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# Lifting the veil: Seeking and contesting authenticity in CEO work

Liisa Välikangas ● Janne Tienari

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**Abstract.** Considerable emphasis is placed on authenticity in leadership today, and many leaders may genuinely try to behave in keeping with their “true” selves. We suggest, however, that due to the many conflicting demands on their work and to their public role, where direct expressions of innerness are deemed inappropriate, Chief executive officers (CEOs) cannot be authentic in the strict sense of the word. To lift the veil concealing authentic leadership, we look into the role of humor in CEO work through a series of conversations with CEOs of large companies in different industries. We contest the popular notion of authenticity in CEO work. We argue that when authenticity is pursued for strategic or instrumental reasons, its very nature will probably frustrate any efforts to be genuine. In this light, the current quest for authentic leadership can be viewed as a diversion from the difficult work carried out by CEOs rather than a reflection of it.

**Keywords:** chief executive officer, CEO work, authenticity, leadership, humor

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## INTRODUCTION

Considerable emphasis is placed on authenticity in contemporary leadership. Many leaders may genuinely try to behave in keeping with their authentic selves. They are willing to embrace who they are in and through their actions. Popular and scholarly interest in authentic leadership has been on the rise in part due to the attention generated by Bill (William) George, the former CEO of Medtronic, whose works on finding one’s “true north” became bestsellers (George, 2003; George & Sims, 2007). Positive psychology and positive organizational scholarship have also advocated authenticity (Avolio, Griffith, Wernsing & Walumbwa, 2010). On the basis of an extensive literature review, Gardner, Cogliser, Davis and Dickens (2011: 1142) point out that the “assumption of authentic leadership theory that people in organizations can effectively lead, and follow, in a way that enables them to express their own unique identity and style, has created a sense of excitement among leadership scholars and practitioners”. However, the authors go on to state that the construct is ambiguous and that practitioner and scholarly writing has created confusion regarding its meaning (see also e.g. Ladkin & Spiller, 2013; Lawler & Ashman, 2012). The lack of relevant empirical research “makes it difficult to assess the validity of assertions regarding the positive effects of [authentic leadership] that are commonly advanced by its proponents” (Gardner et al., 2011:

1120). More varied methodological approaches and deeper theoretical insights into leadership authenticity are required.

We are particularly interested in authenticity in the work of chief executive officers or CEOs. But what makes CEOs special? Although their job profiles vary, CEOs have ultimate responsibility for the functioning and performance of their organizations. In this capacity, they are engaged in determining strategy and direction, overseeing resource allocation, leading the top management team and, overall, setting an example about how the organization should function. Notwithstanding variations in legal definitions and traditions across societies and socio-cultural settings, CEO work is multifaceted and, apart from responsibility for the bottom line, difficult to measure. As their words are often over-interpreted and because they are seen as the public face of companies and their respective brands (Simon, 2017), CEOs choose their words carefully (Kleiner, 2003). Viewed more critically, they are deemed elitist and exclusionary propagators of often biased discourse (Amernic & Craig, 2006). There are indications that the way CEOs look at the world (and talk about it) is connected—via the “organizational culture” they help sustain—to the performance of their organizations (Berson, Oreg & Dvir, 2008; Finkelstein & Hambrick, 1996).

We know from the surprisingly thin literature on what CEOs do that it varies between industries, businesses and company size. CEOs are inclined to take up a variety of roles in their work (Glick, 2011; Hart & Quinn, 1993; Mintzberg, 1973, 1994; Tengblad, 2006). They attempt to strike a balance between spending time with organizational members and outside constituencies, and while there is pressure for the latter, it is often more productive to spend some more time with the former (Bandiera, Guiso, Prat & Sadun, 2011). Today, CEOs are advised to respect others, to listen and to share. They are reminded that authenticity is a quality attributed by others to leaders. However, it is also argued that authenticity “can to a great extent be controlled by you” (Goffee & Jones, 2005).

