

Chapter 13

A Comedian Who Changed the Leadership Script in Reykjavik: The Case of Jón Gnarr



*The atmosphere in the workplace was just turned around.
Anonymous employee of Reykjavik City Council*

Abstract This chapter is a case study of the leadership exercised by Jón Gnarr, a famous comedian who later served as the mayor of Reykjavik through 2010–2014. This profile is based on the reflections and insights shared during seven open-ended interviews with official city leaders who had closely worked with Jón Gnarr in the political arena. Evidence suggests that Jón Gnarr emerged as a leader due to extreme social and economic factors, which led to the election of the Best Party and thus shaped an unorthodox leader. At the same time, the descriptions provided by his followers portray an image of a leader that closely matches the theories of authentic leadership and has made a lasting impact. When Jón Gnarr stepped into the role of the mayor of Reykjavik, he used new tactics that had not been seen before with trust, respect, and care as the underlying values, out-of-the-box behavior patterns, original communication style, and intuition. Thus, he inspired his followers to change their own communication style. Finally, the case laid out in this chapter contributes to our understanding of authentic and unconventional leadership as an efficient vehicle in unusual circumstances.

Keywords Authentic leadership · Mayor of Reykjavik · Jón Gnarr

13.1 The Bigger Picture

From a research standpoint, for a long time, a great portion of leadership literature covered analysis from the position of the leader and hence focused on the leader or the effects that an individual in the role has on followers (Bass 1985, 1998; Blom 2016; Korzyski 2014). This tendency, combined with a strong preference for quantitative research methods (Mahsud et al. 2010; Bryman 2004; Blom 2016), eventually resulted in a rather unbalanced understanding of the concept of leadership

(Blom and Alvesson 2014). As the field was developing and growing, more actors and factors were added to the leadership picture, including greater attention to followers, leader-follower relationships, broader groups of leadership stakeholders, and the related factors. Thus, environmental factors such as culture, meaning, norms, and for recent decades, feelings, thinking, and values that are laid down through communication, became more evident (Blom and Alvesson 2014; Kotter 1985).

The penetration of leader-centric perspective sometimes referred to as “romantic” view on leaders, often portraying them as heroes (Diddams and Chang 2012; Meindl 1995; Sinclair 2007; Guðmundsdóttir 2011), was arguably dominant until the first global financial crisis of the twenty-first century. A shift in the leadership discourse arose together with the uncertainty and corporate scandals that shook the leadership domain at the time of financial crisis of 2008, prompting both scholars and practitioners to investigate what kind of leadership builds and promotes sustainability, including transparency and trust. In this landscape, Iceland was found in an unfavorably particular position: once its three major banks collapsed in just 1 week in October 2008, it experienced the most profound and most rapid ramifications (Danielsson and Zoega 2009). Different leaders were required for a new era.

13.2 Theoretical Underpinnings

Leadership is a process between the leader and followers, which, depending on its nature, can be viewed through a number of theoretical lenses. The case presented in this chapter documents an example of authentic leadership in action, which foundations are discussed in this section. The elements of authentic leadership consist of self-awareness, unbiased processing, authentic behavior, and authentic relational orientation (Ilies et al. 2005).

When the environment is chaotic, there is a tendency for followers to call for a change in leadership or other types of leadership behaviors (Williams et al. 2012). In the 1990s, the theory of transformation or transformational leadership was one of the first theories to provide a framework of leadership when uncertainty was high. There are four components of transformational leadership: firstly, *idealized influence*—the leader serves as an ideal role model for followers; the leader gains respect by doing what needs to be done. Secondly, *inspirational motivation*—the leader has the ability to inspire and motivate followers. These first two combined are what constitute the transformation of what Bass names the leader’s charisma. Thirdly, *individualized consideration*—transformational leaders, according to the theory, demonstrate genuine concern for the needs and feelings of followers. Thus, they bring out subordinate’s best efforts. Fourthly, *intellectual stimulation*—transformational leader challenges subordinates to come up with creative solution (Burns 1978).

