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The strengths and capacities of Authentic Followership

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Abstract

Purpose – Exploring a new conceptual framework for authentic followership (AF) comprised of three components: individual, dyadic and organisational. The purpose of this paper is to explain how the components of AF interact as a positive, non-linear feedback loop. It presents three propositions of positive outcomes arising from AF. First, AF builds follower's strengths and capacities. Second, AF strengthens dyadic relationships between followers and leaders. Third, AF deepens and strengthens positive organisational culture thereby improving organisational performance. It discusses the practical significance of these propositions for followers, leaders and firms.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper provides an overview of AF. Then three propositions of positive outcomes arising from AF are presented. It identifies how these propositions could benefit followers, leaders and firms. In conclusion, it offers suggestions for future research directions and notes some limitations of this work.

Findings – The key finding of this paper is that AF could potentially strengthen the capacities and performance of followers, leaders and organisations if the propositions presented in this work are correct – if the three components of AF interact with each other as a positive feedback loop strengthening and reinforcing each component of AF. To establish the validity of the AF model and the three propositions the paper suggests that investigations in different empirical settings are undertaken: SME's and multinational corporations, in different countries under different market conditions, with followers and leaders of different gender, age, education level, roles and tenure of employment.

Originality/value – The paper's core contention that the components of AF interact as a positive feedback loop has significant practical implications – beneficial outcomes for followers, leaders and firms. *P1* explains how AF enables followers to gain confidence, maturity and create solid foundations from which to thrive and flourish. *P2* explains how dyadic relationships between followers and leaders could be strengthened, deepening trust and respect between each party, thereby enhancing leadership effectiveness. *P3* explains how the dynamic processes of AF can strengthen and deepen positive organisational culture and enhance organisational performance.

Keywords Organizational performance, Leadership effectiveness, Authentic Followership

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

Conventionally, the labels follower and followership have been viewed as pejorative terms, conveying images of passivity, deference, obedience and submission to leaders (Hopton *et al.*, 2012; Carsten *et al.*, 2010). However, there is a growing recognition that proactive, participatory, empowered followership styles are feasible and desirable. Indeed, several studies have posited that active followership plays an important role in assisting leaders and organisations to be effective (Carsten and Uhl-Bien, 2012; Baker, 2007; Kelley, 1988; Blanchard *et al.*, 2009; Chaleff, 2009; Kellerman, 2013; E Cuhna *et al.*, 2013).

Recently there have been important advances in the development of followership theory. In 2014 Uhl-Bien and colleagues published a paper in *The Leadership Quarterly* that identifies two forms of followership theories: role-based views that investigate “how individuals enact leadership and followership in the context of hierarchical roles”, and constructionist views that investigate “the processes and relational interactions involved in the co-production of leadership and followership” (Uhl-Bien *et al.*, 2014, pp. 90, 94).

Thank you to the anonymous reviewers for comments, which improved this work.



Concurrently with Uhl-Bien *et al.*'s (2014) publication, de Zilwa published a new conceptual framework for authentic followership (AF) (de Zilwa, 2014); throughout this paper this model is referred to as AF. AF aligns with Uhl-Bien *et al.*'s constructionist view of followership. AF explains the relational interactions involved in AF, and how AF impacts leadership processes (de Zilwa, 2014; Uhl-Bien *et al.*, 2014). AF is a proactive process whereby authentic followers decide whether they will follow a leader. Hence AF reverses the conventional view that leaders influence and direct followers' behaviour (Avolio *et al.*, 2004).

The aim of the present paper is to identify three potential positive outcomes of AF. These positive outcomes of AF are presented as propositions – “statements for discussion or illustration to be affirmed or denied” (Delbridge *et al.*, 1981, p. 1414):

- (1) AF enhances followers' strengths and capacities.
- (2) AF strengthens dyadic relationships between followers and leaders.
- (3) AF deepens and strengthens positive organisational culture thereby improving organisational performance.

This paper has three sections. The first section of the paper provides an overview of the AF construct to assist readers' understanding of how the propositions could work. Readers who seek more information about the AF model should refer to de Zilwa (2014). The second section of the paper presents three propositions of positive outcomes that could arise from AF. In conclusion, the third section of the paper discusses the practical implications of these propositions for followers, leaders and firms. It also identifies future research directions and notes some limitations of this work.

