Julia expressed: “You are able to use empathy to connect, especially with the different cultures.” Marcela explained that the use of empathy is culture-agnostic, stating: “It’s regardless of what country I’m in because we work with human beings.” Another leader shared that in Latin America the balance between emphasizing both the professional and personal is important, a leader must be mindful of erring on the side of too much business conversation. The incorporation of inquiries about personal interests into conversations is another way to use empathy. Rafael used the popular Latin American pursuit of soccer as an example: “Building the bridge is part of empathy – asking about soccer is important.”

Lastly, one leader based in Chile raised the use of empathy within the context of the Hofstede masculinity–femininity dimension. This dimension refers to societal adoption of gender roles. Within societies, behavior trends toward either masculine or feminine dimensions. Parry described his behavior as leaning toward the masculine dimension by identifying his paternalistic experience related to trust, sharing: “When you start being empathetic, you are a father to the rest of the company. They feel support that is not technical, but emotional. They trust me. It is more of an affective response.”

Similarities and Differences Across Latin American Country Culture Exist When Empathy Is Used

When empathy is used, similarities and differences exist across national country cultures in Latin America. I will highlight the similarities reported, along with notable differences.

Leaders overwhelmingly indicated a preference for consistently leading with empathy across the four Latin American country cultures included in this research. Followers across Latin American cultures overwhelmingly reported the leader's use of empathy specifically made them want to follow the leader.

Leaders reported similarities in the positive benefits and business outcomes because of using empathy. They collectively described creating an environment where people can be themselves, can work more efficiently and therefore more productively, and are more responsive and engaged, resulting in higher degrees of trust and commitment to both the work and the leader.

Followers across cultures consistently reported feeling comfortable in their relationship with the leader because of the leader's use of empathy. Cristobal reported: "It makes it a lot easier when you feel comfortable, I can ask for guidance instead of holding to yourself and hoping for the best. In other cases, I hold back because fear of punishment."

Differences between Latin American cultures can be noted. While trust was similar between Latin American cultures, how it emerged differed across country cultures. Additionally, while leaders regularly used empathy as a vehicle for authentic leadership, their motivation and context for using empathy differed. For example, one leader in one country described using empathy to discover differences, while a leader in another country described using empathy to bring people together. It is unclear whether these differences are due to differences in Latin American culture, context, leader preference or some other factor, such as the organization's industry.

Leaders Increase Followership Using Empathetic Leadership

Consistent with the existing research about the direct effect and indirect effect of authentic leadership on followers (Avolio et al., 2004), both

leaders and followers reported direct and indirect follower effects from using empathetic leadership. This Included both an increase in the number of followers and an increase in follower commitment to the leader.

While trust came up as one of the most common effects, it was mentioned as both an antecedent and an outcome of using empathy related to increased followership. Julia shared: “Once you are at a more emotional level you can fulfill the work. Having the connection and then you start building trust.” Rafael described trust as an outcome related to better understanding follower intent. He articulated:

Trust is a long-term benefit. Think about how you use empathy to understand why someone did what they did and the facts. Did they have an intent? Were they distracted? Empathy helps you identify intent over time, and that helps you help people.

Followers observed leaders’ use of empathy translated directly into action. In one instance, a leader put people ahead of business results by recognizing the team for their hard work in the face of disappointing business results. Sylvia described this scenario:

Last time we are in [location redacted] our results were not great. At the end of the meeting, no one expected anything. Marcela arrived with champagne to celebrate. That is the way that she finds to thank us because of our results. It was incredible.

In addition, followers described the impact leaders had upon them when they experienced extremely difficult circumstances. Multiple followers described difficult and poignant personal circumstances that directly impacted their work or would likely impact them in the future. They shared that in those circumstances, the leader put the follower’s needs over business results. Their examples included circumstances ranging from medical difficulties during a pregnancy, to fighting life-threatening illnesses, to experiencing a death in the family. Followers explained how the leader, using empathy, understood the seriousness and responded in a way that both supported the follower and brought the follower some measure of relief from the difficulty.

Followers further described leaders as gleaning information through empathetic conversations that influenced the leaders to balance people with results in the business. This description serves as another possible indicator that leaders who use empathy to glean information that influences their actions are embracing the relational transparency attribute of authentic leadership. Followers indicated leaders who allowed themselves to be appropriately influenced by information gleaned from them through empathetic conversations increased their commitment. Klint explained his leader's approach: "He always says that we focus on people and not on product. It's about human relationships. We try to treat them as human beings. Empathy is a great part of that. We are concerned with how people are."

Leaders responded to information gained through empathy by staying true to their beliefs about the best way to solve a problem, even if it pushed a boundary. One follower, Angela, was overloaded by work. Her leader had no budget for additional resources, and she described his empathetic response: "I saw him bend the rules to find a creative way to hire. He has the angle of doing what's right for people and business."

Followers described their loyalty and commitment to leaders as one which would cause them to follow them to another position, company, or even location because of their empathetic leadership. One follower stated she worked with her leader at a previous organization and followed him to the current organization. Another followed their leader three different times. Manuel explained he had a lot of mentees and they told him they would go so far as to resign if he left his role. He said: "People have told me if I relocate, they will leave the company."

