



# The Possibility of Authenticity Under Hierarchy: A Study of Public Middle Managers

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## Abstract

This study examines the ideal of authenticity in leadership in the context of conflicts between middle managers and their superiors in the Danish public sector. Drawing on 37 in-depth interviews with Danish public middle managers conducted between 2023 and 2024, the study investigates how middle managers perceive their ability to act authentically in such conflictual situations. Using Goffman's concept of facework, the analysis demonstrates how middle managers engage in preventive facework, suppress emotional reactions, and stay formal to protect themselves from losing face under conflicts with superiors. The findings indicate that managers experience a need to conceal their genuine emotions during these encounters with superiors and, in doing so, contribute to protecting the superior's face, for instance by mitigating or accommodating the superior's emotional outbursts. This means that the middle manager's capacity for authenticity is conditioned by the situations in which the superior places them. This suggests that authenticity in conflictual situations appears to be a privilege primarily available to superiors, who may allow themselves emotional expressions such as anger and outburst, whereas subordinate middle managers cannot.

## Practical Relevance

- Challenging the concept of authenticity: The paper critically examines prevailing understandings of authentic leadership, questioning whether authenticity can be understood as an individual leadership characteristic independently of organizational and hierarchical conditions.
- Exposing organizational contradictions: The study highlights the tensions between public organizations' normative ideals of authenticity, recognition, psychological safety, and respectful leadership and the persistence of hierarchical power structures that may enable managerial conduct contradicting these ideals.
- Providing micro-level insights: Drawing on interviews with 37 public middle managers, the study examines how managers experience, interpret, and respond to accusations of guilt, blame, and humiliating treatment by their superiors.
- Understanding facework as a response to hierarchical power: Applying Goffman's concept of facework, the analysis demonstrates how middle managers engage in emotional restraint, strategic self-presentation, and protective practices to preserve their professional dignity and organizational standing in situations of conflict.
- Contributing to critical leadership research: The findings challenge normative assumptions about authentic and ethical leadership by demonstrating that opportunities for authenticity are unequally distributed across hierarchical positions. The study thereby raises broader questions about whether organizational ideals of authenticity and psychological safety can be meaningfully realized within hierarchical public organizations.

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## Introduction

This study examines the ideal of authenticity in leadership in the context of conflicts between middle managers and their superiors in the Danish public sector. We investigate whether and how middle managers experience the possibility of authenticity in these conflictual situations. The concept of authenticity in leadership has attracted considerable attention, including in Denmark. This development is particularly interesting because the notion of authenticity appears to align closely with the Danish public sector's emphasis on public values such as equality and democracy; values that are associated with transparency (Christensen & Lægheid, 2011), citizenship (Greve, 2015), and collaboration (Heckscher & Adler (Eds.), 2006). Further, authenticity can be associated with the growing interest in psychological safety (Dekker & Edmondson, 2022; Edmondson, 1999 and 2008) and vulnerability (Ciccone, 2020) which also has gained attraction in the public sector as part of the growing interest in the emotional dimension of work-life (Grandey & Melloy, 2017; Hochschild, 1983; Mikkelsen & Madsen, 2025) as well as employees' well-being (Medarbejder- og Kompetencestyrelsen, 2026). Alongside the growing interest in well-being, authentic leadership can be viewed as a social technology aimed at enhancing well-being as well as improving outcomes for citizens. This perception of authenticity is seen for example in the Leadership Committee of 2018 (Danish: Ledelseskommisionen), consisting of high-profiled public and private leaders whose task was to establish a foundation for discussing leadership in the public sector (Ledelseskommisionen & Medarbejder og kompetencestyrelsen, 2018). One outcome of the committee's work was an emphasis on the concept of the "personal", understood as authenticity, as a means of creating a closer connection between managers and employees (see e.g. Ledelseskommisionen & Medarbejder og kompetencestyrelsen, 2018, Recommendations p.18 and Examples of personal leadership foundations). Presenting oneself as a person, rather than merely as a formal authority figure, is regarded as a way of making leadership more relatable.

The Danish public sector has thus undergone a shift in leadership ideals, moving from a bureaucratic, Weberian model of management grounded in formal hierarchy towards an ideal of transformational leadership (Bass, 1985, 1990, 1998; Bass & Riggio, 2006) in which authority is derived from the leader's ability to inspire others, involve employees, and present themselves as ethically grounded individuals.

This shift in ideal from bureaucratic management to transformational leadership does not imply the disappearance of formal hierarchy. Organisational hierarchies continue to structure positions, authority, and responsibilities according to the official roles individuals occupy. However, the significance and operation of hierarchy become less transparent when values such as democracy, equality, psychological safety, and authenticity are increasingly emphasised.

