

# Leadership of State-Owned Enterprises in Malawi: Proposing a Conceptual Framework of Authentic Strategic Leadership

MacDonald Kanyangale

University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, Graduate School of Business & Leadership,  
Durban, South Africa, Orcid 0000-0003-2259-1449

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## Abstract

There is a paucity of research on authentic leadership of top-level executives, especially in State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs). This conceptual paper aims to review the existing models of authentic leadership and propose a new and comprehensive framework of Authentic Strategic Leadership (ASL) in leading SOEs in Malawi. To pursue this aim, a background literature review on authenticity and authentic leadership was conducted in several peer-reviewed journals to identify the conceptual foundation and nature of authenticity and authentic leadership and dimensions, revealing different and interrelated aspects of authentic leadership in the existing models.

Six key dimensions of ASL of SOEs in Malawi are connecting authenticity to Self and organisation strategic direction, building organisational resilience, strategic authenticity, the iterative and authentic influence of internal and external stakeholders and collaborative and transparent drive of positive change and producing Direction, Alignment and Commitment (DAC). Based on the identified dimensions and gaps, a new framework of ASL of SOEs operating in a politicised context is proposed to guide practice and future research.

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## 1. Introduction

With effective and Authentic Strategic Leadership (ASL), State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) in developing countries like Malawi can provide important public services. However, Kaunda (2021), Ministry of Finance (2022) and Mchulu (2023) share the widespread concern that the activities of the seventy-two SOEs to provide services are adversely affected by corruption, unethical leadership, mismanagement, culture of impunity and political interference, among others, in Malawi. To be concise, poor accountability measures, financial burden on the state, procurement anomalies, and political interference in the recruitment of chief executive officers or directors general and their boards of directors are some of the underlying causes for the poor performance of many Malawian SOEs (Mchulu, 2023). Gardner et al.(2021) assert a compelling need to appoint ASL to oversee and improve the performance of organisations such as SOEs. ASL focuses on people, values, and ethics first, with productivity and profits subsequently promoted by fostering an inclusive and welcoming environment where everyone feels heard. To turn SOEs into efficient and self-sustaining organisations, leadership and management style changes should be part of the radical reforms in Malawi (International Monetary Fund,2019).

There are two conceptual issues for researchers interested in the theory and practice of ASL in SOEs. First, scholars need to understand the opposing views of researchers such as Ford and Harding (2011, p. 464), who lament that Authentic leadership (AL) as a reflection of the 'true self is impossible. The pitfall is that leaders are forced to sacrifice their subjectivity to that of the organisational collective— privileging their collective or organisational self over their individual self. Välikangas and Tienari (2018, p.1) add that “CEOs and Top Management Teams cannot be “authentic in the strict sense of the word—embracing who they “truly” are—due to the many conflicting demands on their work and due to their public role, where expression of their inner-ness would be deemed inappropriate”.

Chamorro-Premuzic (2020, p.1) warns that authenticity comes at a high price, paid not only by leaders but also by their followers (e.g., reduction in team engagement and tensions due to hurtful but true comments on team members' performance). Second, the literature is explicit that AL is a relatively new leadership model in the nascent phase (Ahmed, 2023; Nikolić et al.,2020; Omeihe et al.,2021). Literature shows a lacuna in the dynamic interplay of strategic leadership theory and authenticity in organisations and its outcomes at the micro-level (the individual stakeholder), meso (groups and organisations) and macro-level (institutions, culture and society). This lacuna is important for scholars who study leadership “of” the entire organisation, which is different from leadership “within” the organisation (Kanyangale,2017). Strategic leadership theory focuses exclusively on the dominant coalition or top "executives who have overall responsibility for an organisation, their characteristics, what they do, and how they affect organisational outcomes" (Finkelstein & Hambrick, 2009,p.4).

Despite the extensive research on strategic leadership, a dearth of studies has anchored their investigations on the practice of authenticity by those in the upper echelon (Samimi et al., 2022). This research gap presents an opportunity to enrich our comprehension of authenticity and its practice by an organisation's

executive leaders and board members. Academics and practitioners yearn for AL to solve dysfunctional leadership in SOEs and the private sector (Iszatt-White et al., 2021).

## **1.2 Problem statement**

A lack of effective and authentic strategic leadership is one of the reasons for poor performance in Malawi's SOEs (Mchulu,2023). There is growing frustration among the users of services provided by SOEs in Malawi, especially when unethical leaders in the upper echelon derail these organisations (Camacho & Jenkins,2022). Sithomola (2019) talks about "catastrophic leadership bankruptcy," which leads to the loss of confidence and trust in the capability of SOEs to effectively and efficiently provide services and sustain their operations without treasury bailouts.

Corruption is a significant problem in Malawi, exemplified by several high-profile scandals implicating prominent public officials, including CEOs of SOEs, the Vice-President, the Inspector General of Police and the President's Chief of Staff (Camacho & Jenkins, 2022). The 2019-2020 consolidated report of SOEs by the Ministry of Finance in Malawi clarifies that the number of loss-making SOEs increased from three in 2017 to thirteen in 2020. With the deteriorating performance of the SOEs and the rise in unethical conduct of political and public leaders, there is a need for AL to be entrusted with the overall responsibility of leading the SOE in ways that promote a culture of ethics and integrity, productivity and service excellence (OECD,2020).

However, there is a dearth of models capturing the nature of authenticity and its dimensions when applied to leadership "of" the entire organisation by top-level executives and members of the Board. AL is a relatively new phenomenon (Ahmed, 2023). Extant research has not examined strategic leadership from the lens of authenticity (Samimi et al., 2022). Furthermore, most of the extant models of AL are context-free, prompting Helmuth et al.(2023,p.2) to call for "scholars to reconsider the blanket use of commonly accepted measures that exist within the authentic leadership arena". Avolio et al. (2004) acknowledge that AL is "more generic" than other leadership theories and represents the root construct of positively oriented leadership that supports organisational performance. There is a compelling need to shift from a generic, context-free to more context-specific understanding of AL enacted at different levels of leadership (e.g., tactical, supervisory and strategic leadership) (Crawford et al., 2020; Kanyangale,2017). This conceptual paper upholds that strategic leaders of SOEs differ from those in the private sector because they operate in politically exposed environments and serve wide-ranging stakeholder interests while simultaneously pursuing vague objectives (Badarai, 2020). This conceptual paper seeks to get a nuanced understanding of the constitutive dimensions of ASL necessary for a leader to enact authenticity and improve the overall performance of Malawian SOEs.

## **1.3 Research objective**

The objective of this conceptual paper is to peruse relevant and existing models of AL and propose a new framework of ASL in leading SOEs in the context of Malawi. This conceptual paper is valuable for

practitioners and scholars of strategic leadership in two key ways. First, it emphasises the interplay of authenticity with stakeholder-centric and relational perspectives for the leadership of top executives in SOEs. Second, the paper identifies dimensions necessary for enacting authenticity as an ASL of SOEs operating in a politicised context. The key question in this paper is: What ASL dimensions can improve the operations of SOEs in Malawi?

