

## **Spinning Authentic Leadership Living Stories of the Self**

By David M. Boje, Catherine A. Helmuth and Rohny Saylor

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### Introduction

We examine authentic leadership through a living story web which recognizes a leader's struggle to reach an authentic whole-Self in relation to their inauthentic selves. This is achieved through an ontological lens (Boje, Helmuth and Saylor, 2012) which is derived from Heidegger's (1962) notion of authenticity and inauthenticity and Bakhtin's (1993) concept of once-occurrent events. While Heidegger (1962) and Bakhtin's (1973; 1993) ontologies are central to the philosophical literature, the majority of authentic leadership scholars disregard Bakhtin's (1993) contributions and merely cite Heidegger's (1962) work rather than leveraging both philosopher's ideas to develop a more theoretically grounded approach to authentic leadership. We address this scholarly gap by developing Bakhtin's and Heidegger's ontologies when considering the processes that leaders utilize to spin authentic living stories of their polyphonic selves. First we explore the authentic leadership literature through an ontological lens which allows us to consider the meaning of 'Being-in-the-world' (Heidegger, 1962: #201, p. 245). Following the tradition of Heideggerian translations we use capital letters to express the word's

ontological meaning. Then, we offer a narrative therapy approach and conclude with specific recommendations for a practical utilization of these ideas.

### Authentic leadership

The authentic resides in a living story web because of the inherent differences between a narrative and a living story (TwoTrees, 2000; Boje, 2001; 2008; 2011; 2012; Tyler, 2010; 2011). In a retrospective-narrative approach a leader's identity is based on character traits and focuses on sequential plot structures. Narrative often requires linear causal links between the beginning, middle and end plot structures and the problem-solution-problem forms of **narrative** which emphasize how past storylines are expected to recur in the future (Czarniawska, 1997). In contrast, living stories use a future-oriented approach that focuses on how leaders struggle to reach an authentic 'potentiality-for-Being-one's-Self' (Heidegger, 1962: #317, p. 364) instead of the inauthentic 'they-self' (Heidegger, 1962: #128, p. 165; #181, p. 225). Living stories are polyphonic (the involvement of many selves), multi-plotted, non-linear and unfold in-the-middle of the Present without the beginning or end anchors required in a retrospective-narrative approach. Greater theoretical depth, and personal insight, can be achieved when the sequential, retrospective requirements of a narrative are replaced by the dynamic, prospective stance of living stories.

Living stories are a dynamic concept of the Self which develops in relation to the inauthentic selves. This occurs in-place, in-time and in-materiality and is answerable

[ethics] to a leader's family, friends, co-workers and neighbors (Boje, DuRant, Coppedge, Marcillo-Gomez and Chambers, 2011). Leaders create an authentic living story web when they integrate their past experiences, future expectations and own their potentiality for being a whole-Self while deconstructing their inauthentic selves. Comparatively, many leaders construct an inauthentic living story by developing a potentiality towards the they-self (Heidegger, 1962) which is defined as an inauthentic other. For instance, leaders create an inauthentic living story when they allow the opinions of outsiders to override, or subvert, their authentic leadership style. Authenticity requires a deep level change driven by the leader's intrinsic desire to become a whole-Self; whereas inauthenticity represents a surface level change meant to please or pacify the they-self (Heidegger, 1962). However, leaders often struggle to identify whether they are spinning an authentic or inauthentic living story until emergent awareness is gained. Emergent awareness refers to the leader's ability to distinguish between reaching a potentiality for an authentic whole-Self or the inauthentic they-self through ontological inquiry.