In this exploratory research note, we turn our attention to CEOs themselves, and ask the following question: what can authenticity mean in their work? Our focus is on CEOs of relatively large companies, and we note that CEO authenticity may play out differently in small and medium-sized enterprises. Also, we take an indirect route and address the question of authenticity through the views of CEOs on humor in their work. This methodological move enables us to bypass a direct question on authenticity, which would be artificial and difficult to respond to. We approach the issue indirectly with questions on humor that tends to disarm and is also somewhat surprising to many CEOs.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. We first explore authenticity and CEO work, and discuss the question in terms of humor. We go on to outline our study, report our findings from a series of CEO conversations and reflect on its limitations. We conclude the paper by offering some more general insights on authenticity and CEO work.

## AUTHENTICITY AND CEO WORK

In popular management literature, authenticity is typically associated with sincerity, honesty, and integrity (Goffee & Jones, 2005). Authenticity turns on the ability to lead an organization, which may present practical dilemmas when CEOs simultaneously honor their “true” self (Shamir & Eilam, 2005). As Goffee and Jones (2005) put it, “To attract followers, a leader has to be many things to many people. The trick is to pull that off while remaining true to yourself”. The diversity of organizational members and stakeholders makes demands on leaders: how can they avoid

offending customers and other stakeholders who represent diverse values while expressing what they “really” believe? Although not focused on the problematics of CEO work, tempered radicalism (Meyerson, 2003) is a similar notion. It is about seeking to act more consistently with your own values and self while remaining loyal to the organization.

This perhaps expresses the challenge suggested by Lawler and Ashman (2012: 330): “Authenticity concerns the manner in which the individual recognizes and deals with the freedom–responsibility dilemma”. Rejecting any notion of a true self, Lawler and Ashman emphasize “becoming” through interaction with the particular context for behavior. There is also the issue of choice in freedom and responsibility: “The distinction is that humans have discretion regarding the ways in which they interact with the world and how they ‘become’ through these interactions” (p. 329). Authenticity is thus neither a trait nor a particular consciousness. Instead, it emerges from the leadership behavior exhibited by CEOs. Authenticity is not something that CEOs have or are, but the potential outcomes of their behavior and decision-making in choosing between freedom of expression and responsibility as the head of an organization. Guthey and Jackson (2005) studied CEO portraits in an effort to pin down the meaning of authenticity. They refer to the elusiveness at its heart: “A closer look at the constructed nature of both CEO identity and portrait photography lays bare the elusive nature of authenticity itself, as well as the way that CEO portraits can function also to expose the corporation’s chronic lack of authenticity” (Guthey & Jackson, 2005: 1057). In brief, there is something ambiguous and even paradoxical about authenticity in relation to leadership. While extant research fails to offer a clear and compelling definition of authenticity, we approach it as an elusive ideal that has nevertheless featured strongly in a great deal of contemporary writing on effective leadership.

There is a strong research-based critique of the notion of authentic leadership. On the one hand, its advocates may prompt a return to leader-centrism where supposedly authentic leaders are cast as “moral giants who can only be imperfectly mimicked by ordinary mortals” (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2013: 51). On the other, it is likely to put pressure on leaders to reach the elusive ideal of authenticity through personal sacrifice (Nicholson & Carroll, 2013) in conditions where they probably work with multiple identities and selves rather than a single notion of self. “There are so many simultaneous little-selves in authentic polyphony that a single voice is essentially inauthentic”, Boje, Helmuth and Saylor (2013: 276) conclude. Alvesson and Sveningsson (2013) remind us that revealing what we truly feel about ourselves, our colleagues and customers, and the situations where we land would not always make for smooth social relations.

All these ambiguities, dilemmas and contradictions culminate in the work of CEOs. Henry Mintzberg (1973) noted in his seminal studies in North America that the work of top executives—and CEOs in particular—was complex and multifaceted. On the basis of his structured method of observing executives at work, Mintzberg laid the groundwork for identifying a variety of CEO roles; informational, interpersonal, decisional, strategic, operational and diplomatic (see Glick, 2011, for an overview). Playing the deck of CEO roles a little differently, Hart and Quinn (1993) examined connections between different (and, according to the authors, competing) roles and various indicators of firm performance. The authors concluded that “CEOs with high ‘behavioral complexity’—the ability to play multiple, competing roles—produce the best firm performance, particularly with

respect to growth and innovation and organizational (stakeholder) effectiveness” (p. 543).