The foundations of AF construct

To ensure that new theoretical constructs are rigorous and robust leading theoreticians have developed protocols to guide the work of developing theory (Suddaby, 2010; Sutton and Staw, 1995; Weick, 1995; Whetten, 1989). These protocols involve answering four key questions:

- (1) The relevance/significance question: why is the conceptual framework important?
- (2) The contextual question: how has the new theory emerged; how does the new theory relate to/differ from existing theories?
- (3) The definition question: what are the constituent components of the new theoretical framework, why were they chosen, and how do these components complement and/or interact with each other?
- (4) The boundaries question: what are the limitations of the conceptual framework; are there particular conditions where the conceptual framework may not work in practice?

This paper adopts the answers to these questions as its structural framework because they provide a clear, logical explanation of the new construct and situate this new work within the context of existing scholarship.

Firms and leaders need AF

Firms and public sector organisations with hierarchical organisational structures typically have a high-power distance between leaders, managers and workers (French and Raven, 1959; Hinkin and Schriesheim, 1989; Barbuto, 2000; Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005). Executives, leaders, managers and supervisors determine strategy, allocate

resources, consult with stakeholders, and direct, monitor and evaluate the productivity and performance of subordinates. In many firms and organisations, this arrangement becomes entrenched over time; the roles and identities of leaders and workers become normatively prescribed, and rarely, if ever, questioned (Tajfel, 1982; Hogg, 2001; Van Knippenberg, 2011). Under this power dynamic, workers have minimal opportunities for input into strategic or operational decision-making processes. It has become axiomatic that this is the most efficient and effective way for firms to operate. However there are two reasons why these normatively prescribed identities of leader and worker should be challenged. First, when workers are limited to passive roles in firms, the firm loses the opportunity of harnessing the full energy, engagement and innovative potential of these workers. Second, whilst heroic leadership paradigms, such as charismatic leadership and transformational leadership, portray leaders as imbued with innate wisdom and ethical principles, leaders can and do fall short of these ideals, making unethical or imprudent decisions (Mayer *et al.*, 2012; Hoyt *et al.*, 2013). During the Global Financial Crisis there were numerous cases where ineffective leadership contributed to the bankruptcy of firms such as at Citi-Bank, Fanny May, Freddie Mac and Lehmann Brothers (de Zilwa, 2014; MacKenzie *et al.*, 2011; Benabou, 2013; Fried, 2012). Also, the recent disclosure of corporate misconduct at Leighton Holdings (Mc Kenzie *et al.*, 2013) illustrates that there is still a pressing need for an antidote for ineffective leadership. AF offers the potential of providing this antidote, acting as a countervailing force preventing the occurrence, or at least diminishing the severity of unethical or imprudent leadership. How and why? AF empowers followers, providing them with agency and voice. AF is grounded in the principles and values of truth, integrity and ethics (de Zilwa, 2014; Algera and Lips-Wiersma, 2012; Park, 2007). When workers enact AF they prioritise the needs and interests of the entire firm over their individual needs and aspirations, or those of the incumbent leader. If a leader proposes a course of action that an authentic follower considers to be imprudent or unethical, then they will raise their concerns about the situation with the firm's board, external regulatory authorities or other agents with the power to intervene or circumvent the situation.

Previous models of AF

There are four previous constructs for AF. Gardner *et al.* (2005) created the first construct. They proposed that the purpose of AF is to develop authentic leadership. The second construct for AF was developed by Goffee and Jones; this construct focused on the satisfaction of a follower's needs (Goffee and Jones, 2006). Avolio and Reicher produced the third construct; their model focused on a follower's possession of the psychological attributes for authenticity (Avolio and Reicher, 2008) Leroy and colleagues developed the fourth model, defining AF as the satisfaction of a follower's needs, positing that a follower's most important need is for autonomous motivation towards tasks (Leroy *et al.*, 2015). The new construct for AF differs from these previous constructs in two important ways. First, it provides a comprehensive perspective on AF encompassing three necessary dimensions: individual, the follower's capacity to be authentic; relational, the follower's secure attachment to the leader; and organisational, the need for a positive organisational culture to enable and sustain AF. Second, the new conceptual framework for AF is grounded on the premise that it is a valuable endeavour in and of itself, rather than viewing AF as a conduit for authentic leadership.