In Denmark is the ideal of authentic leadership seen through publications such as Ole Fogh Kirkeby and Paula Helth's book *Human Being and Leader: Become Who You Are*, first published in 2015 and subsequently reprinted in a second edition (Kirkeby et al., 2025; Kirkeby & Helth, 2015); Svane & Bach's (2025) book "Authenticity, dialog, and ethics", and in Mandrup's (2026) "Authenticity - modern leadership communication" who argues that "Previously, professional expertise alone was considered sufficient to qualify as a good leader <..> Today, however, leadership is confronted with an additional normative demand, namely the expectation of authenticity and the capacity to inspire" (Mandrups, 2026). Within this framework of authenticity, the manager is constructed as a leader possessing the personal and relational capacities required to implement these values as well as reach the goals of the public sector (Ledelseskommisionen & Medarbejder og kompetencestyrelsen, 2018).

The emphasis on authenticity can be understood not merely as an ideal, but as a form of social technology designed to render reform ambitions operational and legitimate. The idea is that employees more readily follow a leader who they perceive as genuine and honest. Several scholars have addressed how leaders who incorporate a personal, authentic dimension can lead their followers to increased commitment (e.g., Barsade et al., 2003; Damen et al., 2008; Diener et al., 2020; Erez et al., 2008; Gooty et al., 2010; Michie & Gooty, 2005; Stocker et al., 2014; Yukl, 2002). This means that authenticity becomes an ideal that seems to meet several of the expectations from both 1) the public on democracy and truthfulness and 2) expectations from the employees on genuineness and reliability.

However, critique of the meaning of authentic leadership has also been expressed within leadership research. For instance, Larsson et al (2021) have questioned what the meaning of authentic leadership in everyday interaction is, showing that “<...> an action, that taken by itself seems to resonate with how authentic leadership is identified in the questionnaires, fails to be treated as such by the participants in the interaction” (Larsson et al., 2021). Further, Larsson, Clifton, and Schnurr (2021) argue that research on authentic leadership has primarily approached the concept from a theoretical perspective, while paying less attention to empirical concerns and organisational realities.

Also Spoelstra, Butler, and Delaney (2016) have addressed how the quantitative approach to authentic leadership contains epistemological problems in the a priori understanding of authentic leadership. These epistemological problems can be summed up like this: “the field <of leadership> does not quite live up to the Popperian ideal: leadership theories are usually discussed in terms of methodological rigor (the context of justification) rather than critically scrutinized (the context of discovery)” (Spoelstra et al., 2016, p.386). Or put more directly: “Following Meehl’s observation, the ‘period of infatuation’ in leadership studies is closely tied to what business practitioners like to hear” (Spoelstra et al., 2016, p.387). Hence, methodological depth may constitute a barrier for those who profit from selling leadership skills.

The present study aligns with the abovementioned critical approach to authentic leadership. It investigates the organisational reality of authentic leadership and explores how the interviewed middle managers experience authenticity option within the public sector. Interviewing 37 public managers, we examine whether, and in which ways, these managers experience the possibility of enacting authenticity in situations of conflict with their superior. Specifically, we investigate how encounters characterised by accusations and attribution of guilt shape middle managers’ understandings of self, role, and trust in their superior. We show how situations of conflicts between middle managers and their superiors are analytically significant because they might expose tensions between authenticity and hierarchy. Conflict situations provide a productive empirical lens through which to examine whether authentic leadership can be enacted under hierarchical organisational conditions, and what consequences emerge when ideals of flat hierarchy and authenticity fail to materialise in situations of conflict. This research interest represents a conceptual and empirical gap that has not yet been addressed in existing research on authentic leadership.

By focusing on these situations of tension and conflict, we seek to illuminate how hierarchy in the depicted situations trumps authenticity in situations of conflicts between superiors and middle managers.

Hence, the research question is: How do public middle managers describe their experiences of being authentic in organisational relationships where authenticity appears to be discouraged during conflicts with superiors?

## 1. Theoretical framework

We apply two theoretical perspectives to the empirical data. The first perspective concerns the theory and conceptualisation of authentic leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Walumbwa et al., 2008). This perspective follows from the overall purpose of the article, namely, to examine how middle managers experience conflicts with their superiors in relation to authenticity. The second perspective consists of the analytical categories used in our interpretation of the findings. Here, we draw on Goffman’s conceptualization of facework (Goffman, 1959, 2008), which provides a framework for understanding the interactional dynamics at play. We will below describe two different analytical perspectives.

### 1.1. Authentic leadership

Across the literature, numerous terms, concepts, and characteristics are repeatedly invoked to frame authentic leadership. These include e.g. confidence, hope, optimism, and resilience (Walumbwa et al., 2008), as well as self-awareness, unbiased processing, relational authenticity, and authentic behaviour/action (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Other contributions highlight traits of the leader as a person, having a high morality and integrity (Woolley et al., 2011), and the

capacity to act ethically in times of crisis (Almutairi et al., 2025). Walumbwa et al. (2008) define authentic leadership this way:

“A pattern of leader behaviour that draws upon and promotes both positive psychological capacities and a positive ethical climate, to foster greater self-awareness, an internalized moral perspective, balanced processing of information, and relational transparency on the part of leaders working with followers, fostering positive self-development” (Walumbwa et al., 2008, p. 94).