Tengblad (2006) aimed at replicating Mintzberg’s studies in the Swedish context some 30 years later. He found both similarities and differences in the daily work of CEOs: “The main differences are a much larger workload, a contact pattern to a larger degree oriented towards subordinates in group-settings, a greater emphasis on giving information, and less preoccupation with administrative work” (p. 1437). CEO roles in the Swedish context also included a commitment to building what is commonly referred to as organizational culture. With a focus on USA-based organizations, Glick (2011) found that CEOs most often viewed themselves as leaders. Decisional and strategic roles were also high on their agenda. How often “CEOs *need to be and indeed are* spending more focused time on strategy” surprised this author, who then reasoned that the increasing complexity and uncertainty of the business environment may have “forced CEOs to finally focus their time on strategy” (p. 193, italics in original). Incidentally, Mintzberg (1994) was later preoccupied with an integrated framework that would do justice to the extremely complex and multifaceted nature of CEO work.

Overall, authenticity is not in the spotlight in these contributions regarding what CEOs do. Rather, they are mostly preoccupied with the variety of roles juggled by CEOs and with building a comprehensive understanding of the kind of work they are engaged in. Meanwhile, we witness a continuous, albeit not always rational search for charismatic superstar and savior CEOs (Khurana, 2002), whose authenticity may be suspect. At the same time, the assertion that authenticity “can be controlled by you” (Goffee & Jones, 2005) depends on what is understood as authenticity, why and by whom. One popular way to evaluate authenticity is to determine the extent to which a CEO addresses every audience in the same way (Rogers, 2017). Consistency in behavior is the key. Another contemporary criterion is accessibility, assuming that authentic CEOs make themselves available and “get real”, and that accessible CEOs make corporate brands seem more authentic (Simon, 2017). “The linguistic hallmark of authenticity is that, when you listen to speakers address a large audience, you get the impression that they’d speak the same way over coffee” (Rogers, 2017).

To understand the work of CEOs, one of the authors of this paper requested permission to follow a CEO for two weeks. Though based on mutual trust, such accompaniment seemed somewhat threatening to the person in question and potentially disruptive for leadership activities and regularly shared insider information. To a significant extent, then, authenticity is in the eye of the beholder—should one get close enough to observe it. Distance may cultivate the myth of authenticity as it can be practiced for carefully orchestrated performances. With the importance of proper preparations in mind, CEOs coming to attend seminars made numerous calls to the same author to ask detailed questions about the setting, context, audience and discussion.

Hence, there is a strong social and symbolic element in CEO authenticity. In their study of CEO portraits, Guthey and Jackson (2005) write that while portraits by a famed photographer “function to establish an authentic connection with their subjects, they also paradoxically highlight how the intrusion of stylistic and photographic conventions—including the presence of the photographic frame itself—renders such authenticity impossible” (p. 1059). It is as if portraits are seeking to build strong plots (Czarniawska & Rhodes, 2004) of the kind that serve to enforce the corporate brand. In the case of Nestlé, for example, the CEO has

suggested that presence and vitality are needed for building consumer trust in the corporation (Guthey & Jackson, 2005). A CEO portrait presumably ought to convey such qualities authentically and credibly. In the end, authenticity may merely serve an instrumental role in corporate branding.

In summary, authenticity in CEO work is apparently pursued, but rarely achieved. As Lawler and Ashman (2012) assert, the search for authenticity for its own sake is not authentic. We concur with Guthey and Jackson (2005) in that authenticity may be something rather fleeting that can be pursued only through indirect means. Framing or picturing leadership as authentic at face value without asking what makes it so and why seems like the wrong point of departure. We suggest that one way to capture glimpses of authenticity is through a topic that in itself is potentially disarming: humor (Välikangas & Sevón, 2010).