The new construct for AF

The core premise of the new conceptual framework for AF is that it is a relational concept (de Zilwa, 2014; Roberts *et al.*, 2009; Uhl-Bien *et al.*, 2014). It is self-evident that

the foundation of AF must be an individual's capacity for authenticity. However, an individual follower may have the psychological capacity for authenticity, yet not be able to enact AF behaviours such as voicing suggestions for innovations, or critiquing a leader's proposed decisions. Therefore, a comprehensive construct of AF should include two additional elements.

First, the nature of the follower's relationship with the leader, and second, the nature of the context or organisational culture of the firm in which the relationship between the follower and the leader occurs. A robust construct for AF should also explain the process of interaction between the three components (individual, dyadic and organisational) of the AF construct. The new conceptual framework for AF is a comprehensive and robust model because it comprises these three essential components (individual, dyadic and organisational) and it explains the interaction process between each of the components. Figure 1 illustrates the new AF construct. A key feature of the new AF construct is that it is a circular model, a non-linear feedback loop where each of the three constituent components which comprise AF interact with each other continuously allowing AF to emerge and be sustained. Hence the new AF construct is not a linear cause and effect model.

The first component of the AF model refers to individual followers; to the way the follower thinks and behaves; to his/her psychological capacity or mindset for authenticity. The second component refers to the nature of the dyadic relationship between the leader and follower; to the follower's secure attachment to the leader. The third component refers to the nature of the firm's context or setting; the

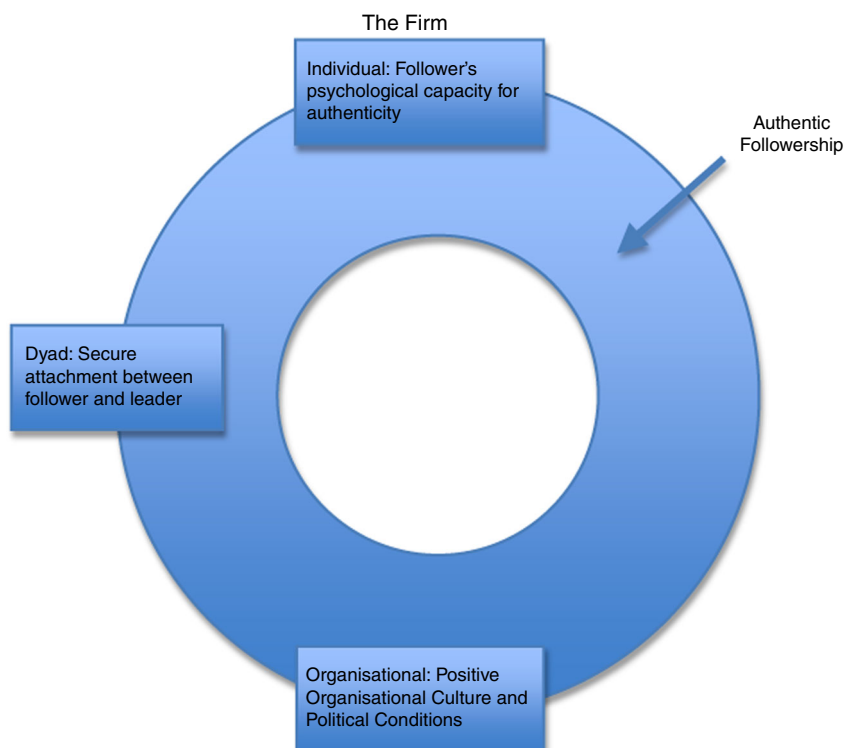


Figure 1.
Authentic
followership

institutional and organisational characteristics of the firm. Positive organisational culture, norms and political conditions create and maintain the conditions for AF. The following discussion provides an overview of the new conceptual framework for AF, for further details see de Zilwa (2014).

The first component of AF is an individual's psychological capacity for authenticity (Kernis, 2003; Kernis and Goldman, 2005a, b). Kernis's construct for authenticity has been validated and found to be reliable by empirical testing (Kernis *et al.*, 2006). Kernis posits that in order for an individual to have the psychological capacity for authenticity they require four attributes: awareness, unbiased processing, action and relational orientation (Kernis, 2003). Awareness refers to self-knowledge, recognition of one's motives, feelings, desires, strengths, weaknesses, trait characteristics and emotions (Kernis, 2003). Unbiased processing means processing thoughts and experiences objectively, cognisant of how our experiences and preferences affect our judgement and views (Kernis, 2003). Unbiased processing also involves seeking truth, integrity and ethical judgements. The action attribute of authenticity means acting in accord with one's values, preferences and needs, as opposed to acting in a way that will please others, or to attain rewards or avoid punishment (Kernis, 2003). Relational orientation refers to self-disclosure, trust and intimacy, allowing others to see the real you – the good and bad (Kernis, 2003).

