



## Exploring the Meaning of Authentic Leadership Communication Among Millennials in Southeast Asian Technology Workplaces

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### ABSTRACT

Leadership communication is a critical area within organizational communication studies, particularly in understanding how interpersonal dynamics shape workplace culture and employee engagement. While prior research has explored authentic leadership, little is known about how millennial employees subjectively experience and interpret authentic leadership communication in culturally complex industries such as technology. The current literature lacks phenomenological insights into how authenticity is perceived from the employee's perspective, prompting the question: how do millennial employees make meaning of authentic leadership communication in their everyday professional lives? This study adopts an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of millennials working in Southeast Asian technology firms—specifically in Jakarta, Indonesia, between January and April 2024—and provides an in-depth answer to this question. Semi-structured interviews with 12 participants from three major tech companies—each with distinct organizational cultures and leadership practices—were conducted, transcribed, and analyzed using thematic interpretation grounded in phenomenology. The findings reveal four key themes: perceived transparency, behavioral congruence, dialogic engagement, and emotional resonance, each contributing to a deeper understanding of how authenticity is constructed through daily leader-employee interactions. These insights illustrate that authentic communication is not merely a leadership trait but a relational process embedded in emotional and cultural contexts. A key limitation of this study lies in its small sample size and its focus on a specific regional and industrial context, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. The study expands our understanding of authentic leadership by emphasizing employee meaning-making and offers a foundation for future inquiries into leadership communication as a lived organizational phenomenon.



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### INTRODUCTION

In today's dynamic organizational landscape, leadership communication plays a vital role in shaping workplace relationships, cultural identity, and employee engagement. Within the broader field of communication studies, it is increasingly recognized not only as a strategic function but also as an interpersonal process that influences how employees perceive their roles, leaders, and organizational values. The rise of decentralized work environments, digital transformation, and generational shifts in the workforce has brought new complexity to how leadership messages are conveyed and understood, particularly in fast-paced industries such as technology.

This phenomenon gains greater significance in the context of millennial employees, who now comprise a substantial portion of the global workforce. Known for their preference for transparency, inclusiveness, and purpose-driven work environments, millennials bring unique expectations toward leadership behavior and communication styles. In Southeast Asian technology firms, where rapid innovation and cultural hybridity intersect, the demand for leadership that is perceived as authentic has intensified. Within this region, research has begun to highlight culturally rooted communication

practices and leader-member dynamics, such as high-context interaction norms, collective identity orientations, and hierarchical respect—factors that potentially reshape how authenticity is understood and enacted. However, these insights remain underrepresented in mainstream leadership communication scholarship. Authentic leadership—characterized by self-awareness, relational transparency, and ethical conduct—has been linked to greater trust and stronger organizational culture, especially when conveyed through consistent and meaningful communication.

Despite growing interest in the concept of authentic leadership, much of the existing scholarship has emphasized quantitative outcomes such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, or performance metrics. These approaches often overlook the subjective, lived experiences of employees—particularly how they make meaning of leadership encounters in culturally specific environments such as Southeast Asian tech organizations. As a result, there remains a pressing need to explore the meanings that individuals assign to leadership communication, particularly through lenses that prioritize human experience and interpretation. This study seeks to fill that gap by addressing the following research question in explicit terms: How do millennial employees working in Southeast Asian technology firms subjectively make meaning of authentic leadership communication in their everyday professional lives?

Phenomenology offers a powerful framework to address this need by focusing on the richness of lived experience. Through a phenomenological lens, leadership communication is not merely a transactional process but a phenomenon embedded in social realities, cultural narratives, and personal meaning-making. Investigating this phenomenon through the voices of millennial employees provides an opportunity to illuminate how authentic leadership is experienced, not just theorized or measured thus contributing to a deeper understanding of leadership communication in contemporary organizational life.

The study of how individuals experience leadership communication particularly the subjective meanings they assign to it has emerged as a critical area within organizational and communication research. Scholars have increasingly acknowledged that understanding leadership solely through observable behavior or quantitative metrics fails to capture the nuanced, personal realities of those most affected by it: the employees. This recognition has led to a gradual shift toward experience-centered research, where the voices of individuals are prioritized to better understand how phenomena such as authenticity, trust, and relational dynamics are constructed and interpreted in everyday organizational life.

However, significant methodological challenges remain in capturing the depth and complexity of these lived experiences. Many existing studies have relied heavily on quantitative instruments, such as surveys and structured assessments, that are designed to measure variables like leadership effectiveness or employee satisfaction. While useful for identifying trends and correlations, such methods often fall short in revealing how individuals make sense of their interactions with leaders or how these interactions shape their understanding of workplace culture. This limitation is especially pronounced in culturally diverse settings, where communication is deeply influenced by implicit norms, values, and interpersonal expectations.

