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Authenticity under Emotional Strain in Social Services Leadership

This study examines how leaders in the social services sector understand and enact authentic leadership while working with teams exposed to emotional strain. The research explores how authenticity is interpreted, how it is calibrated in everyday leadership practice and how it relates to trust and psychological safety. A qualitative interpretivist design with a phenomenological orientation was employed. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with ten social services leaders and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. The findings show that authenticity is enacted as a relational and ethically grounded practice involving emotional regulation and boundary-work rather than unrestricted openness. Trust emerges when authenticity is calibrated and emotionally contained. The study contributes to understanding authentic leadership as a context-sensitive and emotionally disciplined practice in high-strain work environments.

Keywords: authentic leadership, emotional labour, trust, psychological safety, boundary work, social services.

Straipsnyje nagrinėjama, kaip socialinių paslaugų sektoriaus vadovai supranta ir įgyvendina autentišką lyderystę dirbdami su komandomis, patiriančiomis nuolatinę emocinę įtampą. Tyrimu siekiama atskleisti, kaip autentiškumas interpretuojamas, kaip jis „kalibruojamas“ kasdienėje lyderystės praktikoje ir kaip siejasi su pasitikėjimu bei psichologiniu saugumu. Tyrimas grindžiamas kokybiniu interpretaciniu požiūriu, taikant fenomenologinę orientaciją. Duomenys surinkti pusiau struktūruotais interviu su dešimčia socialinių paslaugų organizacijų vadovų ir analizuoti taikant refleksyvią teminę analizę. Rezultatai rodo, kad autentiškumas suvokiamas ne kaip nevaržomas emocinis atvirumas, o kaip santykinė, etiškai pagrįsta laikysena, apimanti emocinį reguliavimą ir ribų nustatymą. Pasitikėjimas stiprėja tada, kai autentiškumas yra nuoseklus, emociškai valdomas ir užtikrina komandos stabilumą.

Raktiniai žodžiai: autentiška lyderystė, emocinis darbas, pasitikėjimas, psichologinis saugumas, ribų nustatymas, socialinės paslaugos.

Introduction

Work in the social services sector is increasingly shaped by sustained exposure to emotionally demanding situations, moral strain and compassion fatigue, which significantly affect employee well-being and organisational relationships (Kinman, Grant & Kelly, 2020; McFadden, Mallett & Leiter, 2021). Leaders in this sector are expected not only to coordinate services and ensure procedural and ethical compliance, but also to support teams engaged in continuous emotional labour with vulnerable client populations (Hussein, Manthorpe & Stevens, 2020; Whitaker, Hughes & Kelly, 2022). Research shows that authentic leadership, understood as a practice grounded

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in self-awareness, ethical consistency and relational transparency, may contribute to trust and psychological safety in care-oriented organisations (Rego, Ribeiro & Cunha, 2021; Wong & Cummings, 2020).

At the same time, recent literature indicates that authenticity in leadership is not universally beneficial nor straightforward in emotionally complex contexts (Alvesson & Einola, 2020; Banks, McCauley, Gardner & Guler, 2021). Authenticity appears as a situated and relational process that may involve tensions and ethical dilemmas when leaders navigate competing expectations, institutional constraints and the emotional burdens experienced by frontline staff (Clapp-Smith, Vogelgesang Lester & Palanski, 2020; Leroy, Segers, van Dierendonck & den Hartog, 2021). In social services organisations, leaders frequently negotiate boundaries between personal values, professional ethics and organisational responsibilities, which complicates the enactment of authenticity and raises questions about how authenticity is regulated and calibrated under emotional strain (Yagil & Ben-Zur, 2022; Lee & Kim, 2022).

Although authentic leadership, emotional labour and wellbeing have been widely studied, considerably less is known about how authenticity is enacted in practice by leaders working with emotionally burdened teams. Existing studies often conceptualise authenticity as an individual psychological quality rather than as a context-sensitive and emotionally regulated practice. This gap is particularly visible in the social services sector, where leaders must simultaneously provide emotional containment for staff and respond to institutional constraints.