According to the theory, transformational leaders empower their followers by inspiring them through intellectual motivation and encouraging them to develop themselves further, thus increasing their follower’s productivity (Bass 1999). Burns

(1978) and Bass (1985) pointed out a gap in the literature as it was more geared toward the transactional model of leadership. The transactional model, according to them, stated that the roles of the leader were setting goal, supporting employees, and ensuring that the job gets done through specific performance appraisal systems or giving out “carrots” in exchange for the right behaviors. According to Bass (1998), leaders should strive to reach employees at an emotional level as a means to help them achieve beyond what they ever thought was possible. Instead, within the transformational model, the contributing factors are charismatic leadership, inspirational leadership, and visionary leadership. Leaders who are charismatic and can inspire their followers to look toward the future are, according to Bass (1998), transformational. The theory of transformational leadership was of great importance, and the following theories have underpinnings that are highly related to it (Avolio et al. 2009; Mahsud et al. 2010). It continues to be important, and it is necessary for the dynamic nature of modern organizations as well as employee’s expectation that leaders will help them achieve their personal and professional goals.

Among them is the theory of authentic leadership, with its differential emphasis on what it means to be “authentic” or, as Avolio and Gardner (2005) refer to on examples of Greek philosophers, what it is “to thy self be true” (p. 5) and how authenticity influences leadership and leaders (Avolio and Gardner 2005; Ladkin and Taylor 2010). Authentic leadership model is based on both philosophy and psychology with the works by Erikson and Maslow among the central pillars. Erik Erikson, the German psychoanalyst, was one of the first to attempt to analyze human’s life, from birth to old age, as a series of distinct and consecutive stages. Abraham Maslow was an American humanist psychologist, but based on his (1954) theory, self-actualization is the highest form of how individuals can succeed in reaching their furthestmost potential, great self-knowledge of one’s talents and skills as well as an understanding of the effect one has on others, and be able to have power over one’s behavior by being conscious of the impact that people have on themselves and others. Maslow suggested that those who reached the self-actualization had stronger ethical values and needs; values are important components of authentic leadership. Carl Rogers, who was an influential figure in the development of education and psychology, in his work referred to authenticity as he stresses that people need to live in the moment and stretch and grow constantly (1957). Avolio and Gardner (2005) applied Maslow’s theory stating that in order to be an authentic leader, the individual has to know oneself well and behave in accordance with the authentic self, related to inner thinking and emotions. Scholars have pointed out that it could be more appropriate to use the term “working selves” or “possible selves” (Ladkin and Taylor 2010). Thus, the life story of the leader enters the picture as a valuable research tool (Shamir and Eilam 2005). This is connected to Erikson’s life stages and Rogers’s work where they state that through experience, people grow and this growth is what leads to a leader’s style, outlook, and relationship with followers.

Authentic leadership stresses that a leader who is authentic usually uses a process where both positive and highly developed organizations motivate self-knowledge and development with discipline in a positive way for both themselves and followers (Avolio et al. 2009). Thus, it is clear that the underlying theme of authentic

leadership is that a leader's personal life experiences, thoughts, emotions, and values shape the leader. Another critical point in the theory is how leaders are actually developed. Shamir and Eilam (2005) pointed out that it is important to analyze the life story in order to understand this process and its outcomes. By analyzing the leaders' life stories, researchers can better understand how leaders' values and identities were formed. Biological factors are sometimes also taken into account, and genetic issues and upbringing are analyzed, but it is generally considered that environmental factors play a more significant role in leaders with their life experience being a strong factor in shaping them (Avolio et al. 2009).

Thus, exactly how leaders behave and compose themselves is an essential factor in leadership, including, how they explore, understand, and process feelings and emotions about their true inner selves. The use of the body language is noticeable in the literature as it is a significant factor in communication and it can be argued that trust between leaders and followers is transmitted through body language (Sinclair 2005; Ladkin and Taylor 2010) and given that authentic leaders may require a talent in acting as they need to be able to draw out emotional responses and bring them forward. Additionally, leaders should be aware of how others see them and how they relate to others or communicate and how to be leader-like or how to take on the role that followers need (Quinn et al. 2000). In this vein, values are also important such as kindness, honesty, commitment, appreciation, and respect which are the foundations of the theory of authentic leadership (Michie and Gooty 2005).