As a result, much of the prior research lacks the depth needed to uncover the essential meaning of leadership communication as it is actually lived and experienced. These gaps underscore the inadequacy of conventional methods in accessing the richness of subjective experience and highlight the need for research approaches that are explicitly designed to reveal the interpretative dimensions of organizational life. Phenomenological inquiry particularly in its interpretative form addresses this need by focusing on how meaning is constructed through experience. It offers a methodological pathway to illuminate the personal, cultural, and relational dynamics that shape how leadership is perceived, internalized, and lived by employees, particularly among millennials navigating complex professional environments.

In existing organizational and communication research, the prevailing solutions to understanding leadership effectiveness and employee engagement have largely relied on established practical approaches such as leadership style assessments, employee satisfaction surveys, and performance-based evaluations. While these tools offer actionable insights for organizational

decision-making, they are predominantly designed to capture surface-level data outcomes that are quantifiable but often detached from the rich context of human experience. These methods tend to frame leadership communication as a functional or behavioral process, overlooking the interpretive and emotional layers that shape how it is experienced by individuals in diverse workplace settings.

This reliance on quantitative or outcome-driven models has led to a limited understanding of how employees, particularly millennials, personally interpret leadership communication within the cultural and relational frameworks of modern organizations. The depth and texture of their experiences the meanings they derive, the emotions they associate, and the values they attach remain underexplored in much of the current literature. In contexts such as Southeast Asian technology firms, where cultural expectations, generational values, and leadership styles often intersect in complex ways, this lack of qualitative insight becomes even more pronounced.

Given these limitations, a phenomenological approach presents a compelling alternative. By prioritizing lived experience over abstract generalizations, phenomenology allows for a deeper, more holistic exploration of the essence of authentic leadership communication. It enables researchers to access the subjective realities of employees, revealing how they construct meaning from their interactions with leaders and how those meanings influence their sense of belonging, trust, and identity within the organization. This study addresses the need to move beyond what is measurable toward what is meaningful offering a contribution that fills the existing gap in understanding how leadership is truly experienced from within.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

### **Study Design**

This study employed an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of millennial employees regarding authentic leadership communication in technology companies. Phenomenology was chosen for its emphasis on understanding subjective human experiences and the meaning individuals assign to specific phenomena. Specifically, the interpretative variant of phenomenology, grounded in Heideggerian philosophy, was applied to allow for in-depth interpretation of how participants make sense of their workplace interactions and leadership dynamics. This approach facilitated a nuanced exploration of personal narratives and contextual meanings, aligning closely with the study's aim to uncover the essence of authentic leadership communication as perceived by millennial employees.

### **Participants**

Participants in this study were millennial employees aged between 25 and 38 years, working in mid-to-large-sized technology companies across Southeast Asia. Inclusion criteria required that participants had at least two years of professional experience under direct supervision and had interacted regularly with organizational leaders. Individuals in purely freelance roles or those without consistent leadership interaction were excluded. A purposive sampling strategy was used to select individuals with rich, relevant experiences aligned with the research focus. The final sample included 12 participants (7 female, 5 male), with an average age of 31 years. Most participants held roles in product development, engineering, or human resource departments, providing diverse perspectives on leadership communication within organizational structures.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted in a setting convenient and comfortable for each participant, including virtual platforms when necessary. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes and followed a flexible interview guide designed to elicit detailed personal accounts related to authentic leadership experiences. Interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and later transcribed verbatim. Efforts were made to create a psychologically safe environment by ensuring confidentiality and allowing participants to speak freely. Field notes were taken to capture non-verbal cues and contextual nuances. Where necessary, follow-up interviews were conducted to clarify meanings or deepen insight into emerging themes.

## **Data Analysis**

The data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which emphasizes both the participants' meaning-making and the interpretative engagement of the analyst. Analysis began with repeated readings of each transcript to foster immersion in the data. Significant statements were identified and coded into meaning units, which were then clustered into initial themes. These themes were further refined through an idiographic, iterative process to ensure fidelity to individual narratives while allowing for the emergence of shared experiential patterns. NVivo software was utilized to organize and trace analytical coding without altering the interpretive depth. The process concluded with the identification of essential themes that captured the core meanings of authentic leadership communication as experienced by the participants.

## **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant institutional research ethics committee. All participants provided written informed consent prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and individuals were assured of their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Anonymity was maintained by using pseudonyms and removing identifying information from the transcripts. All data were stored securely and treated with strict confidentiality. The study adhered to established ethical standards for qualitative research, including those outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki and local regulatory guidelines.