The research object of the article is authentic leadership as enacted by leaders working with emotionally burdened teams in social services organisations. **The aim of the article** is to explore how leaders in the social services sector understand, calibrate and apply authenticity in everyday leadership practice and how these practices relate to trust and psychological safety. **The research methods** are based on a qualitative interpretivist design with a phenomenological orientation. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with ten leaders working in social services organisations and analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. **The objectives of the article** are to examine how leaders interpret authentic leadership in emotionally demanding work contexts, to explore how authenticity is calibrated in everyday leadership situations and to analyse how authenticity, trust and psychological safety are experienced as interconnected in leadership practice.

Literature review

Authentic leadership has increasingly been examined in contemporary organisational research as a relational and ethically oriented form of leadership that is expected to support trust, wellbeing and psychological safety, particularly in emotionally demanding human-service environments. However, much of this work has conceptualised authenticity primarily as an individual psychological quality or as a set of desirable leader characteristics, paying comparatively less attention to how authenticity is enacted and negotiated in practice within contexts marked

by emotional labour, moral strain and relational complexity.

In the social services sector, where leaders are required to balance care for staff, service accountability and continuous exposure to emotionally charged client situations, authenticity is likely to take on distinctive and context-dependent meanings that cannot be fully captured by trait-based perspectives. For this reason, a theoretically grounded and context-sensitive review of recent research is necessary to examine how authenticity, emotional labour, trust and boundary-work intersect contemporary leadership practice.

Authentic leadership as a relational and practice-based construct

Recent literature conceptualises authentic leadership as a dynamic, relational and practice-oriented process rather than a stable individual attribute, emphasising reflexivity, value congruence and relational transparency enacted within specific organisational contexts (Rego, Ribeiro & Cunha, 2021; Leroy, Segers, van Dierendonck & den Hartog, 2021). This view is also consistent with relational leadership scholarship that understands leadership as an ongoing, ethically embedded process of meaning-making shaped through interaction and reflexive engagement with others (Cunliffe & Scarlatti, 2023). Over the last five years, scholars have increasingly positioned authenticity within debates on identity, ethics and relational leadership, arguing that authenticity is co-constructed through interaction and context-dependent meaning-making rather than expressed as an unmediated inner "true self" (Banks, McCauley, Gardner & Guler, 2021). This represents a departure from earlier essentialist views toward more critical perspectives that foreground ambiguity, power relations and situational constraints in authentic leadership enactment (Alvesson & Einola, 2020).

Comparative analyses across empirical studies indicate that authentic leadership tends to manifest differently across organisational domains. For example, research in healthcare and human-service organisations shows that authenticity is interpreted primarily through ethical consistency and relational credibility, especially in emotionally demanding environments (Wong & Cummings, 2020; Ribeiro, Duarte & Filipe, 2022). By contrast, findings from corporate and hybrid organisational contexts emphasise identity regulation, impression management and the negotiation of competing professional and institutional identities (Banks et al., 2021; Leroy et al., 2021). These cross-contextual differences reinforce the argument that authenticity should be understood as situated practice rather than as a universal behavioural style.

In this study, authentic leadership is understood not as an essential personal trait, but as a relational and practice-based construct that is enacted through value alignment, ethical responsibility, boundary-conscious emotional regulation and situational judgement within emotionally demanding contexts (Rego et al., 2021; Leroy et al., 2021; Yagil & Ben-Zur, 2022). At the same time, empirical findings since 2020 suggest that authentic leadership can strengthen trust, fairness and commitment in contexts

characterised by uncertainty, value conflict or emotional strain, particularly in public-sector and care-oriented organisations (Wong & Cummings, 2020; Ribeiro et al., 2022). Yet several authors caution that authenticity may also generate unintended outcomes, including emotional overexposure, blurred role boundaries and tension between personal integrity and institutional demands, especially in professions where work is relationally intense and ethically charged (Leroy et al., 2021; Yagil & Ben-Zur, 2022). When compared across studies, these findings reveal a shared pattern: authenticity is beneficial when it is calibrated and ethically grounded, but risky when enacted without boundary awareness. This suggests that authentic leadership must be conceptualized as a negotiated and sometimes fragile practice rather than as an inherently positive ideal (Lee & Kim, 2022).