First, the conceptual paper explores the complexity of authenticity before delving into the ontology of strategic leadership. After that, there is a critical analysis of five seminal and dominant models of AL before discussing themes and gaps evident in the extant models of AL. Lastly, a new and integrative framework of ASL of SOEs in Malawi is presented, followed by implications for future research.

## **2. Literature review**

The literature review in this paper focuses on two key aspects, namely the complexity and meaning of authenticity and the Direction, Alignment and Commitment (DAC) ontology of leadership, which resonates with strategic leadership.

### **2.1 Complexity and Meaning of Authenticity**

AL is still elusive despite 15 years of growing research in different disciplines (e.g., philosophy, leadership, public relations, marketing and psychology) (Helmuth et al., 2023). The ontological roots of authenticity are traceable to the Ancient Greek philosopher Socrates, who coined the maxim "be true to thine self" (Gardner et al., 2011). Authentic comes from the Greek word "*authento*", which translates as "to have full power" (Trilling, 1972). One can decipher the complexity of the phenomenon of authenticity by examining the variety of meanings of authenticity, the multi-dimensional and multi-level aspects of AL, and the nature of the definitional challenges of AL. Different scholars view authenticity in different ways. First, there is the notion of authenticity as self-congruency, critical to leading the self. For example, authenticity in social psychology underlines self-congruence regarding the extent to which a particular behaviour is consistent with deeply held values and other dispositions (Crawford et al., 2020; Dammann et al., 2021).

The internal sense of true self and the external expression of it are two key parts of individual self-authenticity. Authenticity is viewed as "intra" in nature, which is inconsistent with the assertion that authenticity occurs in a social and relational context and impacts leading others (Avolio et al., 2004; Iszatt-White et al., 2019). Second, there are views of authenticity as a continuum. For example, Helmuth et al. (2021, p.11) advise that "authenticity is not an either/or condition," but rather, it is aspirational in the sense that leaders "can be more or less authentic at any point in time and across situations". In existential philosophy, authenticity unfolds in the social and relational context. In the words of Erickson (1995, p.121), authenticity is 'being true to self', but also being true to "self-in-relationship" as well as to "self and world". Authenticity in organisations is inadequate if the focus is only on individual self-

authenticity. Team authenticity draws attention to the need to understand individual authenticity's external effects on others and its relational nature. Third, some scholars see authenticity as a social process. Ammann et al. (2021,p.2) elaborate that authenticity is “the process of being in a congruous relationship with self, others, and relevant social norms”. Scholars such as Iszatt-White et al.(2019) and Alvesson and Einola (2019) are among those who strongly argue that authenticity is not limited to self-knowledge, discovering and accurately communicating one’s values. It also implies consistency in living out the social norms in a dynamic context. Lastly, there is literature that suggests that authenticity is an organisational capability. In a nutshell, organisational authenticity refers to the degree to which an organisation is true to itself, acts according to its values and purposes, and communicates honestly and transparently with stakeholders (Crawford et al., 2020; Shen & Kim, 2012). Organisational authenticity is examinable by focusing on three elements, namely consistency, truthfulness, and transparency (Shen & Kim, 2012). Truthfulness is about the organisation's true self and the extent of congruence with the strategy statement (mission, vision, purpose), value and character. Transparency entails being open and honest in sharing information with the public, accepting criticism, and taking responsibility for behaviour. Lastly, consistency occurs when the actions and behaviours of an organisation agree with its values, beliefs, principles, and character.

## **2.2 Multi-dimensional and multi-level Aspects of Authenticity in Leadership**

Another way to understand the complexity of authenticity is to examine its multi-dimensional and multi-level nature. The most used definition of AL in literature is by Walumbwa et al. (2008,p. 94), who created four dimensions: self-awareness, internalised moral perspective, relational transparency and balanced processing. Walumbwa et al. (2008,p.94) concisely defined AL as:

*"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 internalised moral perspective, balanced processing of information, and relational transparency on the part of leaders working with followers, fostering positive self-development”.*

Self-awareness is not an end but a process of developing insight into one’s limitations, strengths and weaknesses through constantly re-assessing one’s self-concept via exposure to feedback from others and being conscious of one's impact on them. Walumbwa et al. (2008) illustrates that authenticity is not about moral neutrality or simply being true to the self you want to be, be it a good or bad, moral or immoral person. Self-regulation based on the moral campus is pivotal in self-based perspectives of authenticity. Internalised moral perspective is an internalised and integrated form of self-regulation, internal moral values and standards that guide one to make decisions despite external influences (e.g. groups, organisational, societal pressure). Balanced processing relates to the ability to be objective when considering all available information (e.g. take opinions, suggestions and consideration of others, embrace disagreeing viewpoints) before reaching a decision (Walumbwa et al., 2008).

Lastly, relational transparency entails presenting one's true self (as opposed to a fake or distorted self) to others and knowing the boundary between healthy sharing and unhealthy, mindless information dumping (Walumbwa et al., 2008). Exhibiting authenticity and genuine feelings towards team members encourages interpersonal interaction and mutual trust in the organisation. Nikolić et al. (2020) elaborate on the multi-dimensional nature of AL in terms of intrapersonal, interpersonal and developmental dimensions. The intrapersonal perspective upholds a leader-centric view and the intra-individual nature of authenticity without any overt attention from other people (e.g. self-knowledge and self-regulatory behaviours). The interpersonal dimension is outward-oriented, emphasising that AL is a relational construct that emerges from the relationship between leader and followers. The multi-level nature of authenticity suggests relationship and cross-level implications between/among entities residing at different levels (e.g. individual, dyadic, team and organisation). Finally, there is a developmental perspective of authenticity as a process characterised by the ever-changing relationships between an individual, himself/herself, others, and social norms (Nikolić et al.,2020).

### **2.3 Lack of definitional clarity: traits, style, antecedent, outcome and moral**

Lastly, one can explore the complexity of authenticity by delineating the various elements used to define the concept of AL. Five different aspects, namely (1) traits, (2) style, (3) antecedents, (4) outcome, and (5) moral components of AL appear in various ways of defining AL (Iszatt-White et al.,2019; Alvesson & Einola, 2019). For example, traits and style are evident in the definition by Avolio and Gardner (2005,p.321), who suggest that *“authentic leaders are “those individuals who know who they are, what they think and behave and are perceived by others as being aware of their own and others’ values, knowledge, and strengths; aware of the context in which they operate”*. Other definitions of AL depict leadership traits that impact organisational outcomes or follower development.

Ilies et al. (2005,p.390) assert that authentic leaders are *“deeply aware of their values and beliefs, self-confident, genuine, reliable and trustworthy, and focus on building followers' strengths, broadening their well-being”*. This definition underscores traits of authentic leaders and the aspect of leader-follower development. In a different vein, some definitions view AL by its outcomes (e.g., followers' intrinsic motivation, trust, engagement, and organisational citizenship behaviours). These fail to explain the fundamental nature of the construct of AL (Crawford et al.,2020). It is equally notable that some definitions pronounce the antecedents of AL (e.g. self-knowledge and self-consistency between espoused values, ethical reasoning and actions), which further exhibits the complexity of authenticity.

