

# The potential use of the Authenticity Scale as an outcome measure in executive coaching

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*Authenticity, or being true to oneself, has been identified as a key construct related to well-being and the effective performance of leaders. This paper describes the construct of authenticity in the context of existing positive psychology and coaching psychology research. We discuss the Authenticity Scale and its suggested use both as a self-report and peer-report instrument in the context of executive coaching. In order to further develop evidence-based approaches to coaching and coaching psychology we need to extend and develop a broad range of validated and freely available outcome measures which can allow researchers to further develop our understandings of the psychological processes underpinning the purposeful, positive change encapsulated in coaching. The Authenticity Scale may prove to be a useful tool in this endeavour.*

**Keywords:** *authenticity; positive psychology; coaching psychology; evidence-based coaching; executive coaching; well-being.*

**I**N ORDER to further develop evidence-based approaches to coaching and coaching psychology we need to extend and develop a broad range of validated and freely available outcome measures. In this way researchers will have more choice in the selection of outcome measures. This has a number of potentially positive effects. Firstly, there would be less reliance on idiosyncratic outcome measures in the coaching literature. Whilst idiosyncratic measures that are custom developed for particular coaching interventions allow researchers to stipulate variables of interest to a specific coaching client or situation and can give important insights into a specific coaching intervention (Orenstein, 2006; Peterson & Kraiger, 2004), such measures may have limited validity or relevance for the broader coaching psychology research enterprise (Allworth & Passmore, 2008). Secondly, the use of freely available and psychometrically-validated measures would allow meaningful comparisons to be made across different research studies. This is important because the replication of findings is an essential part of developing an evidence-base in any discipline that holds itself out as subscribing to the

scientific method (Chalmers, 1976). Thirdly, the increased use of validated psychologically-relevant outcome measures will allow researchers to further develop our understandings of the psychological processes underpinning the purposeful, positive change encapsulated in coaching.

It is clear that the use of psychometrically-validated measures in the published coaching literature is increasing. Early coaching research was primarily case study-based, and primarily qualitative in nature (e.g. Craik, 1988; Diedrich, 1996), or used observable behavioural measures. Sergio (1987) for example, examined the effect of coaching on reducing the percentage of scrapped materials and, therefore, the overall production costs in a manufacturing context. Whilst such measures are in themselves valuable and of interest, they are limited in the generalisable insights they can give into the psychology of coaching.

The growing trend towards using validated psychologically-relevant and validated outcome measures covers a range of psychologically-relevant variables including; goal-attainment scaling (for discussion, see Spence, 2007); validated measures of depres-

sion, anxiety and stress (Gyllensten & Palmer, 2005); resilience and workplace well-being (Grant, Curtayne & Burton, 2009); core self-evaluations (Libri & Kemp, 2006); psychological and subjective well-being and hope (Green, Oades & Grant, 2006); self-efficacy (Evers, Brouwers & Tomic, 2006); self-reflection and insight (Grant, 2003); employees' sickness due to psychosocial health complaints (Duijts et al., 2008) using well-validated measures including the Short Form Health Survey (Ware & Sherbourne, 1992), the General Health Questionnaire (Koeter & Ormel, 1991), the Dutch Questionnaire on Perception and Judgment of Work (Veldhoven & Meijmen, 1994), and the Dutch version of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Schaufeli & Dierendonck, 2000); character strengths (Govindji & Linley, 2007; Linley et al., 2010; Madden, Green & Grant, in press) and goal self-concordance (Burke & Linley, 2007). (For further details on outcome measures in coaching research see Grant et al., 2010.)

However, some measures of psychological constructs central to the coaching enterprise are noticeable by their absence. Given that much coaching takes place within organisational contexts with the aim of developing leadership (Goldsmith, 2009), it is perhaps surprising that freely-available, validated measures related to leadership have not been widely used to date in coaching research. Of course, a number of studies have reported on the use of commercial or proprietary leadership assessments in coaching (Grant, Green & Rynsaardt, 2010; Kampa-Kokesch, 2002; Trathen, 2008), but the use of such commercial or proprietary assessments is limited to those who can afford them.