These cross-contextual contrasts are particularly relevant for the present study because they indicate that authenticity acquires different meanings depending on the degree of emotional labour embedded in the work context, which makes social services a critical empirical site for examining calibrated authenticity and boundary-work in leadership practice (Lee & Kim, 2022).

Emotional labour and leadership in the social services sector

Research published after 2020 consistently demonstrates that employees in the social services sector perform sustained emotional labour involving empathy regulation, emotional containment and moral responsibility toward vulnerable clients, which is strongly associated with stress, exhaustion and compassion fatigue (Kinman, Grant & Kelly, 2020; McFadden, Mallett & Leiter, 2021). Leadership is therefore recognised as a central factor shaping emotional climates, relational norms and expectations of psychological safety within such teams, particularly in ethically complex and emotionally intense situations (Hussein, Manthorpe & Stevens, 2020; Whitaker, Hughes & Kelly, 2022). Comparative insights across recent studies show that leaders in social services face a distinct set of emotional demands that differ from those observed in other service sectors. While research in healthcare leadership emphasises clinical responsibility and risk management, studies in social work settings highlight moral distress, exposure to clients' trauma and continuous ethical negotiation (Kinman et al., 2020; McFadden et al., 2021). In both sectors, however, leaders act as emotional moderators for their teams, and their leadership practices significantly influence how staff perceive support, legitimacy, organizational fairness (Ribeiro et al., 2022; Whitaker et al., 2022).

Within this environment, authenticity becomes closely intertwined with boundary-work and emotional regulation rather than unrestricted openness. Scholars increasingly describe this phenomenon as "calibrated authenticity", whereby leaders consciously judge when, how and to what extent authenticity should be expressed to sustain trust while maintaining professional distance and emotional stability (Leroy et al.,

2021; Rego et al., 2021). Comparative studies further show that this calibration process is particularly salient in social services because leaders must simultaneously act as supervisors, moral anchors and emotional buffers for staff experiencing compassion fatigue (McFadden et al., 2021; Ribeiro et al., 2022). Despite this, there remains limited empirical evidence on how such judgements are made in practice, how leaders interpret authenticity under emotional pressure, and how these processes unfold in real-world organisational episodes, particularly in social services contexts.

Trust, psychological safety and authenticity under emotional strain

Contemporary research highlights that trust and psychological safety are critical for sustaining wellbeing, ethical practice and collaborative learning in emotionally demanding human-service environments, where employees rely on relational security and ethical leadership behaviour (Ribeiro et al., 2022; McFadden et al., 2021). Studies since 2020 indicate that authentic leadership can support trust by signalling consistency, moral integrity, and value alignment in situations characterised by emotional uncertainty or ethical tension (Rego et al., 2021; Wong & Cummings, 2020). In such contexts, psychological safety is shaped not only by formal authority structures but also by leaders' perceived reliability, transparency and capacity to provide emotional containment for staff (Whitaker et al., 2022; Ribeiro et al., 2022).

Cross-study comparisons reveal important nuances in how authenticity influences trust. In some empirical contexts, authenticity enhances trust when leaders demonstrate grounded openness, ethical coherence, and relational stability, particularly during emotionally challenging organisational episodes (Wong & Cummings, 2020; Ribeiro et al., 2022). In other settings, however, authenticity may destabilise trust when self-disclosure or emotional expression blurs professional boundaries, exposes personal vulnerability in ways that unsettle staff or inadvertently shifts emotional burden onto employees (Leroy et al., 2021; Yagil & Ben-Zur, 2022). These divergent findings suggest that authenticity functions as both a trust-building resource and a potential trust-risking practice, depending on how it is enacted and interpreted within organisational norms.

Recent research also indicates that employees in care-oriented professions interpret authenticity ambivalently: they value honesty and relational closeness, but simultaneously expect leaders to maintain emotional composure, decisional authority and role distance to provide psychological containment during high-strain situations (Banks et al., 2021; Rego et al., 2021). Compared to studies, this ambivalence appears to be structurally embedded in emotionally demanding work environments rather than an isolated contextual anomaly (Liu, Zhu & Yang, 2020). As such, authenticity emerges not only as a relational construct but also as a normative and ethical practice that must be enacted within shared professional expectations about leadership, care and responsibility (Gardner, Cogliser, Davis-McCleary & Dickens, 2021).