## **HUMOR AND CEO AUTHENTICITY**

We propose that humor can be used to probe authenticity in the way CEOs approach their work. Humor, however, is a tricky concept to pin down and define. In popular management thinking, humor, like authenticity, is subject to varying degrees of instrumentalism. Managers are encouraged to use different styles of humor to achieve organizational outcomes such as reducing stress, enhancing group cohesiveness or fostering creativity (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). Humor is used to highlight discrepancies in logic and beliefs (Duncan, 1982) and to enable shifts in perspectives (Kahn, 1989). These assertions come with a caution, however, as humor is subjective and dependent on context and must be used with extreme care (Beard, 2014). At the same time, we can see that the notion of authenticity pervades popular understandings of humor. “It’s not whether or not you’re funny, it’s what kind of funny you are. Be honest and authentic”, McGraw (2014) concludes in his global search of what makes things funny. In a similar vein, Stein (2017) states that “landing a joke requires knowing your style” because “people want authenticity”. Overall, the consensus seems to be that humor and authenticity are related. However, the relationships between the two concepts remain blurry.

Critical research, in turn, reminds us that humor is ambiguous and never neutral (Linstead, 1985). Humor challenges management because it highlights inconsistencies, ambiguities and paradoxes in the organization and because it tends to be built on a foundation of recognized contradiction, incongruity and incoherence (Hatch & Ehrlich, 1993). Humor can be used to surface, bring attention to and make communicable the experience of paradox, because people have a tendency to revert to humor when they deal together with paradoxical situations (Jarzabkowski & Le, 2017). Humor enables juxtaposing otherwise incongruous or contradictory elements, and in particular circumstances it can be a powerful way of expressing taboo feelings and impulses. “Under the moral smokescreen supplied” by humor, people are able to express some of the ambiguities they feel (Gabriel, Fineman & Sims, 2000: 194). Hence, humor is used to negotiate identities and reframe situations (Martin, 2004) and to perform notionally “authentic” selves in organizational contexts where other scripts are imposed upon employees and managers (Westwood & Johnston, 2012).

Huber and Brown (2017) elucidate how members of an organization talk about humor and thereby discipline their identities. Organizational members may inadvertently reproduce norms that further regulate the use

of humor. This is one example of how humor and power feed on each other (Collinson, 2000). While oppositional humor appears to be subversive, it can reinforce existing power relations. However, in so far as workplace humor can “provide a protective cloak of ambiguity or anonymity, it may also facilitate effective forms of resistance” (Rodrigues & Collinson, 1995: 273). In other words, humor can be both the prerogative of those in authority *and* a vehicle for resistance (see also e.g. Fleming & Spicer, 2003). As such, humor has a dualistic dynamic nature (Westwood & Johnston, 2012). Whether or not humor is seen as resistive depends on how one conceptualizes resistance and on the context of power.

The question of humor and authenticity is thus a power-laden one. Humor may be an important element in attempts by CEOs to behave as if they are manifesting their authentic selves or embracing who they are. However, Collinson (2000: 278) argues that “when managers artificially incorporate joking into their control practices”, they reduce humor to a “manipulated commodity”. Moreover, humor can turn into performances of hegemonic masculinity, misogyny, and homophobia. In an intriguing study of a “fun culture” in an IT company, Plesner (2015) witnessed how employees participated in humor performances and, arguably, revealed “their authentic selves with regards to sexist, sexualized and aggressive urges” (p. 540). The CEO of the company was the main perpetrator of this ultra-masculine culture. This extreme example elucidates the many sides of authenticity in leadership and it shows how humor is involved in its performance. In a different light, Carlsen (2008) described how humor and laughter channeled the revelation of great ambition and transformative aspiration in another IT company.

Next, we aim to lift the veil, and offer an analysis of accounts produced in interviews between a researcher and corporate CEOs. The researcher had established rapport with the CEOs and introduced the question of humor to the discussion. What happened then is significant for the purposes of understanding authenticity in CEO work.