Authenticity is defined by Crane (2022) as “clarifying one’s true self and deep values, staying connected with them, and acting in accord with them” (Crane 2022, p.392). Authenticity then becomes the consistency between one’s self-perception and one’s behaviour (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Gardner & McCauley, 2022). Authentic leaders are perceived as someone who stay true to their core beliefs and values (Algera & Lips-Wiersma, 2012; Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009; Shamir, 1991). An authentic leader is described as “confident, hopeful, optimistic, resilient, moral/ethical, and future-oriented” (Luthans & Avolio, 2003, p.243). Leader authenticity is in much of this literature associated with positive organisational outcomes (Algera & Lips-Wiersma, 2012; Avolio & Gardner, 2005), despite ongoing critique of the epistemological assumptions and conceptual coherence underpinning authentic leadership research (Spoelstra, 2018).

Behind these broad concepts of authentic leadership lie two theoretical domains that constitute the conceptual foundation: 1) a philosophical tradition, drawing on the Ancient Greek and the meaning of “*authos*, i.e. “self” (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Gardner et al., 2011; Walumbwa et al., 2008) identifying authenticity as being oneself. 2) A psychological domain, primarily positive psychology. We will now describe the two different domains.

The first domain, philosophy, is introduced to organisation studies by Rome & Rome (1967) and Henderson & Hoy (1983) who focus on responsibility, self-awareness, and honesty as pivotal for authentic leadership. Authentic leaders are described as the type of person who accepts mistakes, avoids manipulation, and acts consistently with their true selves rather than hiding behind formal roles. These definitions emphasise moral accountability and personal integrity. Along this philosophical tradition more contemporary scholars such as Bhindi & Duignan (1997), Begley, (2001), George (2003) George & Sims (2007) and Whitehead (2009) describe authentic leadership as grounded in clear values, ethical behavior, trust, and meaningful relationships with others. These authors stress that authentic leaders are genuine, reflective, and concerned with serving others rather than pursuing personal success alone. The definitions in this category are closely related because they all connect authenticity with morality, trustworthiness, and human relationships.

A second domain is psychological and developmental oriented. For example, Luthans and Avolio (2003) and Walumbwa et al. (2008) define authentic leadership through concepts such as self-awareness, self-regulation, resilience, positive psychological capacities, and consistency between values and behavior. They describe authentic leadership as a process that promotes both leader and follower development through transparency and internal moral guidance.

There are clear similarities between the two directions, both of which place the leader as a person and the leader’s approach to leadership at the centre. What distinguishes the two schools of thought is that the philosophical strand of authentic leadership emphasizes the leader’s ethical and moral choices, whereas the psychological strand focuses primarily on the leader’s behavioural patterns and leadership practices.

Despite these two distinct domains, authentic leadership remains a loosely defined and predominantly normative construction. The concept does not constitute a management technology in any operational sense; rather, it functions as an ideal that signals to contemporary organisations which values and behaviours ought to characterise leaders and leadership practices. For instance, Larsson & Alvehus (2023) questioned whether authentic leadership is a fruitful perspective on leadership, or possibly even dangerous and detrimental (see also Einola & Alvesson (2021). Gardner & McCauley (2022) recently defended authentic leadership against this critique, arguing that the critique of the concept of authentic leadership is “gaslighting” (Gardner & McCauley, 2022) approach to authentic leadership”. They assert that authentic leadership, in practice, makes a difference to both leaders and followers. However, there is the additional critique we advance in this article: that the literature on authentic leadership fails to

address the consequences that arise when leaders who are expected to act authentically do not, in fact, do so.

The second perspective we use for the data consists of the analytical categories used in our interpretation of the findings. Here, we draw on Goffman's conceptualization of facework (Goffman, 1959, 2008), which provides a framework for understanding the interactional dynamics at play. To interpret the interview material, we drew on Erving Goffman's seminal work *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Goffman, 1959, 2008), which provides a pertinent analytical lens for examining whether, and to what extent, middle managers perceive themselves as able to express authenticity within hierarchical interactions. If the middle managers would express that they did not need a face or facework, we might see that authenticity as "being oneself at work" would actually be possible. Applying Goffman to the data, we can analyse how the middle managers actually understand the possibility of being themselves or not.

Goffman likens people to actors who assume specific roles in different social contexts, modifying their behaviour according to the setting, audience, and objectives of the interaction. He deals with the concept of on-stage and back-stage. In *On Face-Work* (1955), Goffman defines face as the positive social value individuals claim through their interactional conduct and the way they present themselves in social encounters. Individuals are viewed as engaging in facework in order to sustain socially acceptable identities and preserve interactional order.