Ontological inquiry, in a Heideggerian sense, is future focused or 'ahead of itself' (Heidegger, 1962: #202, p. 246) which influences the Present and re-historicizes the past. Heidegger (1962: #384, p. 436) argues 'Fate does not first arise from the lashing together of events and circumstances' but is future focused in that 'Our fates have already been guided in advance, in our Being with one another'. For Bakhtin (1993, p.2), ontological inquiry is rooted in the Present and 'once-occurrent events of Being,' which may change future potentialities. Bakhtin (1993, p. 13) believes 'Once-occurrent uniqueness ... cannot

be thought of, it can only be participatively experienced or lived through' which occurs in the Present. In sum, Heideggerian ontology situates the future as arriving into the Present and past, while Bakhtinian ontology focuses on the Present moment of Being. Our stance pulls from Bakhtin by considering how living stories emerge in-the-Present and Heidegger by seeing how refracted different pasts occur alongside co-constructed futures in a living story web. In the next section we offer a narrative therapy approach as a means by which these can be integrated?

### Narrative therapy

In narrative therapy (White and Epston, 1990) we deal with a whole system of relationships which unfold in an authentic living story web in relationship to one's inauthentic dominant narrative. Living story webs are without a beginning or end but, develop in the Present moment which is in the middle of many other unfolding stories. This stands in stark contrast to a dominant narrative (Boje, 2008) which has emptied itself of living stories in order to develop a universalistic theme, generalized plot structure and character traits. Narrative therapy can be applied through specific restorying steps (Rosile and Boje, 2002; Boje and Rosile, 2011).

We work through the steps using an example from a restorying seminar conducted by David Boje and Grace Ann Rosile in 2011. Prior to Boje and Rosile's presentation, a first year Ph.D. student began interrogating the presenters with the following questions: When do I get my dissertation committee? Who will be the chair? When is the literature

review due? What has what you're saying got to do with my dissertation? When it came Boje and Rosile's turn to present, they asked the Ph.D. student if they could use restorying on the problem he was having with his Ph.D. program.

Restorying steps:

1. Characterize – Describe the problem of the individual's dominant narrative so that the problem is the problem and not the person. (e.g. The Ph.D. student, 'I really have a problem with this whole program. When are we going to get on with the dissertation?' Boje and Rosile asked about the Ph.D student's past experiences and learned he had just returned from a combat zone overseas. He was trying to sort out how to behave now that people were not threatening his life.)
2. Externalize – Identify the dominant narrative as a separate entity within the living story web by externalizing it as a sort of character. (e.g. Boje and Rosile asked, 'Since returning from overseas, if you could give this problem a character what would it be?' The student replied, 'Mr. Military.' Mr. Military was the Ph.D. student's way of externalizing his dominant narrative and giving it a separate character.)
3. Sympathize – Deconstruct the benefits of the singular dominant narrative. (e.g. Boje and Rosile asked, 'How is Mr. Military beneficial?' The Ph.D. student replied, 'I get things done. I push through to the core of things'.)

4. Problematicize – Isolate the costs of the singular dominant narrative. (e.g. Boje and Rosile asked, ‘How does Mr. Military affect your relationships, work, etc.?’ The Ph.D. student replied, ‘My wife is ready to bail. My friends find me overbearing’.)
5. Strategize – Rethink the leader’s experiences through an authentic living story web which detaches from the inauthentic dominant narrative. The individual is now able to recover the ‘little wow moments’ (Boje, 2012, p.4) previously overshadowed by the dominant narrative in order to constitute a new authentic living story in the web. (e.g. Boje and Rosile asked, ‘When did you get positive results without being Mr. Military?’ The Ph.D. student replied, ‘When I was gentle with others, listened to them, and coached them’.)
6. Re-historize – Continue to bring more of the individual’s little wow moment experiences from the shadows of the dominant narrative. This way the dominant narrative does not regain control over the authentic living story web. (e.g. The Ph.D. student recalls, ‘There was a time, overseas, when I helped a guy in the barracks work through some issues’.)
7. Publicize – Create a social support network to help the leader sustain the change. This means getting friends, co-workers and family members to write letters reinforcing the new, authentic living story. (e.g. Boje and Rosile asked Mr. Military if it would be okay to have the other first year

Ph.D. students in his cohort work with him to reinforce the change. Mr. Military and his fellow Ph.D. students agreed).