## METHODOLOGY

Research interviews are socially and linguistically complex situations where the interviewer and the interviewee engage in joint meaning making. The interviewer frames the interviews, and not only acts as an audience for the interviewees, but also takes part in a continuous negotiation and co-production of meaning. Hence, analysis of texts produced in interviews calls for conscious efforts to view the subject matter from different angles (Alvesson, 2003). Our interviews were carried out by the first author, a senior female academic, to understand how corporate CEOs whom she knows personally make sense of strategic challenges and opportunities in their work in the volatile business environment. We focus here on four experienced CEOs who represent leading companies across different industries. Three of the companies operate internationally and one is focused on the Nordic market.

A question on how humor is related to CEO work was included in the interview guide and it was posed toward the end of each interview. We expected that this would give us a quick view, a fleeting moment, revealing the inner person that is carefully protected and covered with “CEO-ness” and making our interviewees open up, even if momentarily. We relied on possible laughter to build togetherness that would enable CEOs to discuss their work even more openly and comprehensibly or, indeed, more authentically.

However, we noted that the question about humor always surprised the interviewees and that it cut the flow in the conversation; it did not seem to “fit in” (see Tienari, Söderberg, Holgersson & Vaara, 2005). Although the question was met with surprise, occasional nervous or uncertain laughter and attempts to maintain rationality, there was also some apparent exposure of self. The indirect approach seemed to shed some light on authenticity in CEO work. Our interviewees reflected on humor, but then quickly reverted to their earlier account of themselves as sensible and credible corporate strategists. We analyzed these cuts in the flow of the discussion and the notion of authenticity offered a heuristic in this exercise. Our analysis focused on how the CEOs related to the question of humor as we documented any glimpses of “self” shining through the discussion as the veil of CEO-ness was at best momentarily lifted before being firmly lowered again.

The vignettes below are based on our analysis of what happened when the flow in the conversations between CEOs and the researcher were momentarily cut and when efforts were made to regain that flow. The vignettes are our constructions of the interviewed CEOs’ constructions of their social realities (Linstead & Thomas, 2002). We use them to develop our argument about authenticity and corporate CEO work, and they are anonymized for the sake of confidentiality. The CEOs in question are in charge of relatively large organizations in their respective fields across various industries.

## **LIFTING THE VEIL: VIGNETTES OF CEOS**

**Vignette 1.** Tom is the CEO of a metal industry company. He has a serious expression on his face as he explains the business challenges that he constantly faces. The industry is volatile and the competition is fierce. Fortunately, his organization is used to clear hierarchical lines of command and he can rely on his staff to execute his decisions. Confronted with the question of humor, Tom is visibly baffled. He does not quite grasp the topic and asks for clarification. Then he starts to explain. Tom notes that what he calls dry and sarcastic humor is sometimes used in his top management team. He points out, however, that using humor is only possible when the people involved trust each other. The group needs to be homogeneous enough to tolerate humor. Group members need to have something in common that enables them to address issues effectively. Tom also ponders whether you can test ideas with the help of humor by detaching yourself from your formal role. In other words, you can sometimes use humor to make a point. But he is quick to emphasize that humor is risky and takes the example of culture to explain how humor can result in misunderstandings and lead to conflict. He firmly believes that humor is culture-bound. Tom goes on to make a more general point about the crucial importance of being sensitive to context. He emphasizes that “you have to be extremely careful in how you communicate as CEO”. Humor clearly presents a potential risk for CEO work.