## **RESULTS**

This section presents the findings of the study based on the lived experiences of millennial employees in technology companies regarding authentic leadership communication. Using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), the researcher identified four overarching themes that emerged from the participants' narratives. Each theme reflects the subjective meanings and emotional realities experienced by participants, supported by direct quotations to enhance contextual authenticity and depth of insight.

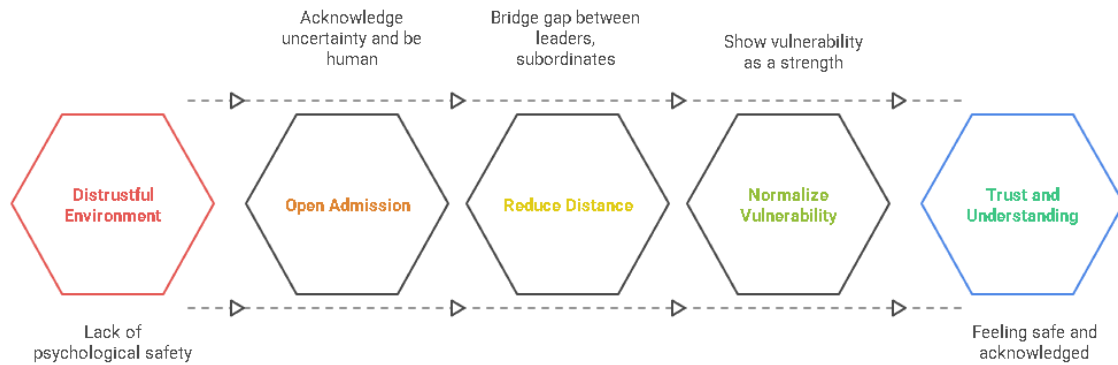
### **Feeling Seen and Understood through Transparent Communication**

One of the most salient themes was the participants' experience of feeling genuinely acknowledged when leaders communicated in a transparent and open manner. Authenticity in leadership was perceived not merely as verbal honesty but as an emotional resonance that fostered a sense of psychological safety.

“When my manager openly admitted that they were unsure about some business outcomes, I felt oddly reassured. It made me think okay, they're human too. That honesty helped me trust them more.” (P3)

Participants emphasized that transparency reduced the perceived distance between leaders and subordinates, enabling a culture where vulnerability was normalized and respected. Rather than seeing transparency as a weakness, millennials interpreted it as a marker of strength and alignment with values.

### **Building Trust Through Open Communication**



### Alignment of Words and Actions Builds Credibility

Another critical theme was the importance of congruence between what leaders said and what they did. Participants consistently referenced their leaders' behavioral consistency as a core indicator of authenticity.

"It's not just about what they say it's whether they follow through. One of my leads always talks about mental health, and when she actually took time off for it herself, it made a huge difference in how I viewed her." (P7)

The perceived alignment between communication and behavior created a sense of credibility that empowered participants to internalize organizational values more fully. This alignment was described as a foundational trust-building mechanism that supported cultural continuity within fast-paced work environments.

### Empowerment through Dialogic Leadership

Several participants described the impact of dialogic communication leaders who engaged in active listening and two-way dialogue as a deeply empowering experience. This leadership communication style was viewed not only as a sign of respect but also as a form of inclusion.

"He always asks for our input in team decisions. Even if he doesn't take every suggestion, knowing I'm heard makes me more committed." (P1)

The dialogic approach allowed participants to feel ownership over their work and contributed to a sense of mutual growth between leaders and team members. Participants linked this form of communication to improved engagement, commitment, and alignment with the organization's purpose.

### Emotional Resonance Creates Cultural Belonging

A recurring narrative involved the emotional tone embedded within leadership communication. Participants valued leaders who expressed genuine care, empathy, and appreciation, particularly in high-pressure or uncertain environments. Emotional authenticity was perceived as a key factor in cultivating a sense of belonging and cultural cohesion.

"During the layoff announcement, my manager sat with me for 20 minutes just to check how I was doing. That conversation made me feel more connected to the company than any town hall ever did." (P4)

This emotional resonance was described not in grand gestures but in consistent, small interactions that revealed a leader's sincerity. Participants linked these experiences to their identification with the organizational culture and their willingness to contribute beyond formal responsibilities.

The lived experiences of millennial employees revealed that authentic leadership communication is deeply rooted in transparency, behavioral congruence, dialogic engagement, and emotional sincerity. These dimensions, when expressed consistently, enable trust, foster cultural

belonging, and elevate the meaning of work for millennials in the technology industry. The themes above reflect not only individual experiences but also the structural conditions necessary for cultivating a credible and resonant leadership culture.