In recent times, scholars within positive leadership strand have developed a broader sense of leadership picture by focusing on the factors that contribute to the empowerment of followers in organizations. Fredrickson (2001) has shown that those who are on the whole positive have more psychological resources to learn and grow and therefore expand themselves. This is the underlying theme that scholars within positive leadership build on when discussing how leaders develop (Avolio et al. 2009). Authentic leadership builds up more self-consciousness and self-control and positive behavior on behalf of leaders and followers. They show a tendency to be hopeful, optimistic, and resilient (Avolio and Gardner 2005). Research within authentic leadership has indicated that those who score high in authentic leadership among subordinates show more commitment toward their organizations and have stronger ethical values. They also seem to be able to build up respect, trust, and employees' participation and integrate them into their communication style and self-understanding (Diddams and Chang 2012; Avolio et al. 2009). A noticeable gap in the literature is authentic leaders' awareness of their weaknesses. It is possible that leaders are more successful by focusing on other factors (Walumbwa et al. 2008). Leaders are often more focused on achieving results, because authentic leaders have more insight and are truer to themselves and they are more inclined to understand and accept their weaknesses and then work to improve them. The recent theory of servant leadership that has already gained acknowledgement among scholars and others (Gunnarsdóttir 2011) has many similarities with and, to a certain degree, complements authentic leadership. The originator of the theory, Robert Greenleaf, puts forward the idea that a leader should be a servant in his or her role as a leader (Guðjónsson and Gunnarsdóttir 2014).

Servant leadership is thus about helping others achieve their goals by offering development, support, and cooperation with the well-being of their followers always at the forefront of the leader's mind (Jónsdóttir et al. 2011). Servant leaders need to be able to have high self-awareness. This is similar to authentic leadership as both theories stress bringing out the best in people as transformational leadership does as well.

Leader-membership exchange theory (LMX) is based on the social exchange theory, which adds up to the equation of authentic leadership by analyzing the relationship between followers and leaders that develops over time and yields mutual benefits (Mahsud et al. 2010). The high quality of the relationship between leaders and followers is grounded in mutual trust, respect, and kindness. If the relationship is strong, followers are willing to work harder, and leaders are willing to empower followers more by giving them access to power and influences (Mahsud et al. 2010). For example, research has indicated that as the relationship becomes stronger between leaders and followers, the more creative and secure and the less stressful the workplace becomes. On the other hand, while quantitative studies have mostly been conducted as explanatory to the theory, there might be factors that call for deeper understanding that has not been yet developed well enough (Blom and Alvesson 2014). The vertical dyad linkage model of leadership explains the difference in quality between the “in-group” and the “out-group” in workplaces. One research showed that over 90% of supervisors formed different quality relationships with their employees. Those reporting high-quality relationships with their supervisors assumed greater job responsibility, contributed more, and were rated as higher performers than those reporting low-quality relationships (Liden and Graen 1980). This is what authentic leadership, servant leadership, and transformational leadership are trying to achieve with each follower.

In particular, it is of great importance to measure the actual need that followers have for leadership and the preference for the type of leadership they have as well (Blom and Alvesson 2014; Blom 2016). In theoretical writings there seems to be a paradox in the fact that it is difficult to analyze if these are the leaders or the followers who are ultimately responsible for the relationship between them (Mahsud et al. 2010; Avolio et al. 2009; Blom and Alvesson 2014; Blom 2016).

In sum, the literature on authentic leadership highlights the ability of leaders to be able to gain self-knowledge and other underlying factors, such as the ability to empower and listen to the followers' ideas to increase their capabilities and independence (Mahsud et al. 2010; Walter et al. 2012). Thus, successful leaders are empathetic and have compassion that leads to an understanding and insight into the emotions of others. Leaders who have these capabilities usually have an interest in other people which leads to their ability to build trust among subordinates. They often aim to protect, foster, and nurture others, and this kind of behavior and thinking process empowers others (Pavlovich and Krahnke 2012; Mahsud et al. 2010; Marques 2013; Holt and Marques 2012). Leaders who have compassion and tend to be caring are confirmed to promote organizational resilience (Lilius et al. 2011). The social exchange theory is well fitted where people are giving and trust each other (Grant 2012), and the leaders have the capabilities to foster the well-being of teams

and followers (Cameron et al. 2003; Sinclair 2007; Csikszentmihalyi 2003). Kernis (2003), another scholar who has contributed to the body of work around authentic leadership, has shown that those that have greater insight into themselves and strong self-confidence are more likely to know and work to improve their weaknesses. Dweck (2006) has shown that leaders who allow themselves and others to make mistakes are more likely to have high self-esteem as they have learned from experience. It seems that humility seems to be the key in authentic leadership.