**Vignette 2.** John is the CEO of a multinational firm in the services sector. He talks a lot about the importance of being able to motivate employees and maintain a good atmosphere in the organization. He warns us against the perils of thinking in silos and he speaks for openness. In John’s view it is of paramount importance to constantly measure the atmosphere among employees and, most importantly, to extend this to customers. He refers several times to the relevance of customer satisfaction. When asked about humor, John shows that he is able to grasp the issue. He offers a number of vague and general comments about the



necessity of humor in maintaining high morale in any group, engaging in dialogue and fostering commitment. Nevertheless, John grows increasingly anxious about the topic of humor. He notes that he cannot name a single concrete example of how his top management team has exhibited humor in their work. Instead, John starts to emphasize how important it is to base your management work on evidence and facts. He points out that it is very difficult to measure humor and to establish objective links between humor and performance. He underlines that jokes and laughter as such are not going to get you results. It is clear that humor has no intrinsic value for John nor does it distract him from his focus on performance.

**Vignette 3.** Susan is the CEO of a retail company. She describes the strategic turnaround that she managed to carry through in her organization. Susan admits that she is very good at “sensing people” and at understanding why they behave the way they do. She is able to understand complex issues profoundly and detect the root causes of various management challenges. When asked about humor, Susan lightens up. She smiles and says that playfulness and humor are an essential part of her persona. She observes that they are an integral part of her people management. However, the smile on Susan’s face vanishes quickly. She starts to talk about how difficult it is to manage with the help of humor, because you don’t want to lose your credibility as CEO. Susan is quick to point out that she is extremely conscious of how she uses humor, where and when. While spontaneous witty remarks sometimes wake people up or make them relax, there are spaces where humor simply does not work. Also, the same kind of humor can spark new insights in one setting and cause havoc in another. Susan describes humor as a management tool that must be used with caution.

**Vignette 4.** Donald is the CEO of a metal industry company. He comes across as someone who is in control, and gives the impression that he knows what he is doing. Donald says that the best way to lead is by example and he knows that his employees respect him for doing so. When explicitly asked about humor in management, Donald sighs and talks at length about trust. It becomes clear that in his view humor can only be based on trust. He then ponders how trust is understood in different ways in different cultures and how difficult it is to establish. As a manager, Donald says that you must develop clear mechanisms in the organization that enable people to get to know and trust each other. This is also crucial in making the top management team work together. You cannot tolerate too much humor. Although multiple jesters are not desirable, one jester may prove strategically useful by presenting new ideas and generating discussion. Donald underlines, however, that people like this are always exceptions. Humor may liberate individuals, but you must always use humor in a controlled and purposeful way. You cannot make a group of people work together by means of humor alone.

## SEEKING AND CONTESTING AUTHENTICITY WITH CEO RESPONSES TO HUMOR

What do we learn about authenticity from our discussions with CEOs? Below we elucidate our key findings along three dimensions: in light of instrumentality, in view of the freedom–responsibility dilemma, and in affecting CEO credibility. These topics emerged in our interviews as glimpses that potentially speak to the issue of authenticity. The way CEOs talk about humor—something that should only be natural and human—is suggestive of their approach to authenticity in their work. This is revealed

by a momentary lifting of the CEO veil in response to unexpected questions about their relationship to humor.

**Instrumentality vs. authenticity.** There is a strong sense of using humor as a tool or instrument in our interviews with CEOs. Humor is used to make a point, to test ideas or to assign someone the role of jester (see Välikangas & Sevón, 2010). However, caution and reserve are advised as humor appears to be somewhat unpredictable in communication. Such instrumentality is understandable as CEOs seek to lead and achieve corporate goals, but it is hardly an indication of authenticity. What could be of benefit is the question that reflects the logic of consequences in their behavior, not what should a person like a CEO do in a situation like this, as suggested by the logic of appropriateness (March & Olsen, 2011). Hence, humor is a management tool like everything else in the CEO's work environment. An authentic leader—someone akin to Don Quixote, as suggested by James G. March and Thierry Weil (2005)—would be likely to discuss humor as something that leaves no alternatives: “Here I stand, I can do no other”. Or, “here I laugh (with or without the others), and cannot help it”. However, for our CEOs humor is simply a tool for accomplishing performance, but not an expression of authenticity.