The second component of AF is that there needs to be a strong dyadic relationship between a follower and the leader. More explicitly, the follower needs to have a secure pattern of attachment to the leader and by extension to the firm itself. This component draws on attachment theory (Ainsworth *et al.*, 1978; Bowlby, 1982). Following a Freudian perspective whereby a leader is likened to a father (Davidovitz *et al.*, 2007; Mayseless, 2010; Popper, 2011), it is argued that a secure attachment pattern develops between followers and leaders when followers have developed a strong bond of trust with the leader. This bond of trust enables followers to be confident that the leader will provide a secure base for them and is available and responsive to their needs (Popper and Mayseless, 2003; Popper, 2011; Mayseless, 2010; Hinojosa *et al.*, 2014). This bond of trust between followers and leaders enables followers to enact AF, to take the risk of articulating their ideas and offering critical feedback on a leader's proposed decisions. In contrast, when a follower is uncertain about whether the leader will be available and responsive to their needs, they are said to have an ambivalent or anxious attachment pattern to the leader (Mayseless, 2010). If a follower seeks protection and support from a leader and the leader rejects the follower's pleas for assistance, then the follower attempts to become emotionally self-sufficient, displaying an avoidant attachment pattern to the leader (Mayseless, 2010). However, it is important to clarify that when a follower develops a secure pattern of attachment to the leader, this does not mean that the follower is dependent on the leader, as an infant is dependent on its mother or father; quite the opposite in fact. When a follower has developed the capacity to be authentic and developed the bonds of trust and respect, which enable them to develop a secure pattern of attachment to the leader they acquire agency. They are self-directed and self-motivated (E Cuhna *et al.*, 2013).

The third component of AF is that the firm needs positive organisational culture, norms and political conditions for AF to emerge and be sustained (Balthazard *et al.*, 2006; Luthans and Youssef, 2007; Jung *et al.*, 2009). Positive organisational culture is characterised by cohesion and cooperation and positive emotions such as optimism, hope, strength, trust and respect (Cameron *et al.*, 2011). A positive organisational culture enables high quality connections (HQC) (Stephens *et al.*, 2012), strong dyadic

relationships between followers and leaders to develop as well as strong relationships between co-workers in teams and groups. Participants in HQCs share subjective experiences (positive arousal, energy, regard and mutuality, participation and engagement) (Stephens *et al.*, 2012). In turn, these shared experiences between participants in the HQCs enable deeper bonds of trust to develop, as well as empathy and resilience, the capacity to withstand strain and stress, and openness to new ideas and influences (Caza and Milton, 2012). In contrast, if a firm has a negative organisational culture characterised by intense political rivalry and conflict between individuals, this inhibits and can even thwart the development of AF (Kahn, 2012). When negativity permeates a firm there are low levels of trust between followers and leaders, and people prioritise self-interested initiatives over devoting time, energy and commitment to collective efforts (Balthazard *et al.*, 2006). If a firm is characterised by negative contagion, a negative affective state, this literally drains energy, enthusiasm, hope and confidence from employees, leaders and managers alike, so the firm can fall into a vortex of decline resulting in weaker levels of productivity, performance and profit (Felps *et al.*, 2006).

Interaction between the components of AF

It is important to keep in mind that the AF construct does not propose a linear cause and effect relationship between its three core components whereby one component is required as an antecedent condition for another component to emerge. Each of the components of AF (followers' capacity for authenticity, followers' secure attachment to the leader, and positive organisational culture) coexist and interact with each other, reinforcing and strengthening the other components; operating as a positive non-linear feedback loop. A feedback loop "refers to the process in which information about the outcomes of an action is fed back into the decision-making, or regulation, process to affect the next action" (Stacey, 1996, p. 287). For further information about feedback loops in systems dynamics models, especially mathematical models of flows (the rate of change over time) and stocks/state variables (the state of the system over time) see Neuwirth *et al.* (2015) and Grösser and Schaffernicht (2012). A non-linear feedback loop is "a system when actions [by an agent/component of the system] can have more than one outcome and when actions generate non-proportional outcomes, in other words, when the system is more than the sum of its parts" (Stacey, 1996, p. 288). There are two types of feedback in complex non-linear systems – positive and negative. "Positive feedback means that growth reinforces further growth [...] In contrast, negative feedback acts to negate this growth [...]" (Neuwirth *et al.*, 2015, pp. 2-3). The core premise of the present paper is that the AF model operates as a positive non-linear feedback loop, whereby growth reinforces further growth.