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that millennial employees in technology companies experience authentic leadership communication as a deeply relational and emotionally resonant phenomenon. Through themes of transparency, behavioral congruence, dialogic engagement, and emotional sincerity, participants shared how authentic communication shaped their trust, sense of belonging, and commitment within the workplace. These insights directly address the central research question: how do millennial employees make meaning of authentic leadership communication in their everyday organizational experiences?

This study contributes to answering that question by offering a phenomenological understanding of authenticity as lived and interpreted by the employees themselves not merely as an abstract leadership trait or managerial technique. The findings illuminate the personal significance of consistent and emotionally attuned communication practices. Rather than being passive recipients of leadership directives, millennial employees are shown to be active meaning-makers who assess leadership authenticity through behavioral integrity, emotional availability, and dialogic inclusion. Such perspectives provide a richer, more grounded account of how leadership communication functions in shaping workplace culture and interpersonal dynamics, especially within fast-moving, culturally hybrid technology environments.

These findings both support and extend prior literature on authentic leadership. For example, Walumbwa et al. (2008) emphasized the role of relational transparency and self-awareness as predictors of positive organizational outcomes. While their quantitative framework validated the structural components of authentic leadership, the present study adds a qualitative depth by unpacking how these components are interpreted by employees within specific relational contexts. Similarly, studies by Avolio and Gardner (2005) highlighted the developmental aspect of authenticity in leadership; the current research complements this by showing how employees themselves contribute to that developmental process through their interpretive engagement. Moreover, the emphasis on dialogic leadership aligns with the work of Isaacs (1999), who underscored the power of generative dialogue in organizational transformation. This study confirms that authentic communication is not simply about information transmission, but about co-constructing meaning and relational trust in daily organizational life.

The implications of these findings extend beyond the immediate experiences of individual participants, offering both theoretical and practical contributions to the field of leadership communication. From a professional perspective, the study highlights the importance of cultivating leadership practices that are not only transparent and consistent but also emotionally intelligent and dialogically engaged. In diverse and dynamic work environments, especially within the Southeast Asian technology sector, authentic communication serves as a bridge between organizational values and employee well-being. Socially and culturally, these findings underscore the relevance of authenticity as a relational construct, shaped by interpersonal trust and mutual recognition elements essential for fostering inclusive and resilient organizational cultures.

Despite the richness of the insights offered, this study has several limitations. First, the sample was limited to millennial employees working within technology companies in Southeast Asia, which may constrain the transferability of the findings to other industries, regions, or generational groups. Second, while phenomenology allows for in-depth exploration of lived experience, it does not aim for statistical generalization, and thus the interpretations are context-bound and shaped by the specific narratives of the participants. Third, all interviews were conducted in English, which, although commonly used in professional settings, may have limited the expressive nuance for some participants whose first language differs. These limitations point to the necessity of cautious interpretation and provide a basis for refining future inquiries.

Looking ahead, future research may expand upon this study by including a more diverse demographic and cultural spectrum, enabling comparative analyses across generational or geographic boundaries. Additionally, further phenomenological studies could explore how leadership authenticity is experienced in non-corporate settings, such as public institutions or social enterprises. Finally, interdisciplinary approaches combining phenomenology with cultural studies or organizational psychology may offer even deeper insights into how meaning-making processes in leadership communication evolve over time. These extensions would help build a more holistic understanding of authenticity as a lived organizational phenomenon, contributing to both academic scholarship and leadership practice.

## CONCLUSION

This study explored how millennial employees in Southeast Asian technology companies experience and interpret authentic leadership communication in their everyday work lives. The findings revealed that authenticity is perceived through transparent dialogue, behavioral consistency, emotional resonance, and reciprocal engagement. These elements shape employees' trust, belonging, and identification with organizational culture, providing a richer understanding than what prior quantitative studies have offered. By using an interpretative phenomenological approach, the study addressed a critical gap in the literature by focusing on lived experiences rather than abstract constructs. The results suggest that leadership communication must be relational, contextual, and personally meaningful to resonate with a millennial workforce. To translate these insights into practical application, organizations in Southeast Asia should design leadership development programs that emphasize reflective communication training, cultural sensitivity, and emotional intelligence. HR departments can also incorporate feedback loops, mentorship systems, and dialogic engagement practices as part of onboarding and performance review frameworks. Future research could expand this exploration to different generational cohorts or cultural environments to deepen our understanding of leadership authenticity across contexts. Policymakers and organizational strategists are encouraged to align leadership standards with evolving workforce expectations, particularly by embedding authenticity and interpersonal communication competencies into formal leadership assessment and certification protocols.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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