**Responsibility vs. authenticity.** Comments by the CEOs pertaining to choice in striking a balance between freedom and responsibility appear to emphasize a need for contextual understanding and trust, and also control. Here again, the interviewees were cautious in explaining how humor is used and who are (or can be) present. They point specifically to cultural implications. Trust is essential in the event of a lapse in understanding regarding what is appropriate or funny for a particular audience. The view that humor has a very precise place in an organization (that must know how to work together) was also expressed. Humor appears dangerous because it may cause people to depart from established norms. Hence, it would appear that authenticity allows little room for freedom; on the contrary, responsibility—refraining from humor—is assumed and recommended by organizational members for the CEO. It is tempting to conclude that there is also little room for expressing authenticity elsewhere in the organization. CEOs bear responsibility and therefore must suppress the urge to joke or laugh.

**Credibility vs. authenticity.** The credibility of the CEO is a serious matter and our interviewees take a lot of care to behave in a way that inspires trust and confidence. Hence, it is not surprising that CEOs are cautious in using anything like humor, which does not look serious but may backfire in an inappropriate socio-cultural context. Ill-advised comments may even affect market evaluations or customer preferences. Statements by our interviewees suggest that authenticity expressed through humor is possible only within a limited context—perhaps a group of colleagues that are very close and in a familiar setting—rather than openly among audiences of organizational members and stakeholders. In brief, there is no alternative for the pursuit of credibility in CEO work. To be effective, credibility requires a rather somber gestalt.

To summarize, the CEOs we interviewed were extremely cautious in expressing themselves. Nevertheless, there are glimpses that suggest a form of authenticity: bafflement, smiles, anxiety and sighs when confronted with a surprising question. One CEO even suggests that humor is part of her personality and leadership style—what she perhaps considers to be her authentic self—although she attempts to control it in her work. Before they revert to exploring its potential instrumentality or reflecting on how it can be used for strategic purposes, other CEOs do not know what to make of the question about humor as it seems unrelated to their CEO work.

Financial performance is an absolute value and it is achieved through instrumentality, responsibility and credibility rather than humor and, by extension, authenticity. A feeling of trust is required for any expression of humor. Incidentally, the chairman of a large global organization recently noted that unless there is laughter during the first five minutes of a board meeting, the meeting will not succeed. Humor has a very specific time, place and form.

Hence, prospects for authenticity are interpreted through an evaluative lens and not an intrinsic commitment to the inquiry and expression of self. As John asserts, “it is very difficult to measure humor and to establish objective links between humor and performance”. Authenticity is subjected to more controllable leadership expressions. Maintaining credibility or preventing diversions from the management agenda prevent CEOs from engaging regularly in humor. Although at least some CEOs apparently appreciate the power of humor in gaining new insights or creating togetherness, they are reluctant to use it extensively. It is risky; humor cannot be controlled and thus it is ultimately not a reliable management tool. It also has connotations that are unpredictable across cultures and groups of people. Although there may sometimes be glimpses of authenticity in the guise of humor, they are mostly suppressed.

We are not implying that these insights can be readily generalized to all CEOs in all circumstances. However, although the empirical base in our exploratory study may appear limited, we do suggest that it is indicative of ambiguities in leadership. Our approach to the study of authenticity indirectly through humor offers a way to tackle the issue without asking the CEOs directly, and thus avoids putting them in a position where they might have to admit that they are not entirely authentic in their leadership. This is something that popular management literature would not endorse and that would sound like a judgment on CEO leadership qualities. Hence, the glimpses of authenticity we offer are likely to resonate with critical literature on authentic leadership more generally (see e.g. Ladkin & Spiller, 2013; Lawler & Ashman, 2012).