Nevertheless, it has been noted that in the business environment, it is often the “takers” who grab resources and opportunities for themselves and are at times unethical in their work even though they are deemed “successful” (Holt and Marques 2012). Leadership studies are analyzing a complex concept and are restricted in the sense of reliability and transferability (Sinclair 2007; Korzynski 2014; Blom and Alvesson 2014). There seems to be a gap in the literature on the interplay between the environment and situations in which followers operate. Thus, the following case presented in the next sections contributes to the evidential inventory of authentic leadership and the limited body of qualitative studies aiming to develop a deeper understanding of this phenomenon while taking both leaders and followers into account.

13.3 Jón Gnarr: The Personality Traits of an Authentic Leader

Up to the point of his high-scale leadership appointment, the life of Jón Gnarr (born 2 January 1967 in Reykjavik, his full name is Jón Gunnar Kristinsson) did not include a traditional leadership path, even though there is likely no single road to take toward any leadership role. In his autobiographical books, Jón Gnarr describes his complicated childhood, even referring to himself as “a case” when he was growing up, especially when his education and experience with learning difficulties were discussed. As a youth, his self-image was poor, and self-confidence was very low. It was only through his hard work and willingness to overcome his weaknesses and challenges that eventually enabled him to develop a strong persona. He believes that eventually his life experience had been applied in all of his endeavors. Those who have worked with him are aware that he was diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and that he “needed to be cared for and that is what his supportive wife Joga still does today.” Jón Gnarr said that he was not afraid to reveal his weaknesses and to be vulnerable, stating, “I borrowed others’ judgments when some assignments came to my table that I did not understand, no matter how I tried to focus,” he recalls.

People need to know themselves well to understand their limitations and have the self-confidence to reveal them to others and thus become heavily exposed. This specific type of behavior, including openness about individual weaknesses and allowing one self to be vulnerable, is highly pronounced in the interviews with

both Jón Gnarr and his followers. The theory of authentic leadership involves an assumption that one of the keys of being authentic is to have and employ one's life story for reaching followers (Walumbwa et al. 2008; Kernis 2003; Blom 2016). In line with research by Shamir and Eilam (2005), this life story of a leader eventually was transferred into work, and the "broken" life story of Jón Gnarr enabled him to connect with people, paving the way for his success and that of the Best Party. The critical values that he expressed as a leader with human rights at the forefront and compassion toward marginalized groups were explicit in his communication style that became the next key to leadership once he was appointed the mayor of Reykjavik, discussed in the next section.

13.4 Jón Gnarr and the Best Party: Appointment of a Leader

Jón Gnarr was a comedian, an actor, a writer, and a media professional for a long time, who also at one point worked in an advertising agency. Like many of his countrymen, he lost his work in the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2008. In the following year, he together with his wife Jóhanna Jóhannsdóttir most often referred to as Jóga and their friends, mainly artists, founded a party to run for the city council. The campaign of the party—titled the Best Party—was highly unusual from what was seen as conventional behavior within the political arena. For example, the party released a music video, featuring the song "Simply the best" as a satire on traditional political behavior, including promises on an array of issues and, among them, a hint that they would do "anything for losers." One of the party's core underlying messages was that the politics of Iceland were unethical and in great need of "cleaning up."

The party was reaching voters, and based on the polls, it already gained 12.7% by the beginning of April 2010, according to Visir.is (2010), a leading news agency in Iceland, and 24% by the end of the same month, according to Gallup (Ruv.is 2010). The party was successful in conveying its message as on 29 May 2010, the Best Party won the election and earned 6 out of 15 mandates into the council. They joined forces with the socio-democratic Samfylkingin party, thereby establishing the majority. Eventually, Jón Gnarr was appointed the mayor of Reykjavik, a position that he was not expecting in the beginning. "Why do I always get myself in trouble?" he wondered to himself on the night of the victory (Brockes 2014).