Commonly, definitions of AL depict the common pitfall of not considering context outside the tripod of leader, follower and shared goals (Drath et al., 2008). The fundamental ontology of leadership asserts: *“In its simplest form [leadership] is a tripod—a leader or leaders, followers, and a common goal they want to achieve” (Bennis, 2007, p. 3). This is not a definition of leadership but something much more fundamental: It is an expression of commitment to the entities (leaders, followers, common goals) that*

are essential and indispensable to leadership and about which any theory of leadership must therefore speak” (Drath et al., 2008,p.635).

As leadership differs in context, level and scope of influence (e.g. tactical, supervisory and strategic leaders), AL theory must reflect multi-level rather than erroneously suggest a one-size-fits-all approach (Kanyangale,2022). Table 1 highlights some of the insightful pitfalls in the scholarship of AL.

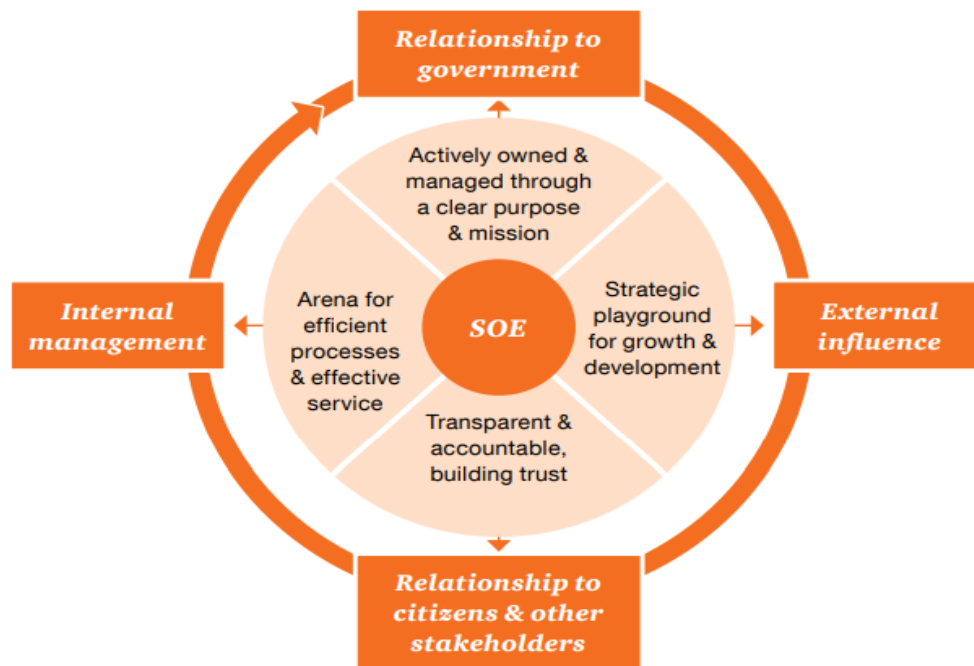
**Table 1: Types of Criticisms of Authentic Leadership**

Type of criticism	Author(s)
Lack of collectivism due to leader centricity, which focuses on the self and who the leader is.	Algera & Lips-Wiersma(2012); Avolio et al. (2004)
Adaptability is misconstrued as a deviation and lack of self-consistency between values, beliefs, and actions.	(Alvesson & Einola, 2019)
Authentic followership is not examined as an independent construct but rather an extension of authentic leadership.	(Crawford et al., 2020)
AL and transformational leadership are closely related, hence construct redundancy.	(Crawford et al., 2020)
Confounding the authenticity of action with the authenticity of a person exhibiting the act.	(Helmuth et al.,2023:2).

**Source: Own**

## 2.4 DAC ontology of strategic leadership

The leadership ontology of Direction, Alignment and Commitment (DAC), which upholds that leadership achieves three main outcomes, resonates with strategic leadership (Drath et al., 2008,p.636). First, direction as a leadership outcome is about the widespread agreement on an organisation's overall collective aims, mission and objectives. Second, alignment is another leadership outcome. Alignment refers to the organisation and the coordination of knowledge and work in a collective. Lastly, commitment is the feeling of obligation, emotional attachment and willingness of the individual members to subsume their interests and benefit for the collective good (Drath et al.,2008,p.636). Commitment is evident in various ways, which include undivided loyalty or extra effort and organisational citizenship behaviours to produce DAC. The DAC ontology of leadership provides insight into the desired outcome of strategic leaders in influencing multiple stakeholders in a dynamic organisational context. Strategic leadership involves leading downwards, upwards, and across the organisation's boundary to create DAC (Kanyangale, 2017). A report by PWC (2015) is explicit that strategic leaders in SOEs establish a clear purpose and mission, build relationships with citizens and other stakeholders, and create and maintain sound internal management for effective services and efficient processes. Strategic leaders also leverage external influence by co-creating value with other stakeholders, as depicted in Figure 1 below.



**Figure 1: SOE of the future and new capabilities**  
 Source: PWC (2015, p. 7)

### 3. Methodology

Three key methodological issues require clarity in this conceptual paper. These are literature search and article selection, AL model selection and Dimensional focus and analysis.

#### 3.1 Literature search and article selection

The search for scholarly articles focused on electronic databases, including EBSCO Host, Google Scholar, JSTOR, and Academic Search Complete, as these are relevant to leadership scholarship. The keywords Malawi, State-Owned Enterprise, Authentic leadership, Authentic leadership models/framework and strategic leadership and Authentic strategic leadership framework were used in searching for articles.

The inclusion criteria included (1) scholarly articles published in English; (2) a clear focus on AL, AL frameworks or models; and (3) articles not repeating another. A total of 70 articles were identified. The author conducted a thorough and deep read of the abstracts of all 70 articles. Articles describing the value of authentic leaders only and training programmes on AL were excluded as they did not dwell on a model or framework with interrelated dimensions. Articles which focused on the measurement and instruments to collect data on AL were also excluded. A total of twelve articles remained for the analysis.

#### 3.2 AL model selection

Impact citation helped identify the most influential models in the identified twelve articles. Articles on AL models with an impact citation of less than 3100, according to the work of Omeihe et al. (2021), were



excluded as they were considered less influential in shaping the thinking of scholars on AL. The models selected due to impact citation include a model by Luthans and Avolio model (2003), a seminal work in the scholarship of AL, the models of AL by Avolio et al. (2004), Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May and Walumbwa (2005), Ilies et al. (2005) and Walumbwa et al. (2008). Omeihe et al. (2021) concur that these five models have the highest impact citation in the domain of AL.