Boundaries, dilemmas and risks in enacting authenticity

Recent research highlights the dilemmas, boundaries and risks associated with enacting authenticity in emotionally complex professions. Leaders in human-service organisations often engage in continual boundary-work, regulating the extent of emotional expression, value disclosure and personal positioning in response to staff expectations, ethical commitments and institutional constraints (Alvesson & Einola, 2020; Banks et al., 2021). Authenticity, therefore, becomes a situated ethical judgement rather than a spontaneous expression, requiring leaders to evaluate the potential relational and emotional consequences of their actions for both employees and clients (Leroy et al., 2021; Rego et al., 2021).

Comparative findings across empirical studies show that risks associated with authenticity tend to intensify under conditions of crisis, resource scarcity or ethically contested decision-making, particularly in social work and care organisations (McFadden et al., 2021; Yagil & Ben-Zur, 2022). Leaders report tensions between remaining true to their values and adhering to organisational directives, as well as between relational closeness and the need to maintain professional distance to protect themselves and their teams from emotional overload (Ribeiro et al., 2022; Whitaker et al., 2022). When these tensions are compared across sectors, similar patterns emerge in healthcare, child protection and community-based services, suggesting that the risks of authenticity are systemic features of emotionally intensive organisational work rather than context-specific exceptions. These insights reinforce the need for context-sensitive empirical research that examines how authenticity is enacted, regulated and bounded in real leadership situations involving emotional labour (Ilies, Morgeson & Nahrgang, 2021). The emerging literature indicates that authentic leadership in the social services sector should be understood as a relational, emotionally embedded and ethically negotiated practice, one that requires continuous judgement rather than simple adherence to normative leadership ideals (Rego et al., 2021; Ribeiro et al., 2022; Yagil & Ben-Zur, 2022).

Overall, the recent literature demonstrates that authentic leadership in emotionally demanding organisational contexts cannot be understood as a fixed personal quality but must instead be viewed as a relational, situated and ethically negotiated practice. Across studies, authenticity emerges as a process that is continuously shaped by emotional labour demands, boundary-work, contextual expectations regarding care, responsibility and professional conduct (Rego et al., 2021; Leroy et al., 2021; Ribeiro et al., 2022). Comparative findings further indicate that, while authentic leadership may contribute to trust, psychological safety, and relational stability, these outcomes are contingent on how authenticity is calibrated, regulated and interpreted within organisational norms, particularly in social services settings characterised by moral complexity and compassion fatigue (Wong & Cummings, 2020; Yagil & Ben-Zur, 2022). At the same time, the literature reveals persistent gaps in empirical understanding regarding how leaders practically

enact authenticity in real situational episodes, how they navigate tensions and risks when supporting teams exposed to emotional strain and how these micro-level practices shape trust in everyday organisational life. These gaps justify the need for qualitative, context-sensitive research that examines authentic leadership as a lived and dynamically negotiated practice within the social services sector.

Taken together, the reviewed literature shows that while authentic leadership has been widely examined as a predictor of trust and wellbeing, considerably less is known about how authenticity is practically enacted, regulated and bounded by leaders working in emotionally intensive social services environments. This study addresses this gap by exploring how leaders interpret and calibrate authenticity under emotional labour conditions, and how these practices shape trust and psychological safety in everyday leadership interactions.

Methodology

Research design

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretivist research design with a phenomenological orientation, aiming to explore how leaders in the social services sector interpret and enact authentic leadership when working with teams exposed to emotional labour. The study focuses on the lived meanings, tensions and relational dynamics through which authenticity is negotiated in practice, rather than on causal generalisation. Data were examined using reflexive thematic analysis, which allows for theoretically informed yet flexible interpretation of meaning patterns across narratives (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Research context and sampling

The study was conducted in organisations providing social services, including family support services, community-based child and youth centres, social care institutions and social work units. These settings are characterised by frequent exposure to emotionally demanding client interactions, moral stress, and compassion fatigue among staff. Participants were recruited using purposeful sampling combined with snowballing, focusing on leaders who met the following inclusion criteria: a minimum of two years of leadership responsibility, direct supervision of teams performing emotional labor and involvement in decision-making affecting staff well-being and client work.