We argue that the coaching psychology enterprise would benefit from indentifying free-available validated assessments related to the psychology of leadership, and the use of such assessments has the potential to further develop the common evidence-base for coaching and coaching psychology. One such construct is authenticity.

## **Authenticity**

The notion of authenticity is increasingly recognised as being a vital part of leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Cameron, 2008; Gardner et al., 2005). The notion of authenticity also has relevance in non-leadership coaching engagements, given that much coaching is aimed at developing the extent to which coachees are able to identify and then pursue personally-relevant, self-concordant goals (Burke & Linley, 2007). Thus, we argue the identification and subsequent use of a validated measure of authenticity has the potential to contribute to the coaching research enterprise. To this aim we review the literature on authenticity, its historical context, its use in coaching and positive psychology to date and suggest how a recently developed measure of authenticity (Wood et al., 2008) could be used in both personal and organisational coaching settings.

## **Historical context**

The conceptual roots of authenticity can be traced back to ancient Greek philosophy and the statement 'To thine own self be true' (Harter, 2002). The concept was re-born in current post-industrialist, modernist era, following a preoccupation with 'inauthenticity' and its associated manifestations such as deceit and manipulation during the 16th century, and a shifting focus on responsibility for one's own conduct during the 17th century. Modern scientific roots of authenticity can be traced to studies in philosophy (Heidegger, 1962; Sartre, 1956) and psychology (Maslow, 1962; Rogers, 1961; Winnicott, 1965). While a detailed discussion of these philosophical and psychological treatments of authenticity is beyond the scope of this paper, these have been explored extensively in literature reviews by Erickson (1995) and Harter (2002), as well as Guignon (2000, 2002) and Chessick (1996).

### **Authenticity in executive and life coaching and positive psychology**

In the executive and life coaching context, authenticity has not been explored as an empirical concept or a potential outcome for coaching clients despite coaching goals in both settings frequently relating to self-awareness, personal growth and a desire for greater authenticity. Existing references largely relate to the authenticity of coaching practitioners as an essential aspect of the practitioner-client relationship (e.g. Stober & Grant, 2006), the concept of 'authentic participation' in the coaching process (e.g. Palmer & Whybrow, 2007, pp.417-418) and the importance of clients' authentic relationships with others (e.g. Peltier, 2001).

During the last decade, since Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi's (2000) feature article on positive psychology, authenticity has been identified as an important concept fundamental to an individual's well being and optimal performance. Seligman's much quoted book and associated website *Authentic Happiness* was and continues to be a platform for those seeking to learn more about positive psychology and themselves. Seligman went on to prescribe an authentic life as a prerequisite to a 'good life' in relation to his model of the 'three paths to a good life' (Linley & Joseph, 2004, p.24). Peterson and Park (2004) developed the values-in-action, or VIA classification which captures and measures the positive traits associated with a cross-cultural understanding of 'good character' (p.437). This empirical work identified authenticity as a dimension of 'courage', one of six discrete virtues underpinning well-being and optimal functioning.

#### **Construct definition**

Although there has been definitional confusion in the empirical study of the authenticity construct (Harter, 2002), there appears to be a large degree of consensus regarding the definitional basis underlying the construct as it is used in positive psychology. This basis has its origins in humanistic psychology and, in particular, the work of

Rogers (1961), who conceptualised the self-actualising or fully functioning individual as: (a) open to experience with tolerance for ambiguity and accurate perception; (b) able to live fully in the moment with adaptability and flexibility; (c) trusting of inner experiences to guide own behaviours; (d) experiencing freedom with choice about how to respond and feel; and (e) creative in his or her approach to living with a strong trust in one's inner experiences and a willingness to adapt to ever-changing circumstances. From this concept, various definitions of authenticity were developed including one by Barrett-Lennard (1998) who defined authenticity as 'involving consistency between the three levels of: (a) a person's primary experience; (b) their symbolised awareness; and (c) their outward behaviour and communication' (p.82). According to this definition, an individual feels authentic when there is congruence between behaviour and emotional expression on one hand, and conscious awareness of physiological states, emotions or cognitions on the other, and, additionally, these are unconstrained from external influences. A further useful definition was developed by Kernis (2003) who characterised authenticity as 'the unobstructed operation of one's true, or core, self in one's daily enterprise' and argued that 'authenticity has four components: awareness, unbiased processing, action, and relational orientation' (p.1). Although there are other definitions, the above two are noteworthy as they form the basis for both of the recent approaches developed to measure authenticity directly and discretely.