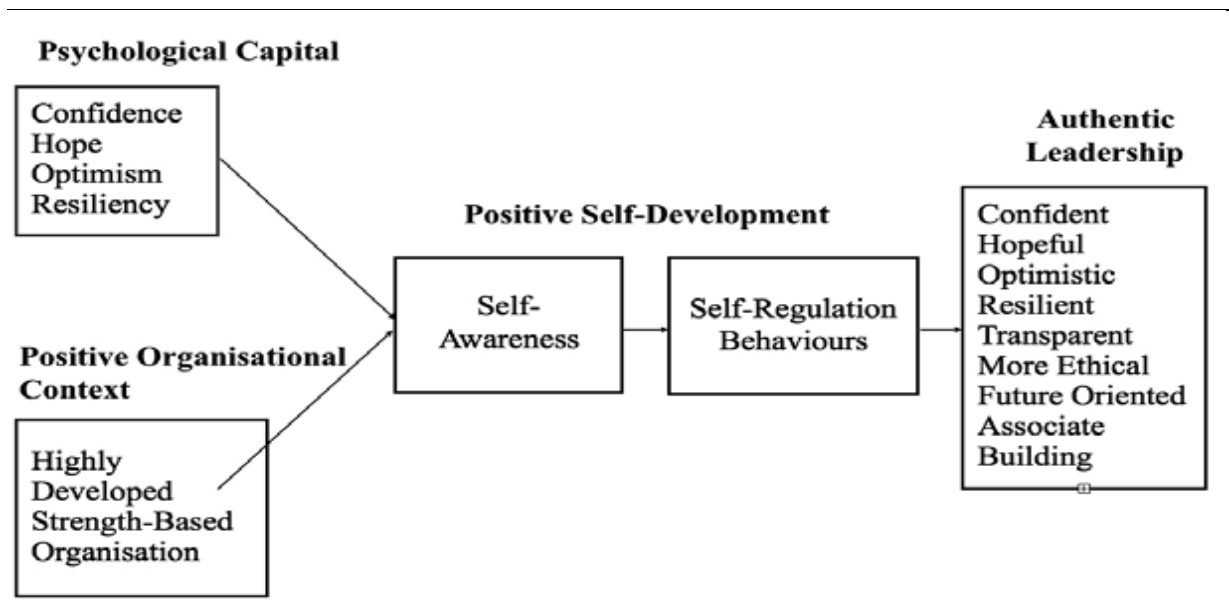
### **3.3 Dimensional focus and analysis**

To identify commonalities and gaps in the dimensions of existing AL for possible inclusion in the proposed framework, a constant comparison of each specified dimension with other dimensions in all the AL models was done to synthesise and classify similar dimensions. This was helpful to avoid overlaps repetition and ensure that no dimension was classified into two groups. The principle of "mutually exclusive and collectively exhaustive" (MECE) helped to compare the constitutive dimensions in all the models of AL so that they are as exhaustive as possible, inclusive and without any overlaps or repetition of relevant and necessary dimensions. Some gaps were identified in the extant models in relation to the SOE context in Malawi, as most of the AL models are generic. Some of the elements in the proposed model are included to fill such gaps for the framework to be holistic and context-specific.

Below is the critical analysis of each of the selected five different models of AL.

### **3.4 The Luthans and Avolio Model (2003)**

First, the seminal model of AL by Luthans and Avolio (2003) emphasises the positive development of AL. Thus, psychological capital and a positive organisational context shape the self-development of AL. Psychological capital or capacity as an antecedent relates to confidence, hope, optimism and psychological resilience. Self-awareness, together with self-regulation, constitutes the self-development of AL. Figure 2 below depicts the model.



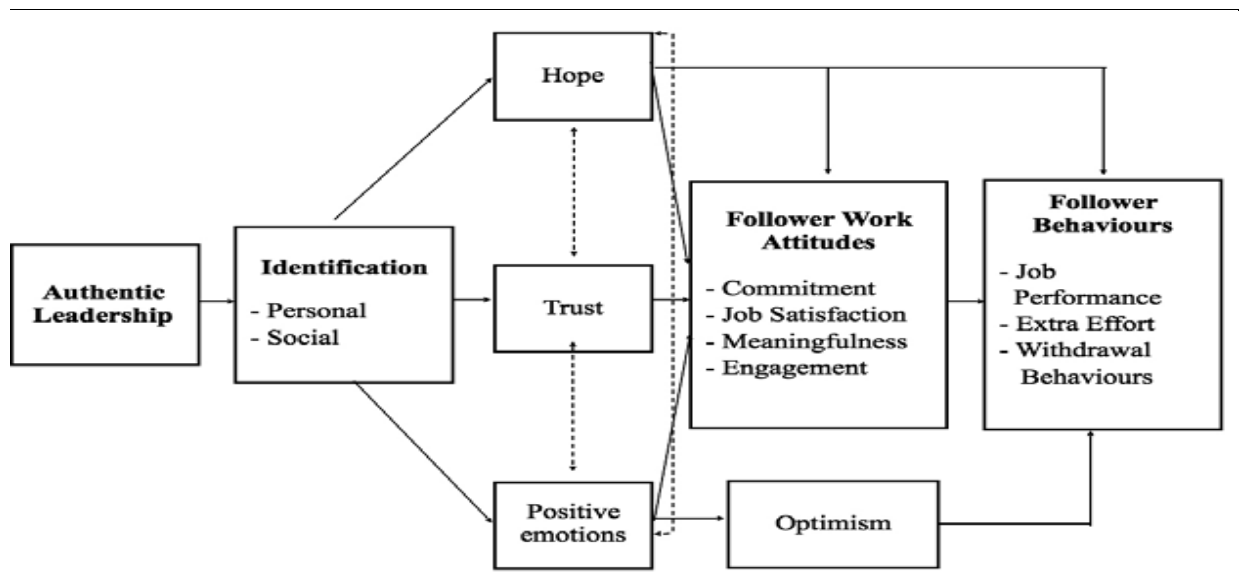
**Figure 2. The model of authentic leadership development**

Source: Luthans and Avolio (2003, p. 251)

In this model, the weakness is that followers' processes are missing as the focus is on internal consistency or self-development supported by a positive organisational context. In a nutshell, the model fails to differentiate the processes of followership and leadership. The positive psychological bias in the model also makes unclear the tensions and complexities in the relational context when enacting authenticity by fallible humans.

### 3.5 The Avolio et al. (2004) model

Second, Avolio et al.'s (2004) model depicts a link between AL and employee attitudes and behaviours. The positive psychological traits of hope, trust and optimism mediate the observed process of influence influencing authentic followers' attitudes and behaviours by the AL. The model illuminates the attempt to bring positive emotions into AL theory. The model in Figure 3 is a response to researchers who emphasised the significance of positive emotions in the process of leadership.