## CONCLUSION

Corporate CEOs today must tread a fine line. In terms of authenticity, we conclude that the CEOs we interviewed present their role as manager and leader as an authentic quest, yet one that is for the most part detached from their personal selves. Hence, authenticity pertains to the role and responsibility of a manager and leader, not to the inner “true” self of the CEO, which is visible only in fleeting glimpses that yield to managerial agendas, issues of credibility and the ability to meet company goals and commitments. Leadership is more of a performance than a matter of expressing one’s inner self (Ladkin & Taylor, 2010). In this sense, authenticity is a red herring when considered a matter of remaining “true” to the self (see Goffee & Jones, 2005). Our analysis suggests that it is about remaining true to one’s managerial agenda to the best of one’s abilities, and to the pursuit of financial results and performance. Acknowledging this may help to demystify CEO leadership and reveal the risks posed by people who are “authentic” yet incompetent, rigid or aggressive in their views and behavior. The ideas developed in this paper thus make us see that calls for authenticity are, at best, “the political snake oil of our age” (Ganesh, 2017).

We suggest that CEOs cannot be authentic in the strict sense of the word—embracing who they “truly” are—due to the many conflicting demands on their work and due to their public role, where expression of

their inner-ness would be deemed inappropriate. When pursued for strategic or instrumental reasons, the very nature of authenticity is likely to defeat efforts to be “truly” authentic. Consequently, we must reconsider why leaders are advised to pursue authenticity in the first place. Authenticity is presented as a moral virtue, as something related to making ethical choices and, interestingly, as something that makes leaders more trustworthy and credible (Novicevic, Harvey, Buckley, Brown & Evans, 2006). If authenticity is manifest in performance as evaluated by others, assertions about how leaders should lead will require incredible sleight of hand. If authenticity is presented as something that can be controlled or manipulated (Goffee & Jones, 2005), we are left with instrumentality. However defined, we suggest that the opposite of authenticity is not inauthenticity. Being sincere and honest and acting with integrity do not necessarily entail authenticity in the sense that CEOs would embrace some kind of “true” inner self. Acting as a CEO is about a management agenda that is credible in the eyes of key stakeholders. Sincerity and honesty can still be expressed and practiced. Disconnects between what the CEO says and does are not so much a question of (in)authenticity, but of practical work.

On the basis of the ideas developed in this paper, we suggest that two questions in particular warrant more attention in the pursuit and study of authentic leadership: gender and new media. The question of CEO authenticity needs to be explored in light of gender relations and hegemonic masculinity as well as sexual orientation and ethnicity. Our analysis offers some ideas on connections between authenticity, humor and homosociality, which is the pursuit of and preference for the company of people who are considered similar in some significant way (see Holgersson, 2013; Lipman-Blumen, 1976). In her illuminative study of an IT company, Plesner (2015) constantly reverts to how the dominant CEO displayed hegemonic masculinity while rejecting and mocking alternative expressions of being a man (see also e.g. Westwood & Johnston, 2012). A particular masculine ideal was forcefully displayed by the CEO “in his constant performances of sexualized, sexist and aggressive humor” (Plesner, 2015: 552). Through these performances, which others were pressured to copy, the CEO exerted control over the organization and established a particularly toxic form of dominant masculinity and homosociality, all in the name of humor, joking and fun. The CEO came across in the study as authentic in his behavior—he seemed to remain true to himself—and others confirmed this by playing along. Plesner (2015: 540) asks the crucial question: “what are the consequences of revealing authentic sentiments such as masculine dominance, homophobia, sexual discrimination and misogyny?”. We suggest that these questions be taken seriously in any exploration of leadership authenticity. Being “authentic” may mean behavior that is unacceptable and wrong. For people in positions of power and authority such as CEOs, this can be dangerous.

Finally, the question of CEO authenticity is likely to acquire new meanings in the contemporary age of new media. Expectations of authenticity are accentuated in the internet playground, in the playful affordances of internet use, which has accelerated with the rise of social media sites and their participatory cultures (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013). With social technology at their disposal, CEOs, among others, are steered toward communication that embraces the informal, amateurish and authenticity-seeking characteristics of social media (Bell & Leonard, 2018). Expectations for CEO accessibility are likely to be accentuated and confused with understandings of CEOs as figureheads of corporate brands. The work of CEOs may be changing radically as they are exposed

to multiple and varying demands on their performance and its appearances. This offers a plethora of important questions on the different meanings and practices of leadership authenticity.

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