#### **Measurement of authenticity**

Historically, there have been a number of approaches that involved an assessment of authenticity, including false-self versus true-self behaviour (Harter et al., 1996), consistency of trait profiles versus mean levels of authenticity (Sheldon et al., 1997), and authenticity related to diverse aspects of healthy psychological and interpersonal functioning (Kernis & Goldman, 2006).

Although it is not disputed that these are empirically valid, none appear to have considered authenticity as an individual factor, that is, they examined authenticity in the context with other variables but not directly on a discreet basis. This shortcoming was addressed with the development of the Authenticity Scale (Wood, et al., 2008) and the Authentic Leadership Questionnaire (Walumbwa et al., 2008). This article focuses on the Authenticity Scale by Wood et al. (2008).

### **Development of the Authenticity Scale**

In developing their measure, Wood et al. (2008) first established the definitional basis for the construct by identifying three factors underlying Barrett-Lennard's (1998) definition of authenticity: self-alienation, authentic living, and accepting external influence. The second step involved the random sampling of 200 undergraduate students who completed a 25-item pool as well as accepted measures for anxiety (using the Tension subscale of the Profile of Mood States; Lorr, McNair & Droppleman, 1992) stress (using the Perceived Stress Scale; Cohen, Kamarck & Mermelstein, 1983), and happiness (using the Subjective Happiness Scale; Wood et al., 2008).

The 25-item pool was developed by the authors on the basis that each item was identified to be relevant to one of the above three factors. In a multifactor analysis, authentic living was positively correlated with happiness and negatively with anxiety and stress, whereas both, accepting external influences and self-alienation, were positively correlated with anxiety and stress and negatively with happiness. As a third step, Wood et al. (2008) reduced the original 25-item pool to 12 on the basis of the highest positive correlations with one of the three factors underlying the definitional construct of authenticity, that is, the four highest correlations for each of the three factors. Scoring instructions for the Authenticity Scale involve assessing items on a seven-point Likert scale, from 1 ('does not describe me

at all') to 7 ('describes me very well'). Items relevant to accepting external influence and self-alienation are reverse-scored because of their negative correlation with authenticity. Although Likert scales can be subject to response style and potential mid-point ambivalence issues, it is generally regarded as producing valid psychometric output (Avey et al., 2010).

In a subsequent study involving 180 ethnically-diverse individuals randomly chosen from the public, Wood et al. (2008) confirmed substantial discriminant validity of the Authenticity Scale across sample, gender, and ethnic group, as well as the 'Big Five' personality traits; these refer to neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness (Goldberg, 1992). Wood et al. (2008) found no significant correlation with social desirability and longitudinal test-retest validity within two and four weeks. The Authenticity Scale also showed high correlation with self-esteem, and subjective and psychological well-being characteristics. On the above basis, Wood et al.'s (2008) work provides the first direct test of several theoretical models that view authenticity as integral to well-being. However, the Wood et al. (2008) research did not explicitly test the relationship between authenticity and optimal functioning. It is to this issue we now turn.

### **Authenticity and optimal functioning**

Although authenticity, by definition, involves being true to oneself, not others, in the context of authentic leadership the focus shifts to the leader's relations with others because all leadership is fundamentally relational (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). On this basis, it is reasonable to infer that the optimal functioning of a leader is very similar to the optimal functioning of an individual with respect to that individual's relationship with others.