Although the concepts of front stage and backstage are developed primarily in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), *On Face-Work* provides an important foundation for understanding why such distinctions emerge in organisational life. Front-stage interaction refers to situations in which individuals perform identities that are socially appropriate and organisationally legitimate before an audience. In organisational contexts, middle managers may therefore be expected to display authenticity, composure, and alignment with organisational values, even in situations where such expressions are constrained. Goffman argues that social interaction is sustained through tacit cooperation in face-saving, where participants protect both their own face and that of others to preserve relationships and organisational stability. Hence, facework consists of the ritualised efforts individuals make to preserve dignity, legitimacy, and social standing in situations where these may be threatened (Goffman, 1959).

Subsequent scholars (Chambers, 2013; Coppola, 2019; Kerber & Kramm, 2021; Rose et al., 2010) have extended Goffman's framework by elaborating the concept of the off-stage. This concept refers not only to what occurs behind the scenes but also to spaces in which the individual is entirely beyond the judgment of others. For this study's concept of authentic leadership, the off-stage position is pivotal, since off-stage is the place where the human being can be him/herself, without others' observation. We see this concept of being freed from others' observation in the Roman bureaucratic notion of the private sphere, in which *privatus/privata* (maskulinum/femininum) in Latin means "freed from" (Lund, 2005). In this sphere, the person is released from the institutional mask and able to be him/herself. This means that if authenticity is a reality in an organisation, the individual can express him/herself without face, or the fear of losing face.

It is the concept of face (on stage) and private (off-stage) that is analytically relevant for the analysis of authenticity or not in situations of conflicts between middle managers and superiors.

## 2. Methodology and Analytical Approach

The data is derived from interviews with 37 public managers' experiences with accusations of guilt and blame' in their present or earlier workplaces. The interviews were conducted between 2023 and 2024. Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants from the public sector, i.e., municipalities, hospitals, health, police, and education (see Table 1). The managers had all attended a leadership course at a Danish university where one of the authors teach. Given the sensitive nature of the topics addressed, ethical considerations were accorded high priority throughout the study. Care was taken to minimise any potential harm or distress, including ensuring confidentiality, anonymising all data, and remaining attentive to participants' emotional responses during the interview process. The participating middle managers were experienced professionals accustomed to articulating and reflecting upon their views, also in

terms of expressing critique. All participants provided informed consent about the purpose of the study and their role in it. Confidentiality was maintained by anonymising the data, and hence all names are pseudonyms. The concepts of guilt had earlier been approached in the teaching of the leadership course. However, none of the metaphors in the data had previously been addressed. These emerged in the analysis of the interviews.

*TABLE 1. Managers' age and gender distribution*

| Age 30-39 | Age 40-49  | Age 50-59 | Total      |
|-----------|------------|-----------|------------|
| 1 female  | 18 females | 6 females | 25 females |
| 3 males   | 5 males    | 4 males   | 12 males   |

## 2.1. Method

The first round of data collection involved 17 managers and was conducted between January and November 2023. The participants were contacted via email and LinkedIn and invited to take part in the study. Thirteen interviews were conducted in person, either at the researcher's office or at the participant's workplace, while the remaining four were carried out via video conference. The interviews lasted between 30 and 70 minutes.

The second round of data collection was conducted in May 2024 and included 20 managers. All interviews in this round were conducted via Microsoft Teams, using the same semi-structured questions concerning blame and apologies as in the first round. All interviews were transcribed using a digital transcription program, GoodTape, with a dictation program used primarily for two of the interviews.

The semi-structured interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) were guided by an interview guide focusing on experiences with accusations of guilt, blame, and the possibility of an apology. The interview guide built on one of the authors' extensive research within the field of guilt and responsibility in the public sector. Pless & Maak (2011) argue that responsibility is one of the most under researched concepts within leadership. The word is often used, but what does it mean? Sløk (2020a and 2020b) argues that responsibility cannot be understood without a counter concept. She suggests that guilt and responsibility are intertwined.

The guide functioned as a framework to ensure that the same overall topics were addressed across all interviews, while still allowing flexibility in wording, sequencing, and probing. Rather than prescribing a rigid interview structure, the interview guide supported a conversational and responsive interaction between interviewer and participant (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The balance between structure and openness made the semi-structured interview format particularly appropriate for the present study as it enabled participants to elaborate on their experiences of conflict and authenticity in ways that might not have emerged through more standardized forms of interviewing.

The semi-structured interview guide was organised around questions concerning apologies, as these were expected to elicit rich accounts of participants' emotional experiences in situations of conflict with their superiors. This approach was informed by the first author's extensive research on responsibility and experiences of guilt in leadership. Within this body of research, situations involving actual or anticipated apologies have consistently proved particularly effective in prompting participants to recount experiences characterised by anger, guilt, shame, blame, and expectations of reconciliation. Accordingly, questions concerning apologies were used as an entry point to explore the emotional and relational dynamics of conflicts between middle managers and their superiors.

The semi-structured interview guide was outlined like this:

Primary questions: "Has a superior ever apologised to you?" and "Have you ever apologised to a subordinate?"