The limitations of AF

It is important to acknowledge that there could be certain conditions where AF may not be feasible:

- in firms where leaders and managers use authoritarian command and control styles of management;
- when leaders use narcissistic or abusive leadership;
- when firms are located in nations with cultural norms that reinforce high-power distance between leaders and subordinates; and

- when workers experience job insecurity because their firms are under financial duress or there is a possibility of organisational restructuring.

Each of these scenarios is a situation where the power/distance between leaders and followers is heightened and reinforced, under these conditions many workers would be unwilling to take the risk of enacting AF because they would be fearful and anxious that if they did so leaders would target them, they could be sanctioned, or even lose their jobs. Whilst it is important to acknowledge these conditions where AF may be unfeasible, when AF can be enacted this could benefit followers, leaders and firms. Next three propositions are presented which illustrate how AF could reinforce and strengthen individual followers' authenticity, dyadic relationships between followers and leaders and reinforce and enhance a positive organisational culture.

Proposition 1. AF enhances followers' strengths and capacities

Support for this proposition is derived from work undertaken by Peterson and Seligman. These researchers identified authenticity as a signature character strength, and they created the values in action (VIA) inventory and undertook a large scale empirical study which validated the instrument (Peterson and Seligman, 2004; Park *et al.*, 2004). Subsequent studies have found that when an individual develops the capacity to behave authentically at work, their job satisfaction, pleasure (hedonism), engagement (flow) and meaning (eudemonia) improves (Peterson *et al.*, 2005), in Harzer and Ruch (2012b). When followers can behave authentically, this creates and sustains self-development strengths and capacities including self-motivation, self-regulation, self-criticism and self-direction (Harzer and Ruch, 2012a; Littman-Ovadia and Davidovitch, 2010). These strengths and capacities enable followers to become more mature and confident workers thereby offering greater scope for improvements in their work performance and productivity (Harzer and Ruch, 2012b; Page and Vella-Brodrick, 2009; Dutton *et al.*, 2010; Luthans *et al.*, 2010). Each of these strengths and capacities requires independent critical thinking (E Cuhna *et al.*, 2013). However, when an authentic follower is exercising independent critical thinking, they are not being self-centred, as a key aspect of AF is its relational orientation: prioritising the interests of the firm, the collective good, over individual needs and preferences. AF enables workers to exercise their psychological capacity for authenticity. Put differently, workers may possess the psychological capacity for authenticity, yet without interaction with the other two components of AF (secure attachment between followers and leaders and a positive organisational culture) then the workers capacity to enact AF behaviours (to offer feedback on leader's decisions, or offer suggestions for business improvements, or innovations) will remain latent. When workers acquire the strengths and capacities that flow from enacting authenticity, this reinforces, strengthens and deepens their relationships with leaders and co-workers, which in turn strengthens positive organisational culture.

Proposition 2. AF strengthens dyadic relationships between followers and leaders

When followers develop and maintain a secure pattern of attachment to the leader, they have confidence that the leader will support them and meet their needs (Mayseless, 2010; Hinojosa *et al.*, 2014). When the dyadic relationship between a follower and leader is strong this builds trust and respect between the two people. Trust and respect are foundation stones of open and honest communication. Trust and respect between a