Self-assessment, self-report measures such as the Authenticity Scale may well be useful measures of functioning. However, because self-assessments rely only on the

respondent's view of themselves, such measures are inherently limited. Thus additionally accessing the perceptions of others (such as peers) can provide a useful counterpoint to self-assessment, particularly in reference to constructs such as authenticity in leadership where relations with others are paramount. Indeed, when there is a material discrepancy between the self-rated and the peer-rated results, it may be that the person's self-rating does not accurately reflect the degree of optimal functioning and peer ratings will be more reliable (Cheek, 1982; Gibson, 1971), and the exploration of such discrepancies can provide important starting points for coaching conversations. Additionally, peer ratings are shown to be reliable in predicting subsequent promotion (Downey, Medland & Yates, 1976).

Consequently, for use in coaching interventions, we propose the adoption of a peer-rated version of the Authenticity Scale as a means of extending the measurement capacities and utility of the Authenticity Scale which we suggest could be used in conjunction with the existing self-assessment version. Such an amended version of the Authenticity Scale, has been discussed with one of the authors of the Authenticity Scale, Dr Alex M. Wood, and is termed 'Peer Authenticity Scale' (Susing, 2010, personal communication). Discussion with the author of this scale suggests that a peer version of the scale would retain its psychometric validity as the items essentially remain the same, being merely rephrased so as to apply to the subject whilst retaining their original meaning, although future research will need to explore this issue.

The use of self and other ratings in assessments has a long history, but has only recently found its way into positive psychology. For example, the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS; Seligman, Park & Peterson, 2004) has recently been adapted to utilise both self and other ratings and the peer-rating version maintained a similarly high validity and reli-

ability as the original, self-assessed version of the instrument (Ruch et al., 2010). (Sample items of a version of the Peer Authenticity Scale as it can be provided to peers of coaching clients is included in Appendix 2.) We believe that such an adaptation may prove to be useful in using the Authenticity Scale in the coaching context particularly where the coaching is aimed at enhancing leadership authenticity and optimising performance.

### **The link between authenticity and existing coaching constructs**

In supporting the argument that a valid measure of authenticity can be used to assess the efficacy of coaching interventions, it may be useful to review the existing evidence base linking authenticity with other empirical constructs relevant to evidence-based coaching. This is useful because, although the various studies involve different measures of authenticity, they nevertheless share the same definitional basis. Importantly, a number of studies demonstrate a positive correlation between authenticity and subjective and psychological well-being (Kernis & Goldman, 2005a; Sheldon et al., 1997; Wood et al., 2008), as well as self-esteem and life satisfaction (Kernis & Goldman, 2005b).

In the context of optimal functioning, Walumbwa et al. (2008) found a positive correlation between authenticity and job performance. Authenticity, as a function of acting with integrity, has been identified by Hodgins, Koestner and Duncan (1996) to yield social benefits as authentic persons are generally well liked thereby creating stronger relationships which, in turn, will benefit the individual. Sheldon (2004) also refers to an experimental study by Robinson, Johnson and Shields (1995) which found that persons who give balanced self-descriptions, that is, include weaknesses as well as strengths, are more likely to be perceived as authentic and, as a result, are more highly regarded as leaders.

Toor and Ofori (2009), in their study of the effects of authenticity in the Singapore construction industry, showed that psychological well-being, relationships, social skills and personal performance are significantly correlated to, and predicted by, authenticity. Their research points to the connectedness between self-awareness, self-regulation and psychological well-being and suggests that individuals experiencing higher levels of psychological well-being are likely to be seen as effective in their workplaces and hence have higher prospects of being successful.

Self-awareness and self-regulatory processes have also been identified by Gardner et al. (2005) as a prerequisite to achieving authenticity and authentic relationships. Self-awareness is an important aspect of evidence-based coaching interventions because it is necessary to enable the coaching client to develop a wider range of behaviour and thereby achieve change (Allan & Whybrow, 2007).

Authenticity has been found to benefit a person's self-regulation by promoting more complex and integrated task performance (Sheldon, 2004). Self-regulation is a fundamental concept of coaching because coaching builds on the basic notion that the coach facilitates the client's self-directed learning (Grant, 2006). Self-determination theory, developed by Deci and Ryan (1985), is an empirical approach to understanding the various factors that affect authentic behaviour. It presupposes a fundamental human need for independence, which is satisfied when people feel free to do what is most valuable to them. Authentic behaviour, in this context, is experienced as being initiated by the person, whereas inauthentic behaviour is experienced as being initiated by external factors (Ryan & Deci, 2004). Self-determination theory has been identified as a fundamental concept underlying evidence-based coaching, particularly in the context of solution-focused coaching (Grant, 2006).