The political landscape was highly unusual in the years before Jón Gnarr became the mayor of Reykjavik. The financial crisis and the breakdown of the Icelandic banks in 2008 completely changed the economic and political contexts in the country. It seemed that the banks had collapsed overnight, and many companies, as well as individuals, went bankrupt, while unemployment skyrocketed, and taxes increased (Guðmundsdóttir and Guðjónsson 2013). This shock led to changes in politics, with distrust and anger as part of the political agenda, and chaos,

accompanied by riots in Reykjavik. From 2006 to 2010, four individuals had served as mayors for Reykjavik (Reykjavikurborg 2015), with Jón Gnarr undertaking the position during the time that was overshadowed by great turbulence and uncertainty.

In a poll that was published just after a year after Jón Gnarr was elected, it became evident that he was the public leader who people thought had the most charisma (Mbl 2011). This finding is in line with extant research findings, suggesting that authentic leadership behavior is embraced by followers often during chaotic times. Followers often put more faith into leaders who appear to be authentic and have stronger faith that these leaders will produce better solutions (Williams et al. 2012).

To gain a more in-depth understanding of the period of Jón Gnarr's leadership following his appointment and the effect that it had on both the political environment and the city officials, six in-depth interviews were conducted with his co-workers and one with Jón Gnarr himself. Those that were interviewed were both from the political arena and the highest-ranking officials of the city. These interviews were then transcribed and coded using standard qualitative research methods. Three central themes were identified in the analyses of these accounts: firstly, the influence of the unusual circumstances of his life, the impact of his life story, and his political intuition.

13.5 The Manifestation of Authenticity: An Unusual Leader for an Unusual Situation

All of the interviewees emphasized the unusual circumstances that Jón Gnarr faced when he became the mayor, including not only the financial crisis but also the turbulent times in the city and its surrounding environment. The interviewees also recalled that they did not hold high expectations before he came into the office and that the recent changes in leadership before his arrival had made them tired and wary of politics partly because of internal political struggles both within and between the old parties. The officials in the city and the citizens of Reykjavik were becoming dissatisfied with uncertainty, little or no foresight in policy-making, and no strong vision for Reykjavik's future. One interviewee noted that it had been "liberating" to meet a mayor who had no prior connections to the old political party system. A particular degree of stagnation in their working environment was apparent according to the interviewees. When the Best Party came, it "shook things up," and one of the main contributing factors is considered to be its way of communicating to the people.

As the interviewees recalled, the newly appointed colleagues were more "caring" and "warm" and, as one interviewee said, were always "hugging" each other. Many members of the Best Party were artists who had previously attained great success in their former careers but had since experienced problems and had needed to go through the 12 steps of the Alcoholics Anonymous program. One of the pillars of the program is the idea that people should look to build close relationships and be truthful and sincere in their behaviors toward them. The members of the Best Party

who joined the Reykjavik council were both more trusting toward each other and others than people were used to. Another emerging factor was that, while their communication transmitted trust, they also focused on people's well-being and would often ask others how they felt about matters of interest to them. While this form of behavior had previously been unheard in the political environment, the party members successfully met one of the tenets of authentic leadership which states that, in order to increase trust between followers and leaders, the leaders need to be aware of how they physically come across toward their followers (Sinclair 2005; Ladkin and Taylor 2010). How leaders come across is partly made up by the body language and how they speak, not only what they say but how they say it.

After a while, when members of the organization became comfortable with a more open style of communication, they started to open themselves up, too. Jón Gnarr himself said that it had taken some time to “break down the barriers of pointless and wrong communication and build up trust.” The extreme economic and political context shaped the leader that followers needed, or, in the words of one interviewee, “what Jón Gnarr was doing, was being an outlet for the anger that prevailed in the society, tried to turn it around and build something positive in the system.” Thus, what Jón Gnarr firstly achieved as a leader together with the Best Party was a substantial shift in the communication style of the city council—an essential first step as it must build on communication and the Icelandic cultural context for effective leadership and people needed a change.