The illustrative dataset consists of ten anonymised leaders (Informants A–J) representing varied organisational types and leadership tenures, allowing for both convergence and diversity of experience. The sample size of ten participants was considered sufficient for in-depth phenomenological inquiry, allowing both cross-case comparison and idiographic depth. The emphasis in this study was placed on information power rather than numerical representativeness, as the aim was to obtain rich and theoretically relevant accounts from leaders directly engaged in emotional labour contexts.

Data collection

Data were generated through semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 45–60 minutes. Interview prompts encouraged leaders to describe concrete episodes rather than abstract attitudes, focusing on situations where authenticity, trust and emotional strain intersected in leadership practice. All interviews were recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim. The fictional excerpts used in the Results section are presented as analytic examples for demonstration purposes.

Data analysis

Data analysis followed V. Braun and V. Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis. Reflexive thematic analysis here is treated as an interpretive and reflexive knowledge-production process, in which themes are actively constructed through researcher engagement rather than passively extracted from the data (Byrne, 2022). The process involved six iterative phases: familiarisation with the data, generation of initial codes, active construction of themes, reviewing relationships between themes, defining and naming themes and producing the analytic narrative.

Coding was conducted inductively, while being theoretically sensitised by concepts of authentic leadership, emotional labour and boundary-work. Reflexive memo-writing was used to trace the development of interpretations throughout the analysis. Although the study does not employ the Gioia methodology as a formal analytic framework, the analytic logic is informed by its interpretive principle of moving from informant-centred expressions toward higher-level theoretical abstraction (Gioia et al., 2022).

Ethical considerations

Ethical principles included informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymisation of organisational identifiers and secure data storage. Given the sensitivity of emotional and ethically charged accounts, situational details were paraphrased to minimise potential identification. All informants are presented as anonymised letter codes (A–J).

Reflexivity was an integral part of the research process. The researcher maintained reflexive notes throughout data collection and analysis, critically considering how personal assumptions and professional experience could shape the interpretation of the participants' accounts. Rather than seeking neutrality, the study acknowledged the researcher's role as an interpretive instrument within the knowledge production process.

Results

The aim of the analysis was not frequency counting, but the identification of key meaning patterns through which leaders described their experiences of authenticity under emotional strain.

Authenticity as relational presence rather than emotional exposure

Across the ten accounts, authenticity was described less as individual self-expression and more as a form of relational presence oriented toward supporting emotionally burdened teams. Leaders consistently emphasised that authenticity in social services leadership is enacted through steadiness, attuned responsiveness and ethically responsible care, rather than through unrestricted emotional transparency (A; C; F; G; I). Informants described authenticity as a way of carrying emotional ground for the team rather than transferring emotional weight to others. As one leader expressed, *"I try to be honest about what I feel, but I also know my role is to carry the emotional weight, not pass it on to the team. Authenticity means being real but also being steady"* (A). Another explained that authenticity must remain **contained rather than emotive**, noting that *"our staff work with trauma every day. If I 'open up' too much, I add to that weight. My authenticity is calm, measured and focused on supporting them"* (C).

Several informants emphasised that authenticity was experienced as **responsible presence rather than confession**, where values are enacted through behaviour, not emotional exposure. One leader reflected, *"I don't think authenticity means saying everything that crosses my mind. It means acting in a way that aligns with my values, especially when the situation is tense"* (F). Others reinforced this view, highlighting that authenticity was oriented toward **stability and containment** rather than personal disclosure. For example, one participant stated, *"The team needs me to be grounded. Authenticity for me is not emotional release, it is emotional reliability"* (G), while another added, *"I can be genuine without being emotionally open. My role is to steady the space, not to fill it with my feelings"* (I).

At the same time, leaders described authenticity as relationally co-constructed within teams, rather than individually expressed, stressing that authenticity gains meaning only through **interaction, responsibility and ethical awareness** (B; D; E; H; J). One informant noted, *"Authenticity is not about my inner truth, it is about what supports the team in that moment"* (B). Another explained, *"I see authenticity as alignment between who I am and what the team needs. If my openness harms them, then it is not authentic leadership"* (D). Others described authenticity as a practice of **protective emotional restraint**, illustrated in the reflection that *"being authentic does not mean putting my emotions into the room. It means staying present without adding to their burden"* (E). Another leader observed, *"Authenticity here is relational. It is not about me, it is about the people I am responsible for"* (H), while a further participant summarised this stance by stating, *"In our field, authenticity belongs inside care, not inside self-expression"* (J).