The Self-concordance Model developed by Sheldon and Elliot (1998, 1999), captures the extent to which a person's goals are

consistent with that person's core values. Their research showed that more concordant goals enabled a person to, firstly, sustain effort to a greater extent compared to situations where relevant goals are less concordant, and secondly, that more concordant goals led to higher levels of well-being. In this context, self-concordance and authenticity are interchangeable because both deal with a person's genuine and unobscured values and motivations. The positive relationship between coaching interventions and positive effects on self-concordance has been demonstrated, amongst others by Burke and Linley (2007). Stober and Grant (2006) also refer to the coachee's requirements to 'identify the enduring and authentic from transitory or superficial whims or desires' (p.165).

### **Summary of practical and research implications**

Clearly, the above coaching-related concepts are inextricably entwined with authenticity, and have considerable relevance for coaching and coaching psychology which is frequently concerned with optimal functioning. The use of a validated authenticity scale (self-report and peer-report) in a coaching context would allow researchers to explore the potential of coaching in increasing authenticity and also exploring the extent to which such changes maybe associated with enhanced business outcomes. The literature to date outlined above suggests such relationships, but to the best of our knowledge such hypotheses have not as yet been put to the test within a coaching paradigm.

There is emerging empirical evidence that links authenticity and a number of constructs that underpin evidence-based coaching, including well-being and optimal functioning. The Authenticity Scale developed by Wood et al. (2008) represents a direct and discreet measure of authenticity that can be used in this context.

Given that the notion of authenticity is central to much of the coaching endeavour,

and that the further development of an evidence-base to coaching would benefit from the increased use of freely-available and psychometrically-validated measures, we would encourage the use of such measures in coaching-related research. In this way we can further develop our understandings of the psychological processes underpinning the purposeful, positive change facilitated by coaching.

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## Appendix 1 – Authenticity Scale

The following are representative examples from the Authenticity Scale, reproduced with permission. Please see original Wood et al. (2008) paper for full 12-item scale.

Please consider the following statements about yourself. Assess the statements on a seven-point scale, from 1 (does not describe you at all) to 7 (describes you very well).

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### Examples of items from Authenticity Scale

|   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| I think it is better to be yourself, than to be popular | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| I don't know how I really feel inside                   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| I usually do what other people tell me to do            | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| I always stand by what I believe                        | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| I live in accordance with my values and beliefs         | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |

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Source: Wood, A.M., Linley, P., Maltby, J., Baliousis, M. & Joseph, S. (2008). The authentic personality: A theoretical and empirical conceptualisation and the development of the Authenticity Scale. *Journal of Counselling Psychology*, 55(3), 385–399. Examples are reproduced with permission.

## Appendix 2 – Peer Authenticity Scale

The following are representative examples from the proposed Peer Authenticity Scale, reproduced with permission. Please see original Wood et al. (2008) paper in order to complete adaptations for the full range of original items.

The following considers feedback about: \_\_\_\_\_

Date of completing this survey: \_\_\_\_\_

Feedback about the person

Please consider the following 12 statements about the above person. Assess the statements on a seven-point scale, from 1 (does not describe the person at all) to 7 (describes the person very well).

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### Examples of items from proposed Peer Authenticity Scale

|  |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| They think it is better to be themselves, than to be popular | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| They don't know how they really feel inside                  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| They usually do what other people tell them to do            | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| They always stand by what they believe                       | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| They live in accordance with their values and beliefs        | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |

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Source: Amended based on discussions with Dr Alex M. Wood. Adopted from Wood, A.M., Linley, P., Maltby, J., Baliousis, M. & Joseph, S. (2008). The authentic personality: A theoretical and empirical conceptualisation and the development of the Authenticity Scale. *Journal of Counselling Psychology*, 55(3), 385–399. Reproduced and adapted with permission.