Several followers indicated that they experienced emotional distress when their leaders were no longer their leader or even anticipating they would no longer be their leader. This impact may partially indicate the degree of commitment felt by these followers. Phyllis said she reacted when her leader transferred to another role in the company: "I cried when she transferred."

Most followers noted the leader they described was one of the best leaders they ever had. Many leaders described that followers, previously members of their team, now come back to them for career advice. The

leaders explained one way they recognized they were known for their use of empathy was when followers outside of the formal reporting channels followed them and sought them out for advice in lieu of their own leader or another designated resource such as a human resource professional. Myrna took the description of the commitment to another level. She said: "I wouldn't just follow him; he is giving an important message. I have the same responsibility to pay it forward to others." Leader motives for using empathy varied, but it is clear it helped to achieve the same outcome; an increase in follower commitment, and in this case, the formation of future empathetic leaders by the example of their empathetic leader.

Followers indicated they committed to authentic leaders who used empathy, even if the organization operated incongruently. Leader descriptions of their internal leadership and organizational culture varied dramatically. In some larger organizations, the organization was described as containing leadership subcultures with their own unique elements. Regardless of these subcultures, in most cases, the cultural leadership orientation of the organization did not directly influence the leader's choice to use empathy.

Followers responded to leaders who used empathy regardless of the expected cultural, organizational, or leadership norms. The leaders even appeared to stand out. Many followers indicated their leader was "different" or "quite different" and distinguished themselves uniquely in their organization by leading with empathy. Marcela declared empathetic leadership as being a part of herself. She said: "It's part of my regular DNA. You use empathy to create the link."

A few leaders indicated their organization advocates and supports the use of empathy in leadership. Of those few, even fewer said they were directly or indirectly influenced by this. In these cases, it's possible the leader was using empathy as a vehicle for authentic leadership. Many followers stated that leaders who used empathy, even if the organization was operating incongruently, was a factor in their followership commitment. Klint explained not only his own commitment as a follower but his observations of other followers' commitment stating: "Other colleagues look for him because he has this environment created at work."

Discussion

Empathy as a Vehicle for Authentic Leadership

My research indicates that if a leader applies empathy as part of authentic leadership, they will be able to more effectively motivate followers and create stronger working relationships. Leaders who regularly use empathy accelerate the development of effective relationships resulting in greater follower willingness to engage, produce, or offer discretionary effort. Thus, investing in using empathy up front while building relationships may free up leader time in the long run. In my work, I've observed multiple occurrences where the use of empathy generates two-way transparent communication as the norm and followers learn to count on support from their leader. Spurred by this enhanced foundation of trust, leaders save time in interactions. By using relationship shortcuts such as an established understanding of expectations and quality standards, preferred approaches for execution, and fewer and brief updates they take advantage of the bond that emerges in developed relationships. A leadership advantage through an increase in follower engagement, productivity, commitment, leader and organizational loyalty and discretionary effort occurs as a result (see Fig. 3.1).

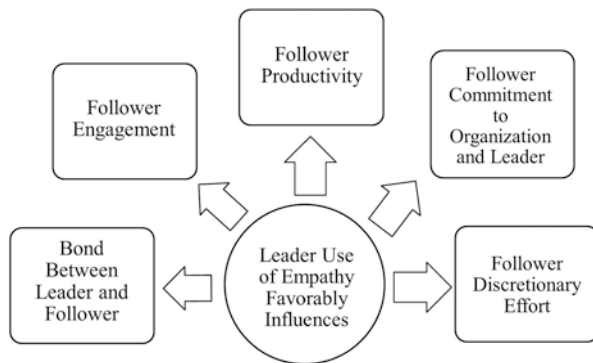


Fig. 3.1 Leadership advantage of using empathy

In this study, leaders across the Latin American cultures indicated their use of empathy influenced follower work engagement as well as commitment. This finding was not wholly unexpected for numerous reasons. Research suggests Authentic Leadership predicts positive work engagement (Aviolo, Gardner, Walumbwa, Luthans, & May, 2004; Rego, Sousa, Marques, & Pina e Cunha, 2012; Walumbwa, Hartnell, & Oke, 2010), so it follows that if empathy is a vehicle for authentic leadership, it may have the potential to influence work engagement. In my view, empathy is then most closely connected to the relational transparency attribute of authentic leadership, and has the potential to influence work engagement through this vehicle. It may be the underlying mechanism responsible for the observations made by leaders across Latin American cultures; their use of empathy influenced follower work engagement as well as commitment.

By leading with empathy, leaders can establish closer relationships (George, 2003). Both leaders and followers described how empathy helped them build a deeper sense of trust and forged a tighter bond between the leader and follower, creating a closer relationship. In many cases, leaders nourished the relationship by continuing to nurture the trust developed through empathy to achieve greater outcomes of engagement. Leaders described the use of empathy and its positive impact on communication, conflict management, organizational change, and decision-making. These findings mirror existing research that indicates empathy may be instrumental in not only building bonds with followers but in effective communication, problem-solving, decision-making, and performance (Kellett et al., 2006).