Step one is to characterize the problem of the leader's dominant narrative by giving it a 'character' with identifiable qualities. The process of characterizing the dominant narrative is critical because it provides the leader with an opportunity to self-reflect and assess the key factors and individuals that influence the dominant narrative. During this process the leader can discuss what a more authentic narrative might look like and what factors hamper this from being achieved. Step two is to externalize the problem by identifying the dominant narrative as a separate character (e.g. Mr. Military) within the leader's living story web. The dominant narrative becomes a separate character which is not associated with the leader individually but unfolds within his or her living story web of expanding selves. By isolating the dominant narrative 'character' we can deconstruct it without threatening the leader's individual traits, attributes or identity. In narrative therapy the problem is the problem instead of the individual being the problem. This is why it is important to maintain the dominant narrative as a separate character from the leader's authentic Self. Step three is to sympathize with the leader and consider the ways the dominant narrative is potentially constructive. This is meant to help the leader explore the positive aspects of the problem. Step four is to problematize and help the leader isolate the negative consequences of perpetuating the dominant narrative. In this step the leader revisits the approach used in step three to further understand the problems associated with the dominant narrative. Step five is to strategize and rethink the

leader's little wow moment experiences that were marginalized or expelled by the inauthentic dominant narrative. The little wow moments have a profound impact on how the leader sees or thinks about things and usually provides the leader greater clarity or insight. In our context, the little wow moments refer to events where the leader is able to identify how the dominant narrative can be set in relationship to living stories, so it is not so oppressive. This reconstruction occurs within an authentic living story web. Step six is to continue the progress made in step five by bringing more of those little wow moments out of the shadows through the process of re-historicizing. Finally, step seven is to publicize this personal change to co-workers, family and friends so that it can be sustained.

Narrative therapy can be exemplified through the leader's ontologically conceived Self. An ontologically conceived Self encompasses the leader's experiences, little-selves, and a dominant narrative. The little-selves represent a multitude of the leader's experiences which are all brought in line by the dominant narrative of a big-Self. The dominant narrative of a leader is inherently inauthentic because it creates a singular voice which silences the multiple voices of the little-selves. There are so many simultaneous little-selves in authentic polyphony that a single voice is essentially inauthentic. For example, imagine that a leader's ontologically conceived Self as a parliament. The leader's experiences elect a little-self to represent them just as the constituents vote for a government official. Then the little-selves select a dominant narrative for representation just as government officials aid in the selection of the prime minister. While the prime minister must serve the interests of the constituents and government officials he also

honors his personal and political agendas. Likewise, the dominant narrative attempts to embody all of the leader's experiences and little-selves; however, such representation is impossible because the dominant narrative is singular and true to only the leader's big-Self. Narrative therapy helps the forgotten little-selves find their voice which creates a new balance of power in the parliament. This new balance of power changes the dominant narrative and creates a more authentic living story web.

In conclusion, spinning an authentic story of the Self requires that the leader struggles with an inauthentic dominant narrative and, through narrative therapy, creates an authentic living story web. Once the leader acknowledges that the dominant narrative is inauthentic we expect this may initially present some challenges. For instance, when the silenced voices of the little-selves start having a say we believe this will affect how the followers perceive the leader. In the final step of narrative therapy the leader publicizes the change to his or her social network. The leader's followers will undoubtedly be an integral part of this process and we suggest the leader use a dramaturgical approach (see Rosile and Boje, 2002 for an example) to help the followers find their place within the newly constructed authentic living story web. Additionally, leaders are likely to face some challenges when trying to integrate their multiple selves into their new 'leader role'. The leader should be especially careful that during the restorying process special consideration is given to how the followers' co-constructed living story webs may evolve and change.

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