Interviewees agreed that Jón Gnarr “had some intuition” in the meaning to have a feeling or insight for both people and situations that came in good use in the campaign before the elections. He was adept at leveraging and applying his experience as a stand-up comedian to capture the audience and surprise his opponents. After he became the mayor of Reykjavik, he behaved in a very different manner compared to his predecessors. For example, he tattooed the symbol of Reykjavik on his arm and sometimes dressed in drag in public. With this he got people's attention and broke the mold of stuffy politicians and showed that he was one of the people. His colleagues mentioned that it could be “fun to work with a leader who is inspirational.” One of the explanatory factors was that he had the courage to be authentic and, in that way, with time people came to admire that. When he met the highest-ranking officials for the first time, he suggested that they sit in a circle and have an “emotional meeting, where they would only discuss emotions” as one interview described it. Where deemed appropriate he would express his position on critical matters by relating them to popular culture, such as by dressing as a character from the Star Wars or as one of Pussy Riot members, but they were a controversial all women's band, when they were in custody in Russia. He dressed differently and often would come with nail polish applied to meetings or frequently be the odd one out in other settings. He both behaved and thought out-of-the-box, changing the way the city council operated as well as becoming well-known outside the country by gaining international recognition. As one of the interviewees who had been working over 20 years of experience for the city council said: “the atmosphere in the workplace was just turned around.” The case of Jón Gnarr shows that he had a feeling for what people wanted and was able to deliver that. This is in accordance with the definition of authentic leadership style as he was able to relate to people in a

way that gained their attention and followership in accordance to who he is and what is his values and purpose.

Another prominent factor in Jón Gnarr's leadership was his emphasis on empowerment. Gnarr would rely on his insight to evaluate when to step in and when to pull back, which shows unbiased processing as is stated in the theory of authentic leadership. For example, he was never intimidated to admit in the public eye that he did not know exactly what to do in all situations and that sometimes other officials were more knowledgeable than him when certain topics were discussed. Such an honest approach was new in the Icelandic political context, did not follow the norms, and gained respect for Jón Gnarr and his co-workers. He had the ability to be humble enough to admit that he needed help and thus sought the input of others which is a critical element in authentic leadership. At the same time, his employees became empowered and more committed toward serving Reykjavík and its people, and thus he cultivated a sense of servant leadership in his people. They would use expressions such as "he became my friend," and many mentioned that they were very "fond" of him and that they thought he was a "good man, who listened to them." Thus, the leader showed appreciation and kindness, and in turn, people felt that they mattered in the big picture. One interviewee described him as a "magician" who could charm people to make them "love" him. However, he did not do this alone, but build a quality relationship by involving others as the model of authentic leadership describes essential. His party members were both genuinely loyal to him and the party's values. Thus, it can be argued that Jón Gnarr was a leader, at the time that took a disillusioned city in the midst of turmoil to a new place where people were hopeful. He did it through being authentic and connecting with people on an authentic level. Being authentic can produce tremendous, even magical results. He created a legacy and a new model of leadership that is in alignment with the nation's values.

13.6 Concluding Remarks

It is no question that some of the extreme factors that led to Jón Gnarr being elected as a leader for both the Best Party and as the mayor of Reykjavik were, historically speaking, unique in the Icelandic context. The anger and mistrust that people felt before his becoming mayor were overwhelming, and as such, they were ready to even vote for somebody who they thought was making a joke of the entire political process. However, by stepping up as truly authentic leader who modelled and championed the change and who undertook responsibility for the situation he found himself in, Jón Gnarr made a difference. Though building trusting relationships, he moved and inspired his followers, both within the system and outside the system. As a professional actor and comedian, he was able to become the type of a leader that was required both in terms of physical and emotional presence. His experience as a scriptwriter for television and the theater came in handy, as he was able to tell a story and connect with people's needs and emotions, and in this way, he is a typical authentic leader who employs his life story and experience to reach his followers, as

Avolio and Gardner (2005) have stated in their theory. Gnarr's way of communicating led to the changes in the system that still can be felt to this day. His compassion increased the well-being of his followers and strengthened the commitment toward him and the organization, similarly to the authentic leadership trend observed in other organizations. Indeed, Gnarr's leadership was not flawless, and one of the factors that many claimed that he could be prone to is attention seeking. Thus, the person serving as a leader became more important than his co-workers in the eyes of the people even though people within the system saw that differently. The general public was not always sure if he was authentic or if he was playing a role. These precautions put aside, this case study documents the story of authentic leadership, exercised by Jón Gnarr while he served as the mayor of Reykjavik, and how he did make a transformational difference and changed the leadership landscape.

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