Follow-up questions: Depending on the first response, we asked additional questions such as:

"What happened?"

"How did you feel?"

"Did the other party express what he/she feels in or after the situation?"

"Did you ask for an apology?" and "Has anyone ever asked you for an apology?"

"Did you have any physical reaction?"

"What did the people around you say?"

These questions were intended to prompt the managers to share their experiences and emotions in detail.

In the first round of interviews of 2023 the question of whether the manager had ever received an apology from a superior elicited detailed accounts of the absence of apologies in hierarchical relationships. In describing situations they believed warranted an apology, the middle managers showed experiences of anger, hurt, and/or resentment over these encounters and led managers to articulate their experiences through intense and often violent metaphors. Consequently, in the second round of interviews of 2024, greater emphasis was placed on exploring the interviewees' experiences with apologies from superiors and the meanings attached to their presence or absence.

## 2.2. Analytical approach

Thematic analysis is particularly appropriate for qualitative inquiry as it facilitates the examination of both explicit statements and underlying, implicit meanings in participants' narratives (Ashworth et al., 2019; Benish et al., 2024; Monrad, 2024). The data from the semi-structured interviews were organised using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006); a method that involves the systematic identification, analysis, and reporting of patterns, or themes, within qualitative material. For the organisation of the data, we followed the following steps:

### *Phase 1: Familiarisation with the data*

The analyses began by familiarising with the data through the transcription of the interviews and by reading the transcripts repeatedly in order to gain a thorough understanding of the material. The data were then organised into preliminary thematic categories by grouping relevant excerpts and identifying patterns and relationships within the material. The coding process was conducted manually in Microsoft Word where significant phrases and segments related to blame, guilt, and apologies were systematically highlighted. Four concurrent topics were identified and marked. The four topics were: 1) *Description of conflict leading to the need for an apology*, 2) *Definitions of apology*, 3) *Frequency of apology*, and 4) *Impact on self/personal identity*. Attention was given to how participants described the ways these experiences affected them on a personal level. This could include emotional, physical, psychological (for instance to throw up, sweating, dizziness), or behavioural changes appearing in the encounter or after the encounter.

By organising the data into these four topics, we sought to capture a broad spectrum of experiences related to apologies and anger. However, during the analytical process it became evident that the second topic, 'definition of apology', was not sufficiently substantiated in the empirical material. Consequently, this category was excluded from further analysis, while the three other topics (i.e. description of conflict; frequency of apologies, and impact on self/personal identity) were maintained.

### *Phase 2: Thematic Organisation*

After identifying relevant quotes related to the remaining three topics (description of conflict; frequency of apologies, and impact on self/personal identity), we found that the use of bodily semantics and metaphors were dominant and then grouped these quotes into themes. These bodily vocabulary of the interviews would be found in a violent language, such as "wounds," "knives," "stabbed," "protection," "hanging," and "death" (see section 2).

### *Phase 3: Identification of Three Overarching Metaphors*

The paper's use of metaphors in the presentation and analysis of middle managers' statements draws on Lakoff and Johnson's theory of metaphors (1980a, 1980b, 1980c). In their work, metaphors are not confined to the realm of artistic expression but are understood as an integral part of everyday language, including communication within organizations, where they are used to capture and convey abstract conditions and situations. Metaphors are thus embedded in actors'

narratives and, at the same time, reflect the cultural contexts that shape their experiences and understandings (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980a).

The use of metaphors in everyday language is particularly evident in descriptions of feelings, experiences, and situations that are perceived as difficult, ambiguous, or conflictual. One example highlighted by Lakoff and Johnson is the conceptual metaphor *Argument is war* (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980c, p. 450). Expressions such as "he attacked every weak point in my argument" or "he shot down all my arguments" illustrate how the domain of war is used metaphorically to structure the understanding of argumentation.

Another relevant element of Lakoff and Johnson's theory is the notion of orientational metaphors (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980b, p. 196). These metaphors organize concepts in relation to spatial orientations and thereby establish directional patterns of meaning. Examples include *more is up* and *good is up*, together with their corresponding opposites. Such orientations help structure how individuals understand and communicate abstract phenomena.

Both the metaphor of war and the orientational dimension of metaphor are evident in the statements analysed in this paper. The middle managers' accounts frequently draw on metaphorical constructions that frame experiences in terms of conflict, struggle, movement, or direction, thereby revealing underlying assumptions about organizational realities and dilemmas in the managerial role.

From the corporeal expressions, three overarching metaphors emerged from the language employed by the middle managers: 1) Assault, 2) Camouflage, and 3) Death. We will now analyse the corporeal expressions that led to three metaphors.