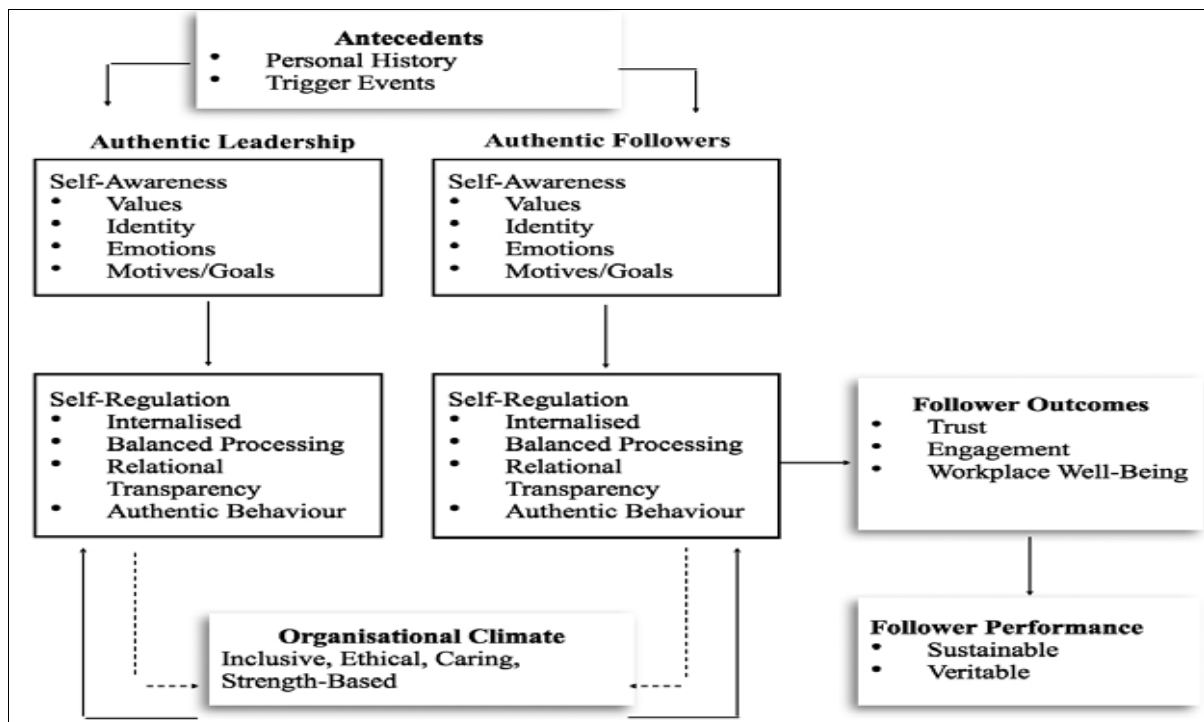


**Figure 3. A model linking authentic leadership to followers' attitudes and behaviours**  
 Source: Avolio et al. (2004, p. 803)

The cardinal insight of this model is the two critical ways of the leaders' influence, namely personal and social identification of followers. The major pitfall is framing the positive modelling relationship between leaders and followers as one-sided and not symbiotic to capture mutual influence. There is a need for AL to be re-conceptualised as collaborative, which is neither attributed to the leader nor can the leader's actions alone lead to follower behaviours and attitudes in pursuit of positive outcomes.

### 3.6 The Gardner et al. Model (2005)

Third, the Gardner et al. (2005) model seeks to correct the shortcomings of previously developed conceptualisations that failed to clearly distinguish between AL, psychological capital, and transformational leadership. The model focuses on creating authentic leaders and followers, resulting in lasting and sustainable follower performance. In this self-based model, the developmental process of authenticity is determined by self-awareness (e.g. values, identity, emotions, goals) and self-regulating behaviours (e.g. balanced processing, authentic behaviours, relational transparency) of leaders and followers. As shown in Figure 4, the development of AL and authentic followers is also influenced by the personal history and life trigger events as antecedents of leaders and followers, as well as the supportive and ethical organisational climate.

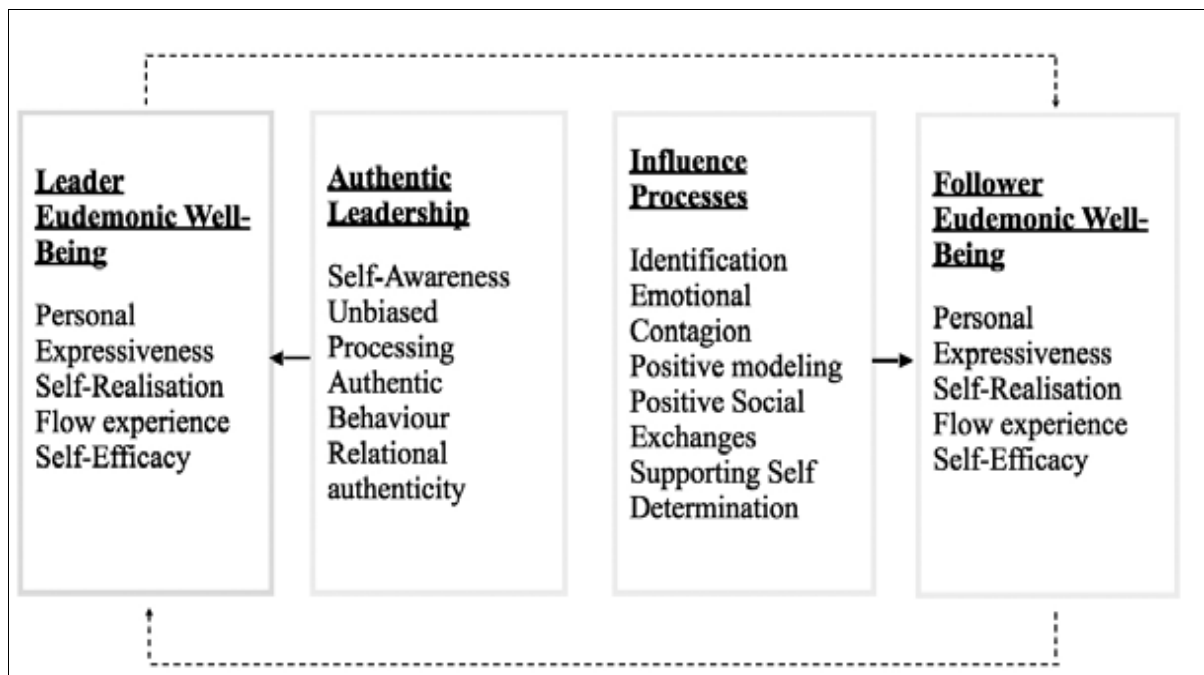


**Figure 4. The model linking authentic leadership to followers’ attitudes and Behaviours**  
 Source: Gardner et al. (2005, p. 346)

This model clarifies the nature and role of context (e.g. inclusive, caring, strength-based), which shapes AL, follower outcomes and sustainable performance. It is decipherable that the model of AL by Gardner et al. (2005) focuses on the dyadic and hierarchical influence and relationships only. The weakness is that it excludes multiple stakeholders' lateral influence to achieve collective and organisational-level outcomes.