Taken together, these accounts indicate that authenticity is not experienced as personal disclosure, but as a relational, ethically oriented leadership position grounded in emotional responsibility toward staff exposed to compassion fatigue (A; B; C; D; E; F; G; H; I; J). Leaders situate authenticity within the moral horizon of care rather than within psychological

self-expression, constructing it as a form of steady, protective presence that supports team emotional stability in high-strain environments (A; C; F; G; H; I; J).

Trust as the outcome of calibrated authenticity

Across all ten accounts, trust was consistently associated with authenticity only when authenticity was **measured, consistent and ethically contained** rather than emotionally unfiltered. Leaders emphasised that trust developed through authenticity that communicated **reliability, steadiness and moral coherence**, particularly in situations marked by uncertainty or emotional strain (A; D; F; G; H; I). Informants described how trust emerged when authenticity was enacted as grounded presence rather than as emotional exposure. As one leader explained, "*When I say, 'Yes, this is a difficult situation, but we will handle it together,' people trust me more. They see honesty, but also leadership*" (G). Another expressed that restrained authenticity was often more trustworthy than full openness, reflecting that "*I sometimes hold back parts of what I feel. If I were fully transparent, it would create anxiety. Authenticity also means understanding what the team needs from me*" (D). Several informants emphasised that staff did not read authenticity through emotion, but through **behavioural consistency and value alignment**. One participant observed that "*they don't trust me because I share my feelings. They trust me because I am consistent – my words and actions match, especially when things are hard*" (H). Others reinforced that authenticity generated trust when it signalled **strength, containment and ethical direction**, rather than vulnerability for its own sake. As one leader put it, "*Trust comes when they see that I am honest, but also that I can hold the situation*" (I), while another stated, "*The team feels safer when my authenticity is calm and reliable, not emotional and reactive*" (F).

At the same time, all informants recognised that authenticity could **threaten trust** when expressed without emotional boundary awareness (A; B; C; E; J). Leaders described instances where personal openness unintentionally transferred emotional strain to staff. One participant reflected, "*Once I told the team how exhausted I was. Instead of feeling supported, they became worried about me, about the future. I realised authenticity can also shake people*" (E). Another acknowledged moment where transparency undermined containment, explaining that "*there are times when saying too much feels like giving my uncertainty to them. That doesn't build trust, it transfers anxiety*" (J). Similar concerns were raised by others, who described how **excessive emotional openness destabilised the psychological climate** of the team (B; C).

Across the dataset, trust emerged not from authenticity understood as personal openness, but from authenticity enacted as calibrated ethical presence (A–J). Authenticity strengthened trust when it created psychological safety, coherence and stability and weakened it when it shifted emotional burden onto staff or disrupted emotional containment (A; D; E; G; H; J). In this sense, trust was experienced as the relational outcome of disciplined, boundary-conscious authenticity, rather than of expressive sincerity alone (A–J).

Authenticity as boundary-work under emotional labour conditions

A core finding across all ten informants is that authenticity is **actively produced through boundary-work**, rather than expressed as spontaneous emotional truth. Leaders described continuous judgment regarding **closeness and distance, personal and professional positioning, emotional expression versus emotional containment** in their day-to-day practice (A–J). Informants stressed that authenticity required disciplined emotional regulation, particularly in contexts characterised by compassion fatigue and moral strain. As one leader stated, *"I am authentic, but I am not porous. I feel with them, but I don't dissolve into the emotion. That boundary is what allows me to lead"* (B).