### 3. Analysis of the Metaphors Assault, Camouflage, and Death

#### 3.1. Assault

The metaphor of "assault" conveys a dramatic tension between sustaining a professional façade and managing internal emotional turbulence. This must also be understood considering the gap it reveals between the middle managers' expectations and their possibility of authenticity. The metaphor of "assault" captures the intense adversarial dynamics that public managers experience in their interactions with superiors, particularly in situations involving blame or critique. It illuminates both the internal and external dramas that unfold in these antagonistic encounters, revealing how managers interpret and respond to such circumstances. It reflected the adversarial nature of situations leading to apologies. Table 2 illustrates quotes related to the metaphor of assault.

TABLE 2. *Quotes related to the metaphor of assault*

| Quotes                                                                                                                                                                                                          | Theme                        | Metaphor |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------|----------|
| "It is vulnerable to go into situations of blame and apologies."                                                                                                                                                | Being vulnerable for attacks | Assault  |
| "A medical doctor at my team aggressive on me because I told him at a meeting that he was late for the meeting."                                                                                                | Verbal abuse                 |          |
| "One of my colleagues said: "You were really slapped at that meeting the other day," and I thought I was. But I had not been sure of my own understanding of what had happened."                                | Being slapped                |          |
| "I do not think that anyone has the right to speak the way he did to me."                                                                                                                                       | Verbal abused                |          |
| "A superior freaked out on me when I noticed he was late for the conference meeting."                                                                                                                           | Verbal abused                |          |
| "I felt like I was getting a scolding like a child, and I just thought, this is inappropriate. It was incredibly difficult, with all the yelling and, yes, the scolding—like a collective reprimand, you know?" | Verbal abuse                 |          |

The quotes show that conflicts are depicted as battles or struggles, foregrounding themes of attack, defence, and survival. The interviewed middle managers describe verbal aggression and

criticism from superiors in terms such as “being attacked,” “scolded,” or “slapped.” Such language frames the interaction as a battlefield in which professional identity and dignity must be defended. The imperative to maintain face while under attack functions as a survival strategy. The interviewed middle managers engage in preventive facework to mitigate potential repercussions, reflecting an effort at emotional and professional self-preservation. The violent semantics associated with assault, including references to “wounds” or “stabs,” underscore the depth of the emotional impact of these encounters. These episodes are experienced not merely as professional disagreements, but as existential struggles connected to identity and role integrity. The assault metaphor illustrates how blame from superiors is internalised, prompting managers to question their competence and self-worth. Such experiences disrupt trust and mutual recognition within hierarchical relationships. The prevalence of assaultive language points to underlying power dynamics that stand in tension with contemporary ideals of authenticity and psychological safety in the public sector.

### 3.2. Camouflage

Participants described actions or emotions that were concealed or masked, suggesting a need to protect oneself or navigate complex interpersonal dynamics. This metaphor highlighted the tension between vulnerability and self-preservation. Camouflage is conceptualised as a strategy through which public managers conceal emotions and vulnerabilities in order to maintain composure and preserve face in professional settings. Rather than openly expressing distress, anger, or insecurity, these middle managers engage in strategic self-concealment to protect themselves from further criticism or negative judgement. This practice resonates with Goffman’s notion of preventive facework, whereby individuals manage impressions in anticipation of potential conflict or loss of dignity. At the same time, the metaphor of camouflage is closely aligned with Goffman’s broader dramaturgical framework, particularly his concepts of face and the distinction between front-stage and off-stage.

An example from the data is Bjarne (fictive name), a senior executive who was abruptly dismissed without explanation. The dismissal was followed by rumours, false accusations, and a protracted legal process lasting two years. During the interview, he described intense anger, shame, and prolonged insomnia. Reflecting on the encounter, he noted: “The best advice I received was that when you want to take revenge, you shouldn’t do it at all because it only escalates the violence of your emotions... Either way, I felt shame that all this happened to me.”

Bjarne’s account illustrates camouflage as a strategy of emotional restraint and self-preservation. Despite profound anger, he refrained from retaliation, choosing instead to internalise his emotions and maintain outward composure. Bjarne maintained face, primarily for his own sake. His deliberate avoidance of confrontation reflects a strategic effort to contain emotional escalation, illustrating the tension between professional performance and private emotion. This duality reflects Goffman’s distinction between front-stage conduct and off-stage emotional life. In this sense, camouflage emerges as an adaptive response to hierarchical power asymmetries, where public managers may suppress genuine reactions in order to protect self-respect and navigate situations marked by blame, scrutiny, and reputational risk.

Table 3 illustrates quotes related to the metaphor ‘camouflage’.