In some cases, leaders modeled leading with empathy, which fostered the development of empathy in followers and paying it forward for followers to emulate. This finding supports research which indicates that through positive modeling, authentic leaders foster the development of authenticity in followers (Avolio & Gardner, 2005).

While my research suggests empathy can serve as a vehicle for authentic leadership and an increase in follower commitment, additional research is necessary to determine the specific contextual and environmental factors that allow follower commitment to emerge and thrive in Latin American business organizations.

Benefits and Drawbacks of This Research Approach

My interest in deeply understanding the descriptive answers to the research question led me to utilize interviews with leaders and followers. The interviews provided a narrative of specific experiences, and I discovered nuances through follow-up questions, which offered clarification and additional insights. Interviews with followers helped to complete the narrative about the leader's approach and uncover some credible conclusions to examine.

However, this research has some drawbacks, such as limitations in geography and sample size. Data comprised only 4 out of 20 countries in Latin America. The sample size is small, was based on my direct and indirect network, and the study was carried out across a small set of organizations. In addition, the intention of conducting interviews was to draw out specific experiential examples. However, leaders and followers self-reported and could have been influenced by other factors in their responses. Further research is necessary to reach a point of saturation to explore a more direct correlation between empathy and authentic leadership. Despite these drawbacks, the research suggests there is a possible relationship where empathy serves as a vehicle for authentic leadership in Latin America.

Opportunities for Further Exploration

Research tells us leaders with high emotional intelligence can empathize with followers (Gardner et al., 2009). Existing research claims that leaders who have high self-monitoring skills are closely attuned to the situational cues of others and more sensitive to follower's emotions, thus allowing them to demonstrate more empathy (Gardner et al., 2009). Both areas warrant further exploration, considering the findings of this study.

Goleman (1995), in his book *Emotional Intelligence*, explains that empathy is a key attribute of emotional intelligence. While none of the leaders interviewed explicitly used the words "emotional intelligence" in their descriptions, their examples consistently described emotion, how they felt, and how they wanted their followers to feel. Followers also used

emotional descriptors. Future research can explore additional intersections between empathy, emotions, and leadership, within leader–follower relationships.

Commitment to leaders who use empathy in their leadership, even though their organizations may be operating incongruently, impacts follower's commitment. However, study participants provided varying degrees of context. Therefore, it is unclear to what degree the leader's use of empathy within this organizational context is a factor in follower's commitment. Because it may be weighted more or less than other factors related to the leaders' use of empathy, there would be a benefit to exploring this further.

Followers reported that the more the leader used empathy as part of their leadership, the more they increasingly counted on consistency and predictability in the actions of the leader. It may be advantageous to explore whether empathetic leadership, consistency, and predictability are correlated.

In describing their leaders, followers often made comparisons between the leader they were describing and a leader who did not demonstrate empathy as part of their leadership. Depersonalization emerges as the possible behavior of a leader who does not demonstrate empathy. Further comparative exploration by comparing the behaviors of empathetic and nonempathetic leaders may offer some additional insight into the impact of empathy on followers as an element of authentic leadership.

Application to Organizations

The research indicates leaders who adopt empathy as part of their leadership approach in the workplace achieve greater positive, collaborative working relationships, and increase follower commitment. This, in turn, leads to greater productivity and work engagement. Empathy is a significant predictor of leadership emergence (Bruch & Walter, 2007; Kellett et al., 2002, 2006). If empathy predicts leadership emergence and could serve as a vehicle for authentic leadership, implementing programs to strengthen empathy as an element of authentic leadership will improve an emerging leader's effectiveness early in their leadership journey.

Organizations can invest in programs to support existing leaders who use this empathetic leadership approach, while training and encouraging emerging and future leaders to adopt empathy as part of their leadership.

Lastly, organizations that intentionally create and maintain an organizational climate where empathy is valued as a part of authentic leadership stand to gain multiple advantages, including increased engagement and productivity.

Conclusions

As described at the outset of this research study, I set out to explore whether empathy serves as a vehicle for authentic leadership. I discovered that empathy may serve as a vehicle to access and engage the relational transparency attribute of authentic leadership, and this may in turn affect leader followership and corresponding commitment of their followers. By using empathy to foster understanding, empathy contributes to creating or increasing a bond between a leader and the follower. This appears to be the key role of empathy as a part of authentic leadership. Empathy results in influencing the development of collaborative relationships based on the deepening of trust and in influencing outcomes that increase in follower engagement, productivity, commitment, leader and organizational loyalty, and discretionary effort. Followers appear to commit to authentic leaders who use empathy even if the organization operates incongruently. In addition, the findings from both leader and follower interviews highlighted that empathy may serve as a springboard to strengthen relationship outcomes of authentic leadership. However, it is unclear whether different national cultures influence adoption of empathy. While there are similarities and differences in Latin American national cultures relating to empathy, the findings indicate that different national cultures may achieve the same outcome, which is an increase in follower commitment, even when leaders' motives for using empathy vary.

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