Others described authenticity as structured empathy, in which care and emotional attitude were balanced with professional framing and responsibility. One participant observed, *"I acknowledge what people are going through, but I also keep the frame of our work. If the leader loses the frame, the whole team loses it"* (I). Informants emphasised that boundary-work protects both leaders and staff, with one reflecting that *"authenticity without boundaries becomes emotional over-identification. In our field, that leads straight to burnout for them and for me"* (A). Another described this process as ethical filtering, explaining, *"Before I speak, I ask myself, is this for me or for them? Authenticity that serves my relief is not the same as authenticity that supports the team"* (C). Leaders reinforced the idea that authenticity involves deliberate emotional restraint, rather than unrestricted openness (D; F; G; H; J). Informant noted, *"Being authentic does not mean sharing everything inside me. It means choosing what is helpful and holding back what would overwhelm others"* (D). Another added, *"My authenticity must be weighed against responsibility. If I cross the boundary, I stop leading and start venting"* (F). Others framed boundary-work as a professional ethical obligation, with one explaining, *"I am close to my team, but I am not their emotional partner. That line is part of my integrity as a leader"* (H), while another summarised, *"Authenticity here is not about emotional expression, it is about disciplined presence"* (J).

Across accounts, authenticity was therefore not experienced as a tension between authenticity and professionalism, but rather as professionalism enacted under emotional strain (A–J). Leaders constructed authenticity through **judgement, reflexivity and ethical boundary management**, presenting it as a practice that is **intentional, reflective and morally filtered**, rather than spontaneous or affect-driven (A; B; C; F; H; I).

Dilemmas and fragility of authenticity in organisational–ethical constraints

Informants also highlighted that authenticity becomes most fragile in situations where organisational constraints intersect with personal ethical commitments (A–J). Leaders described emotional strain when authenticity **could not be fully expressed** due to confidentiality rules, institutional policies, political sensitivities or external accountability pressures (C; F; J). One participant

explained, *"Sometimes I know staff want full transparency, but there are boundaries: legal, organisational, ethical. In those moments, authenticity feels restricted, and it weighs on me"* (J). Another reflected on the emotional cost of **partial openness**, stating, *"I try to explain as much as I can, but there's always a line I cannot cross. That's the hardest kind of authenticity, being honest, but not complete"* (F). Several informants described dilemmas in which authenticity risked **placing emotional labour back onto workers**, particularly when leaders expressed fatigue, frustration or vulnerability in ways that shifted concern toward them rather than toward the team or clients (B; E; H). As one leader observed, *"If I share too much of my fatigue or disappointment, they start worrying about me instead of themselves. That isn't leadership, that's emotional transfer"* (E). Another described this as a moment where authenticity became **self-centred rather than relationally ethical**, explaining, *"There are moments when authenticity becomes about my feelings rather than their safety. I must remind myself that I am here to carry weight, not add to it"* (H).

Others spoke about the **moral discomfort** of authenticity constrained by institutional realities. One informant reflected, *"There are decisions I have to communicate that don't match my own values. In those moments, authenticity feels conflicted, divided between loyalty to the organisation and loyalty to the team"* (A). Another described a similar experience, stating, *"I remain truthful, but not fully transparent. That ambiguity is emotionally heavy"* (C). Leaders, therefore, framed authenticity as a **negotiated practice situated within unequal power relations, ethical obligations and organisational hierarchy** (D; G; I). These narratives reveal authenticity as fragile, negotiated and situational, rather than stable or self-evident (A–J). Authenticity is continually shaped and sometimes constrained by **i**nstitutional context, ethical responsibility and concern for staff wellbeing. Leaders must therefore navigate authenticity not as a personal expression, but as an ethically bounded leadership practice, constantly re-evaluated within the realities of emotionally demanding organisational life (A–J).

The illustrative results suggest that authentic leadership in the social services sector operates as a form of ethical emotional stewardship. Leaders construct authenticity through measured presence, reflective restraint and boundary-conscious engagement, supporting trust and psychological stability within teams exposed to compassion fatigue and moral stress. At the same time, authenticity remains fragile when confronted with institutional restrictions, ethical conflicts or emotional spillovers, underscoring the need for leadership development approaches that strengthen reflective judgement, boundary-navigation and emotionally responsible authenticity.

Conclusions

The findings demonstrate that authentic leadership in the social services sector cannot be reduced to personal sincerity or emotional openness; instead, it functions as a context-embedded practice of ethical emotional stewardship. Across the accounts of all ten leaders, authenticity is enacted through measured presence, reflective restraint and responsibility

for the emotional climate of the team, rather than through self-expression for its own sake. Trust is strengthened when authenticity communicates consistency, steadiness and moral alignment, particularly in emotionally charged situations; it is weakened when openness becomes unbounded or anxiety-transferring. Authenticity, therefore, operates as a calibrated and relationally oriented practice, not as an automatic or uniformly positive leadership trait.