*TABLE 3. Quotes related to the metaphor of a camouflage*

| Quotes                                                                                                              | Theme                     | Metaphor   |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------|------------|
| “I keep myself in the role, and do not get emotional.”                                                              | Staying in role           |            |
| “I am kind to everybody, and I never cross that line of hurting anybody. I believe you may come far with kindness.” | To not reveal yourself    |            |
| “I am using techniques to protect myself from getting into conflicts.”                                              | Protection                | Camouflage |
| “We never address conflicts at my workplace. Nobody wants to go in there.”                                          | Avoidance                 |            |
| “I always prepare myself 100 % before I decide. This way I never make mistakes.”                                    | Preparation as protection |            |

The metaphor of “camouflage” further aligns with the concept of emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983; Guy et al., 2008), whereby individuals regulate their emotions to conform to professional expectations (Landry & Vandenberghe, 2012). One manager illustrated this dynamic vividly: “I was sitting there, smiling at them, while inside I was feeling like ...<throwing up>” He raised his finger to his throat, mimicking the act of vomiting. This embodied gesture accentuated the stark contrast between outward composure and inner turmoil, rendering visible the tension between performed professionalism and suppressed affect.

Although camouflage operates as a survival strategy, it also functions as a form of resilience, enabling managers to navigate adverse or hierarchical contexts without jeopardising their professional identity. At the same time, its double-edged character becomes evident: While emotional concealment sustains composure, it entails a significant personal cost. The metaphor thus exposes the dissonance between 1) organisational ideals of authenticity, and 2) the lived realities of hierarchical blame, where suppression of genuine emotion becomes a condition of endurance in situations of conflict.

### 3.3. Death

Experienced, whether the loss of trust, a relationship, or a part of their identity. It underscored the gravity of the situations and their lasting impact. The interviewed middle managers employ a violent semantic repertoire, describing their experiences as being “stabbed in the back,” “hung,” or “thrown under the bus.” Such expressions convey the intensity of the perceived violation and the depth of the emotional injury incurred. The metaphor of “death” is represented as a profound sense of loss or transformation participants. The metaphor underscores how such encounters destabilise managers’ sense of self, generating an existential rupture that extends beyond formal professional boundaries. When considered alongside the metaphors of assault and camouflage, death signifies the ultimate consequence of failing to defend oneself or of being symbolically defeated in organisational conflicts. In the context of public managers’ experiences of emotional strain, the metaphor of death signifies profound personal and professional loss. It captures the culmination of the struggle to maintain face and points to the long-term costs of sustained emotional concealment.

Table 4 illustrates quotes related to the metaphor of death.

TABLE 4. *Quotes related to the metaphor of death*

| Quotes                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | Theme                                        | Metaphor |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|----------|
| “When you apologise, you throw yourself on the floor to ask for forgiveness”                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | Throw yourself on the floor                  |          |
| “One attacked me, and the other threw me under the bus. If she had just distanced herself from all that, I would not have had anything to do with it. Then it would not have happened.”                                                                                                                                                                                        | Thrown under the bus                         |          |
| “I’ve also been thrown under the bus myself.”                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | Thrown under the bus                         | Death    |
| “I feel like I’ve been stabbed in the back, thrown under the bus, or something like that.”                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | Stabbed in the back.<br>Thrown under the bus |          |
| “If I were to give an apology I would feel like: I hope you won’t hang me because I made a mistake.”                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | Being hung                                   |          |
| “Yes, there is one instance that I can think of where it was a director. I felt that she should have come down from her high horse and really given me an apology for running me over in relation to an organisational change she wanted to implement. She wanted to push through, and she had a certain speed in doing so, making it an unpleasant experience at that point.” | Run over.<br>Hit by a car.                   |          |

In the following, we will summarise the findings, leading to a discussion of these.

## 4. Findings

The research question of the study was: How do 37 public middle managers describe their experiences of being authentic in organisational relationships where authenticity appears to be discouraged during conflicts with superiors? The findings suggest three interrelated patterns. First, a pronounced disconnect emerges between the normative aspirations of authenticity in contemporary public management and the lived realities of hierarchical authority. While reform discourses such as the Leadership Commission (Ledelseskommissionen & Medarbejder- og Kompetencestyrelsen, 2018) emphasise openness, vulnerability, psychological safety, and authenticity the managers' narratives reveal that hierarchical power relations continue to structure interaction in decisive ways. In conflict situations, the expectation of loyalty, deference, and role conformity appears to override the ideal of the self-expression in authentic leadership. Authenticity is thus experienced not as an unconditional value, but as a contingent possibility, constrained by the organisational hierarchy.

Second, face is perceived as a crucial protective mechanism in encounters characterised by verbal aggression or blame. Drawing implicitly on forms of corrective facework, managers describe regulating their emotions, maintaining composure, and refraining from open confrontation in order to stabilise the interaction. The performance of face becomes a defensive strategy that shields them from further escalation and preserves both their own professional standing and the superior's authority.

Third, blame and accusations of guilt are experienced as deeply personal rather than merely procedural. Managers describe such encounters as intruding upon their sense of self, challenging their competence, dignity, and moral integrity. Conflicts with superiors are therefore not confined to disagreements about tasks or decisions but are interpreted as existentially charged moments in which personal identity and professional role become entangled.

In the context of the interviewed managers, the recurrent emphasis on concealing their genuine emotions underscores a marked discrepancy between the organisational ideal of authenticity and the face they perform in situations of conflict. The tension becomes particularly salient for middle managers who operate within hierarchical structures. In such situations, expectations of authenticity can collide with institutional demands for role conformity.