leader and follower create secure conditions, congruence and synergy between the leader and the follower. This enables followers to take on a proactive role in their firm working as partners with leaders, in effect engaging in the co-production of leadership (Carsten and Uhl-Bien, 2012). When workers take on a proactive, AF role, they are empowered, gaining agency and voice. Authentic followers articulate their suggestions for innovation and voice concerns and or criticisms if they view a leader's proposed course of action as inadvisable. Hence AF could provide two benefits for firms. First, firms gain the opportunity to enhance their efficiency, effectiveness and profit from new innovations proposed by authentic followers. AF enables workers to stretch and develop their skills and capacities, they can attempt new tasks, or modify how existing tasks or projects are undertaken, confident that should these new approaches fail they will still have the support of their leader. Second, AF has the potential to enhance leadership effectiveness. Leaders can make better informed, more balanced decisions, which consider and evaluate the viability of alternative strategies, perspectives and priorities. In contrast, if there is a weak connection, or bond of trust and respect between a leader and follower then the follower is unlikely to take the risk of voicing doubts, concerns or criticisms if they consider a leader's planned course of action to be imprudent or unethical. When this bond of trust and respect does not exist, followers are more inclined to remain silent (Knoll and van Dick, 2013; Carsten and Uhl-Bien, 2013). And as noted, followers' silent acquiescence with imprudent or unethical decisions can lead to significant financial losses for firms and significant reputational damage. A caveat is required. The advantages of secure attachment patterns between followers and leaders are clear. However it is anticipated that in some situations it could be difficult for followers to establish and maintain a secure pattern of attachment to a leader if they adopt a narcissistic or abusive leadership style "demanding unquestioning obedience" (Padilla *et al.*, 2007, p. 181; Pelletier, 2010) or when a worker's employment is insecure.

Proposition 3. AF deepens and strengthens positive organisational culture thereby improving organisational performance.

AF has the potential to improve a firm's organisational performance. Richard and colleagues defined organisational performance as:

Organizational performance encompasses three specific areas of firm outcomes: (a) financial performance (profits, return on assets, return on investment, etc.); (b) product market performance (sales, market share, etc.); and (c) shareholder return (total shareholder return, economic value added, etc.) (Richard *et al.*, 2009, p. 723).

It is useful to provide an explanation of how the proposition that AF could improve a firm's organisational performance was derived. Human resource management scholars have undertaken a substantial body of work investigating links between employees motivation, job satisfaction, engagement, creating high-performance work systems, the absence of dysfunctional organisational culture and improved organisational performance of firms (Singh *et al.*, 2012; MacKenzie *et al.*, 2011; Hancock *et al.*, 2013; Guest, 2011; Buller and McEvoy, 2012). And as noted, organisational psychologists have studied how employees can build their strengths and capacities through the VIA inventory (Peterson and Park, 2006; Harzer and Ruch, 2012b; Dutton *et al.*, 2010; Luthans *et al.*, 2010; Peterson and Seligman, 2004). The proposition that AF could facilitate improved organisational performance is influenced by the human resource management stream of scholarship on employees motivation, engagement and

improved organisational performance and the organisational psychologists work on building individuals' strengths and capacities. Unpacking the reasoning involved in the proposition that AF could improve a firm's organisational performance involves the following steps. First, it has been argued that AF strengthens the skills and capacities of workers, enhancing their motivation, engagement and self-direction. Second, the case has been made that AF strengthens the relationship between leaders and followers, building trust, respect and honest communication, serving to reinforce individual workers alignment with the firm's strategic goals. Together, these two patterns of behaviour associated with AF serve to strengthen and reinforce a positive organisational culture. What is proposed here is that as AF continues to deepen and flourish in a firm over time, continually strengthening and reinforcing the positive nature of the firm's organisational culture, then the flow on effect could be improvements in the firm's organisational performance, especially its financial performance – profit, return on investment, market share and return to shareholders.

Discussion

The core idea presented in these propositions is that when the three components of AF are enacted (followers' authenticity, secure attachment between followers, and leaders and positive organisational culture) each component is strengthened and reinforced. Some readers may find these propositions confusing, they may refer to their training in the principles of logic and dismiss these propositions as a Cartesian circle whereby the premise assumes what is to be proved in the conclusion (Baggini and Fosl, 2003). Such a view assumes that the concept under consideration is linear, that agent/component A causes a particular effect in agent/component B. However the AF model is not linear, it is a non-linear feedback loop where each of the components coexist and interact, feeding back to the other components.

This paper extends the original work on the AF model by proposing that the feedback between the components of AF is positive, that it strengthens and reinforces each component of AF (de Zilwa, 2014). More formally, systems dynamics scholars refer to positive feedback as "positive polarity" where each agent or component in the complex non-linear system changes in the same direction (Neuwirth *et al.*, 2015, p. 2; Grösser and Schaffernicht, 2012). These scholars argue that negative feedback or "negative polarity" occurs when a change in one agent/component of the system causes another agent/component of the system to change in the opposite direction (Neuwirth *et al.*, 2015, p. 2). Why is the direction of the feedback important? If the feedback between the AF components is positive rather than negative, this theoretical insight offers significant practical benefits for firms. How and why? Firms are constantly striving to improve their performance. The AF model and these propositions about strengthening and reinforcing the components of AF through positive feedback serve as useful insights that firms could deploy to enhance workers' performance and productivity, improve the effectiveness of leadership, sustain a robust positive organisational culture which fosters creativity and innovation, and strengthen the firm's resilience to adverse events.