The study further shows that authenticity is continuously shaped by boundary-work under conditions of emotional labour. Leaders negotiate the balance between closeness and distance, empathy and containment, care and role authority, framing authenticity as part of professional responsibility rather than as a tension with professionalism. However, authenticity becomes fragile when institutional constraints, confidentiality limits or organisational decisions restrict transparency, producing ethical and emotional dilemmas that leaders must navigate carefully.

Conceptually, the study contributes to contemporary debates by reframing authentic leadership as a situated, relational and ethically negotiated practice within emotionally demanding organisational contexts. Practically, the findings point to the need for leadership development approaches that strengthen reflective judgement, boundary-navigation skills and emotionally responsible authenticity, particularly in sectors characterised by compassion fatigue and moral pressure. Future research should examine how these dynamics unfold across different welfare and care settings and how teams themselves interpret and co-construct the boundaries of authenticity in leadership practice.

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AUTENTIŠKA LYDERYSTĖ EMOCINĖS ĮTAMPOS SĄLYGOMIS SOCIALINIŲ PASLAUGŲ SEKTORIUJE

Santrauka

Straipsnyje analizuojama, kaip socialinių paslaugų sektoriaus vadovai supranta ir įgyvendina autentišką lyderystę dirbdami su komandomis, patiriančiomis nuolatinę emocinę įtampą, moralines dilemas ir profesinio perdegimo riziką. Šiame sektoriuje vadovų vaidmuo apima ne tik organizacinių procesų koordinavimą, bet ir atsakomybę už komandos emocinį klimatą, psichologinį saugumą bei pasitikėjimo kūrimą. Nors autentiška lyderystė dažnai siejama su atvirumu ir saviraiška, emociškai intensyvioje aplinkoje ji įgauna labiau santykinę ir kontekstinę prasmę. Tyrimo tikslas – atskleisti, kaip vadovai interpretuoja autentiškumą, kaip jį sąmoningai „kalibruoja“ kasdienėje praktikoje ir kaip šios praktikos susijusios su pasitikėjimu bei psichologiniu saugumu komandose. Tyrimas grindžiamas kokybiniu interpretaciniu požiūriu, taikant fenomenologinę orientaciją. Duomenys surinkti pusiau

struktūruotais interviu su dešimčia socialinių paslaugų organizacijų vadovų, turinčių patirties vadovaujant emociškai apkrautoms komandoms, ir analizuoti taikant refleksyvią teminę analizę.

Rezultatai rodo, kad autentiškumas suvokiamas ne kaip nevaržomas emocinis atvirumas, bet kaip etiškai pagrįsta, santykinė lyderio laikysena, orientuota į komandos emocinį stabilumą. Vadovai pabrėžia vertybinį nuoseklumą, patikimumą, emocinį susitvardymą ir gebėjimą išlikti ramiems sudėtingose situacijose. Autentiškumas pasireiškia per sąmoningą emocijų reguliavimą ir ribų nustatymą, leidžiant būti artimiems darbuotojams, bet kartu išlaikyti profesinį atstumą. Pasitikėjimas stiprėja tada, kai autentiškumas reiškiasi kaip stabilumas ir moralinis aiškumas, o pernelyg didelis emocinis atvirumas gali būti suvokiamas kaip emocinės naštos perkėlimas darbuotojams. Autentiškumas taip pat tampa trapiu reiškiniu organizacinių ir etinių apribojimų kontekste, kai vadovai negali būti visiškai atviri dėl konfidencialumo ar institucinių sprendimų. Tokiose situacijose autentiškumas tampa refleksyvia, morališkai apsvarstyta praktika, o ne spontaniška saviraiška. Straipsnyje siūloma autentišką lyderystę suprasti kaip kontekstinę, santykinę ir emociškai disciplinuotą praktiką, ypač aktualią socialinių paslaugų organizacijose, ir pabrėžia emocinio reguliavimo bei ribų nustatymo kompetencijų svarbą vadovų veikloje.