### 3.7 The Ilies et al. Model (2005)

Fourth, there is a model of AL by Ilies et al. (2005), which includes self-awareness, unbiased processing, authentic behaviour, and authentic relational orientation. Ilies et al. (2005) 's four-component model advocates multi-dimensions of authenticity initially proposed by Kernis (2003). The model focuses on the link between AL and the “eudemonic” well-being of leaders and followers. It also clarifies the various mechanisms through which AL influences followers’ well-being. Figure 5 shows this model, its dimensions and interrelationships.



**Figure 5. Authentic leadership influences leaders' and followers' well-being**  
 Source: Ilies et al. (2005, p. 377)

The model provides insights into the various influence processes on the leader and follower, which result in well-being. However, this model fails to illuminate how the follower influences the well-being of a leader. The model also lacks clarity on how to directly address the asymmetries of power that enable leaders to impose their values on others.

### 3.8 The Walumbwa et al. (2008) Four-dimensional phenomenon

Lastly, the dominant work of Walumbwa et al. (2008) is prominent for encouraging a multi-dimensional nature of AL, which underlines that authentic functioning embraces four elements: self-awareness, internalised moral perspective, relational transparency, and balanced processing. Notably, there is a lack of clarity on how the identified four dimensions combine and result in the development of AL (Einola & Alvesson, 2021). Iszatt-White et al. (2021, p. 465) lament that “suggestions to shift from self-awareness and 'inner life' to more 'intersubjective, embodied relationships' as truer reflections of authenticity have not gained attention in the literature”. There is a call for researchers and scholars to re-conceptualise the dominant four behaviours of AL by Walumbwa et al. (2008) to embrace both the self-based notion and relational and organisational aspects of authenticity.

## 4. Results

Six themes are delineated from the five different extant models of AL analysed in this conceptual paper. These themes are (1) connecting authenticity to self and organisation to the strategic direction, (2) building organisational resilience, (3) strategic authenticity, (4) the iterative and authentic influence of internal and external stakeholders, (5) producing long-term DAC and (6) collaborative and transparent

drive of positive change to create an inclusive, caring and ethical organisational context. Each of the themes is discussed below.

#### **4.1 Collaborative and transparent drive of positive change**

The theme of transparent behaviour and a positive type of leadership capable of delivering positive, ethical and measurable results is evident in the model by AL by Luthans and Avolio (2003) and Gardner et al. (2005). Prakash et al.(2021) shed light that transparency and positive leadership are core to AL, which emerged at the overlap of three domains, namely ethics, leadership and positive psychology, to address the ethical crises in organisations. Mchulu (2023) calls for radical reforms in Malawian SOEs as they operate in a politically and ethically compromised organisational context. ASL must understand how political patronage compromises the ethical expectations of most people to be professional, independent and able to stay true to the organisation's mission as a leader or authentic board member of a Malawian SOE (Kaunda, 2021). In selecting the Chairperson and Board of Directors in Malawian SOEs, little regard is accorded to merit-based selection criteria, emphasising the necessary knowledge, experience, integrity and corporate governance skills. This politically influenced practice results in an ingratiated Board and politicised governance culture, compromising ethical role modelling by the Board and ethical corporate decision-making in the SOEs (Kaunda,2021). Lastly, there is a weak, imbalanced and less integrated SOE oversight by the Department of Statutory Corporations, which focuses much on financial performance and structural factors of the Board in SOEs (e.g. size, composition) (Ministry of Finance,2022). To ensure acceptable, feasible and realistic costs to the required positive change in an SOE, ASL needs to adopt collaborative and transparent engagement of diverse stakeholders (e.g. government, politicians, employees) to build trust and optimism for collective action in creating a more inclusive, caring, and ethical organisational context (Luthans & Avolio,2003; Gardner et al.,2005).

#### **4.2 Connecting Authenticity of Self and Organisation to the Strategic Direction**

The theme of authenticity of self is evident in four of the five extant models of AL by Luthans and Avolio (2003), Ilies et al. (2005), Gardner et al. (2005) and Walumbwa et al. (2008). In these models, the prevalent assertion is that without understanding oneself, one cannot truly regulate oneself and lead others and the organisation authentically. Notably, self-based models of authenticity are inadequate for strategic leaders who require organisational authenticity in setting strategic direction by engaging in strategy conversations and social interactions with diverse stakeholders. The strategic dimension of what it means to lead and show the direction of the entire organisation authentically or inauthentically is missing in existing models of AL. The upper echelon theory, which is the seminal work on strategic leadership by

Hambrick and Mason (2004), underlines that strategic leaders are powerful and set the direction of an organisation. The theme of connecting the authenticity of self and organisation to the strategic direction has three critical capabilities, namely (1) aligning and enacting core values and purpose, (2) promoting integrated ubuntu ethics, and (3) effectively navigating the politics of SOEs.

#### **4.2.1 Aligning and enacting core values and purpose**

The issue of values and the interaction of AL and AL followers' values are evident in the model by Gardner et al. (2005) and Walumbwa et al. (2008), who express this in terms of the internalised moral perspective of AL. ASL of SOEs drives and reinforces the congruity of values and purpose of an SOE with those organisational members. Core values drive authentic actions of individuals in the genuine expression of the SOE's beliefs and purpose rather than self-interests.

While core values define what an SOE believes and the behaviours it agrees to live by daily, purpose elaborates the fundamental reason for its existence. Values and purpose communicate what is important to the SOEs, provide clarity and direction for decision-making and behaviours of the people inside the organisation, and signal to external stakeholders what is important (Badarai,2020). Second, an ASL enables individual and collective values to forge a frame of reference and interpretive filter of important issues and critical interdependencies across different levels and elements in the organisational architecture (e.g., shared values, staff, style, system, strategy, and structure). A value system actively around decision-making builds a strategic leader's internal confidence, allowing stakeholders to develop their hope and confidence in the leader. In this way, authentic strategic leaders are true to the self and the values they hold dear and transmit them to their followers to create shared purpose and goals. AL understands personal values and strives to act following those values (Ahmed,2023). Leaders are scrutinised by others and defined by their values and character.

#### **4.2.2 Promote integrated Ubuntu ethics**

The model of AL by Walumbwa et al.(2008) conspicuously focuses on ethics and internal morality. As a self-based model of AL, it has an inwardly moral focus on the ethical self. In this way, the model leaves a gap in how AL and authentic followers integrate their inner morality with outward ethical conduct and its impact on others and the organisation. Ubuntu ethics seems to fill this gap, especially with the view of authenticity as being genuine, original, and real as a human being. A person with ubuntu in the organisational community develops self-regarding behaviours (e.g. self-control, self-respect, employee citizenship behaviour) and also other-regarding virtues (e.g. solidarity, interdependence, cooperation) (Imafidon,2022). Individual-based ubuntu virtues build a virtuous individual who, apart from supporting others, lives as an exemplary person. Ubuntu's inclusive and communitarian virtue is encapsulated in the dictum "I am because we are" (Laloo, 2022). Authenticity in an organisation emphasises both individual and communitarian virtues. ASL of SOEs needs to adopt and exploit an integrated system of ubuntu to enhance interdependence, consultation and collective consensus in an SOE. As agents of ubuntu virtue, ASL of SOE role models and reinforces ubuntu values and ethics to send strong ethical cues and develop

others (Johnson, 2019). Lastly, an effective ASL cultivates and sustains bridging and bonding networks and relationships with myriad stakeholders inside and outside the SOEs. Creating a network of disparate stakeholders builds trust and reciprocity for consensual solutions (Laloo,2022).