## 5. Discussion

The aggressive metaphors employed in these accounts indicate that conflicts involving blame and guilt permeate deeply into middle managers' personal boundaries, destabilising their sense of self and professional identity. If managers perceive such encounters as emotionally unsafe and feel compelled to suppress their reactions when being scolded, the ambition of cultivating authenticity and psychological safety in organisational environments appears far from realised for the interviewed middle managers.

Goffman's perspective is particularly relevant for understanding tensions in authentic leadership. Organisations may rhetorically encourage authenticity and openness, while simultaneously discouraging forms of authenticity that threaten hierarchical relations or organisational harmony, especially during conflict with superiors. In this sense, authenticity becomes conditional rather than absolute. As Goffman notes, social relationships require individuals to entrust their self-image and social standing to the "tact and good conduct of others." The middle managers experience that the burden of facework is on them. In times of conflict, superiors in these examples lose their head, and do not perform any facework. Thus, the results unfold a practice that is far from the ideals of the theory we presented earlier in the theory part (e.g. Algera & Lips-Wiersma, 2012; Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Walumbwa et al., 2008).

The option of being authentic appears in times of conflict only an option for the superior. This experience may make the middle managers wonder whether organisational power relations permit real authenticity for all, or only authenticity when it is convenient for the superior.

Yet much of the literature on authentic leadership presupposes a relatively direct and positive relationship between leader authenticity and favourable follower outcomes, such as engagement, satisfaction, and commitment (e.g. Algera & Lips-Wiersma, 2012; Avolio &

Gardner, 2005). However, authenticity, whether in leadership or generally in life, concerns also the individual's subjective experience of selfhood, how one understands and experiences oneself in the world. The apparent dissonance between contemporary leadership paradigms and enduring hierarchical practices therefore warrants further investigation into how public sector management negotiates, adapts to, or resists evolving leadership norms. Future research might want to undertake a more systematic and critical examination of whether contemporary leadership ideals, particularly authenticity and psychological safety, can in fact be substantively institutionalised within public sector organisations. This critical perspective is also reflected in sources included in this paper, which adopt a more critical perspective on authentic leadership (Einola & Alvesson, 2021; Gardner & McCauley, 2022). An alternative interpretation is that Weberian bureaucratic logics continue to operate beneath reform-oriented discourses, reasserting themselves as "the bureaucrat's face" when hierarchical authority is perceived to be under pressure. This point calls for further analytical attention to whether authenticity constitutes a practically relevant dimension of public sector leadership, or whether it remains a largely normative construct with limited operational significance in organisational contexts characterised by enduring hierarchical power structures. Moreover, if the ideal of authentic leadership cannot be realised in practice, it may generate disappointment and constrain middle managers' capacity to prepare for and navigate the realities of hierarchical power relations, including within the public sector.

## 6. Conclusion

This study examined whether public middle managers experience the possibility of acting authentically in conflicts with their superiors. Drawing on interviews with 37 Danish public middle managers and analysing the material through Goffman's concept of facework, the study demonstrates that authenticity is not experienced as an unconditional leadership ideal. Rather, the possibility of authenticity is shaped by hierarchical power relations.

The study makes three contributions. First, it contributes to the authentic leadership literature by showing that authenticity cannot be understood solely as an individual characteristic but must also be analysed as a relational and organisational phenomenon conditioned by hierarchy. Second, it extends Goffman's concept of facework by demonstrating how preventive facework functions as a survival strategy for middle managers who experience accusations, blame, and emotional aggression from superiors. Third, the findings question the assumption that organisational ideals such as authenticity, vulnerability, and psychological safety are equally available across hierarchical positions.

Practically, the findings suggest that organisations should be cautious about promoting authenticity as a universal leadership ideal without recognising the power asymmetries that shape managers' opportunities to express themselves openly. If middle managers are expected to remain emotionally restrained while superiors are not, organisational initiatives promoting authenticity may unintentionally increase frustration rather than psychological safety.

This study has several limitations. The findings are based on interviews with Danish public middle managers and therefore reflect participants' retrospective accounts rather than observations of actual interactions. Consequently, the results cannot be generalised to all organisational contexts. Future research could combine interviews with observational studies or examine whether similar dynamics occur in private organisations or different national settings.

Overall, the study suggests that authenticity is less an individual leadership capability than a socially and hierarchically negotiated possibility. Understanding authenticity therefore requires greater attention to organisational power relations and the interactional work through which leaders maintain face in everyday organisational life.

## Authors' statement: Division of labour in the paper

The first author conducted the data collection, including the interviews and the initial thematic analysis, and prepared the first draft of the manuscript. The second author contributed primarily to the development of the theoretical framework and the positioning of the paper within the

literature on authentic leadership and Goffman's sociology. Both authors contributed to the interpretation of the findings, revisions of the manuscript, and approval of the final version.

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