Conclusion

Lewin stated "nothing is as practical as a good theory" (Lewin, 1945, p. 129). At first glance Lewin's statement appears to be paradoxical. Yet on deeper reflection its profound nature is revealed. "Good theory is practical precisely because it advances knowledge in a scientific discipline, guides research toward crucial questions and enlightens the profession of management" (Van de Ven, 1989, p. 486). Does this paper meet the criteria of

good theory? Yes. The paper makes three important contributions to advancing our knowledge of followership and leadership processes. First, it proposes that followers can have agency and voice; proposing ideas for business improvements or innovations and actively collaborating with leaders in decision-making processes. Second, the propositions presented in this paper extend the initial work undertaken in developing the AF model by explaining that the processes of interaction between the three components of AF operate as a positive non-linear feedback loop. Hence the present paper contributes to Uhl-Bien and colleagues call for followership researchers to undertake research that explores the constructionist approach to followership – whereby leadership and followership are conceived as relational processes (Uhl-Bien *et al.*, 2014, p. 100). Third, the propositions' contention that the interaction process is positive has significant practical implications – beneficial outcomes for followers, leaders and firms. *P1* explains how AF can enable followers to gain confidence, maturity and create solid foundations from which to thrive and flourish. *P2* explains how dyadic relationships between followers and leaders could be strengthened, creating deeper bonds of trust and respect between each party. This has a flow on effect of improving leadership effectiveness through the active involvement of authentic followers in decision-making processes. *P3* explains how the dynamic processes of AF can strengthen and deepen positive organisational culture and enhance organisational performance.

Future research directions

The paper provides a guide for future research. In order to harness the potential practical benefits from this theoretical work some key questions need to be answered: first, are the propositions presented in this paper correct – is the feedback between the components positive, or is it negative? Second, how can firms enable and sustain AF? Third, are there specific strategies, structures, operational practices and resources, which could assist and support workers to enact AF? Fourth, do leaders need to be authentic leaders to enable workers to enact AF? Fifth, how can leaders and followers foster and sustain a positive organisational culture during challenging times – recession, aggressive competition from a rival firm? Future studies could address these questions using two research methods. The first involves systems dynamics scholars developing mathematical models to simulate the AF model and the propositions presented in this paper on a computer, perhaps using a Visual Modelling Language (Neuwirth *et al.*, 2015). The second involves empirical testing of the AF model and the propositions in different types of firms (SMEs and multinationals) representing different industries (finance, manufacturing, retail, transport, health) in different countries and under different market conditions (recession and strong growth), with followers and leaders of different gender, age, education level and tenure of employment. Indeed the two forms of research need not be mutually exclusive. Both research methods could yield valuable knowledge about the strengths and capacities of AF and identify its limitations.

Limitations of the present study

Work on AF is at a nascent stage; this means that the limitations of this work must be acknowledged. The present paper extends and develops initial work that presented the AF model by providing three conceptual propositions of positive outcomes, which could arise from the AF model (de Zilwa, 2014). However, as yet, no measure for the AF model or the propositions has been developed. A second limitation is that at this stage we are

uncertain about the boundaries of the AF model. It is predicted that under specific organisational scenarios/conditions AF may be unfeasible or could be constrained; we need to identify these boundaries. A third limitation of the propositions is that at this stage the significance of the temporal dimension remains unclear: do followers and leaders have to work with each other for a certain amount of time before a follower has the confidence and trust in their leader to display authenticity, and to develop a secure attachment to the leader. Whilst these limitations are important, they are not insurmountable obstacles. Each is an issue which can and should be addressed in the future – measures for the AF model and the propositions can be developed, the boundaries of AF identified and the significance of the temporal dimension clarified, so that followers, leaders and their firms can reap the positive benefits that could flow from AF. AF is not the panacea for all that ails contemporary firms – low staff morale, engagement and productivity, high turnover, dysfunctional organisational cultures, resource constraints and regulatory requirements. However the generative benefits of AF are clear. AF is a theory with relevant and useful practical implications, it has the potential to enable individual employees, leaders and organisations to thrive and flourish.

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