Additionally, building links with individuals who occupy very different social positions and formal or institutionalised power helps to influence powerful people and politicians in the ecosystem in favour of SOEs (Titus & Hoole,2021). Avoidance or minimising the adverse effects of in-group, out-group and exclusionary behaviours is critical for ASL not to undermine cohesion and social capital in an SOE. Stakeholder-centred authenticity is about 'being true to self' and being true to others, as humans are interdependent, especially in a politicised setting (Ammann et al.,2021).

#### **4.2.3 Navigating the Politics of SOE**

There is silence in the extant models of AL regarding how ALs navigate the politically exposed environment where the use of political skills (e.g., social astuteness, interpersonal influence, networking ability, and apparent sincerity) is critical to understand others effectively and using such knowledge to influence stakeholders to enhance personal or organisational objectives. The lack of focus on navigating the politics of SOE is a critical gap. ASL who lack political skills may not survive in politically exposed organisations such as SOEs in Malawi (Mchulu,2023). Ammann et al.(2021,p.2) are clear that the activities and process of being in a harmonious relationship with self, others, and relevant social norms are political. It is vital to realise how the intersection of government, the ruling political party, and organisational politics form a political arena for strategic leaders to navigate authentically or inauthentically. Ferris et al. (2005) advise that political skill constitutes four elements relevant to the organisational context.

First, social astuteness is observing others and creating a close understanding of diverse social situations. Second, interpersonal influence denotes the ability of politically skilled individuals to exert significant influence within their social spheres. Third, networking ability is about creating, recreating, developing and nurturing diverse, value-adding networks or contacts at work. Titus and Hoole (2021) assert that leadership, which is a catalyst of bonding social capital (between 'people like us' who are 'in it together) and bridging social capital beyond the current social circle or connections, is very important for the survival of SOEs. Political skills are also helpful for gaining social linking capital to access the powerful people to support SOEs. In using networks with excessive levels of bonding and linking social capital to navigate political challenges and exploit opportunities for the SOE, it is salient that ASL is sensitive to the negative possibility of breeding bias, political patronage and creating out-groups and exclusion among key internal and external stakeholder (Titus & Hoole,2021).

Lastly, apparent sincerity emphasises substantial sincerity, genuineness, integrity and authenticity. It was long ago when Erickson (1995) advised that authenticity is not just 'being true to self' but also relationships with others in a social setting where people may have competing interests. A positive



political approach (e.g., persuasion, negotiation) embraces various views on critical issues helpful for strategic leaders and SOEs to accomplish organisational objectives and encourage teamwork. A rational approach to navigating the politics of SOEs entails looking for and analysing relevant information before deciding. ASL seeks synergistic outcomes arising from a genuine balance of political and rational approaches to deal with ambiguity and turbulence positively. ASL in Malawian SOEs must avoid negative political skills, which use power and political advantage to gain or protect self-interest rather than organisational outcomes (Mchulu,2023). At its worst, organisational politics manifest as outright manipulation and sabotage for one's upward mobility, power, or success. Inauthentic leaders display an inflated sense of entitlement that may lead to abuses of power, focus on achieving their personal goals, and disregard others in pursuit of success (Ferris et al.,2005). The inauthenticity of strategic leaders is also exhibited in various ways, such as willingness to disregard standards of morality and see value in behaviours that benefit the self at the expense of others and unethical pro-organisational behaviour (Einola & Alvesson,2021; Lazreg & Lakhal,2022). Any framework of ASL in Malawian SOEs will be less meaningful if it ignores or downplays the influence of the political skill of the decision-maker in shaping the adaptive behaviour of employees and other key stakeholders in a politically exposed context.

### **4.3 Building organisational resilience**

The theme of resilience is evident in the two models of AL by Luthans and Avolio (2003) and Gardner et al. (2005). The extant models uphold that restoring confidence, hope, optimism, and the ability to bounce back from catastrophic events is essential for resilience. Ahmed (2023) asserts that leader authenticity encourages extra-role behaviour, pivotal for employees' resilience before, during and after disruptive events. However, the self-based models of AL fail to conceptualise the organisational level resilience and its link to interpersonal authenticity. Individual level resilience is inadequate without collective resilience required in many SOEs in Malawi facing challenges of financial sustainability in a VUCA context. There is a need for ASL to develop the resilience capability of followers and the organisation by using four types of sights and systemic adaptation. In SOEs, organisational resilience as a strategic capability comprises the four "sights" and systemic positive adaptation.

#### **4.3.1 Integrating four Sights**

In the existing models of AL by Luthans and Avolio Model (2003) and Gardner et al. (2005), AL is a process that rests on positive psychological capacities, self-awareness and a highly developed organisational context (e.g. caring, ethical, reinforcing resilience). The VUCA context of SOEs demands foresight, insight, oversight and hindsight to ensure adaptive capacity after an unexpected change or adversity (Duchek,2020). The capabilities of foresight (anticipating problems) and hindsight (learning from the experience) are essential to building collective situational awareness. Still, they are inadequate for identifying and prioritising keystone vulnerabilities in the system of an SOE(Duchek,2020). Anticipation entails observing internal and external developments, identifying critical developments and

potential threats, and preparing for unexpected events. ASL also rely on insight (interpreting the situation and responding accordingly) and oversight (assessing the action taken) to put coping skills into action. The synergy of the four types of sight helps strategic leaders and employees of an SOE build trust and hope in anticipatory capabilities, coping capabilities during the disruptive event, and adaptive capacity after the event in an SOE. Goffee and Jones (2005) advise that "authentic chameleons" are authentic leaders with the capability of playing different roles that they believe are valuable and relevant while remaining true to their own identity and values (Goffee and Jones, 2005).

#### **4.3.2 Systemic positive adaptation**

The models of AL by Luthans and Avolio (2003) and Gardner et al. (2005) allude to resilience. However, a gap arises from a lack of clarity on how individuals and organisations manifest adaptive capacity. The capacity of individuals and the organisation to reflect, learn and change after an expected event is critical for adaptation (Duchek,2020). Commonly, adaptation capabilities are part of reactive adjustments to ensure continuity. Algera and Lips-Wiersma (2012) warned leaders of how adaptability may easily be misconstrued as a deviation and lack of self-consistency between values, beliefs, and actions by advocates of self-based models of AL. ASL as individuals requires adaptive capability not only as reactive effort but also as pro-active (ex-ante) action, which pronounces learning from past experiences to shape the future while developing the adaptive capacity of everyone in the team to avoid strategy drift. The adaptive capacity of people is enhanced if they feel safe to speak up, challenge their way of thinking and behaving, try something and fail – without fear of being judged harshly. Psychological safety is pivotal to mobilising collective knowledge and empowering colleagues to react, even when the path is unclear and the journey might be messy (Duchek,2020). Being open, accepting, and learning from change and addressing the silo mentality to reduce the undesirable outcome of adversity in SOEs are critical to ensure continuity after unexpected disruption (Dammann et al., 2021). When interdependent, leaders and followers step back together from events and ponder persistently to create meaning to guide immediate and future behaviour (Alvesson & Einola, 2019). Lastly, ASL must enhance visibility, availability and transparency in decision-making and empower people to make sense of and execute necessary changes to resources and activities in fostering individual and collective adaptation in reaction to unexpected change and adversity (Duchek,2020).

#### **4.4 Strategic authenticity**

The dimensions of (a) self-awareness, (b) relational transparency, and (c) internal moral and balanced processing are evident in many of the models of AL. First, it is noteworthy that self-awareness is commonly evident in models by Walumbwa et al. (2008), Gardner et al. (2005), Ilies et al. (2005) and Luthans and Avolio (2003). It represents how accurately one sees their values, aspirations, beliefs and reactions. Internal self-awareness (how well you know yourself) and external self-awareness (how well you understand how others see you) are critical for an authentic strategic leader to lead self before leading others in SOEs. Luthans and Avolio (2003) concur that ALs are deeply aware of how they think and

behave and are perceived by others as aware of their values, strengths and limitations. However, the strategic dimension of leadership calls for modifying and enacting authenticity through the prism that pronounces strategic relevance and the external social influence of stakeholders. At the organisational level, accurate self-awareness of authentic strategic leaders in Malawian SOEs must also emphasise self-accountability and sustainability awareness. Self-accountability and financial sustainability are salient in the backdrop of increased unethical behaviours and poor financial performance of SOEs in Malawi (Ministry of Finance,2020). Malawian SOEs face fiscal risks as they fail to meet debt and statutory obligations (e.g., remittance of dividends, tax and pension) (Ministry of Finance,2022). Self-accountability occurs when an organisation or person is accountable to him/herself without anyone else to observe, monitor, or hold him/her responsible.

Second, relational transparency is commonly evident and expressed as relational authenticity by Ilies et al. (2005), relational transparency by Gardner et al. (2005) and Walumbwa et al. (2008). Relation transparency is modified slightly to suit the strategic level of leadership, which engages in strategic, relational and ceremonial work. The two elements of modified relational transparency are strategic openness and relational transparency. First, vision-led and systemic openness, inter-connectedness and interdependencies within and across the various subsystems that impact activities in Malawian SOEs are aspects of strategic openness (Ministry of Finance,2022). Mbo and Adjani (2017) advise that the strategic element is about the capability to create an open, inclusive and transparent way to develop and enact the strategy of an SOE. Second, relational transparency is about openness in internal social interactions and interactions with external stakeholders. ASL promote channels of sharing information and feelings on strategic issues with the most significant impact on SOE performance in a way that leads followers and stakeholder to identify authenticity in their leaders and the organisation. Johnson (2018) warns that the detached leadership style will not be successful in the twenty-first century because employees demand more personal relationships with their leaders before they give themselves entirely to their jobs. In Malawi, almost half of the SOEs repetitively fail to complete their annual financial statements, undermining strategic openness and transparency (Ministry of Finance,2022; Kaunda,2021). This harms trust in the strategic relationship between the SOE, citizens and government. Transparency reinforced by accountability is helpful for strategic leaders to engage not only with internal but also external stakeholders of the SOE better and effectively (PWC,2015). Third, the moral dimension of AL evident in Walumbwa et al.'s (2008) model is expressed as an internalised moral perspective. Integrating the internal moral standards to regulate one's behaviour with social morality or norms of whether an action is right or wrong is salient for the organisational community and other stakeholders. Lastly, authentic strategic leaders adopt a balanced approach that solicits opinions from subordinates, welcomes opposing viewpoints, and considers the value of these viewpoints fairly.

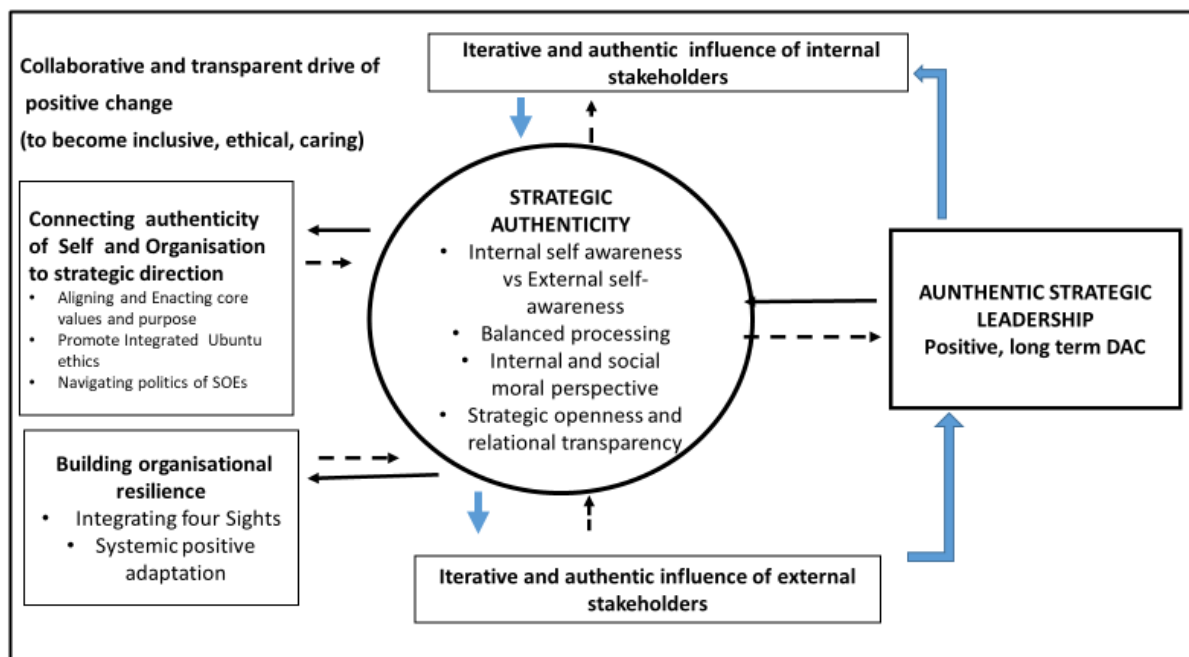
#### **4.5 Iterative and authentic influence of Significant Stakeholders**

The theme of relationships, interconnectedness and positive modelling is recurrent in the models of AL by Ilies et al. (2005), Gardner et al. (2005), Walumbwa et al. (2008) and Avolio et al. (2004). Goffee and Jones (2005) caution that authenticity is not an innate quality that a person is authentic or not. As authenticity exists on a continuum and is aspirational, it is insightful for ASL to uphold authenticity regarding what others see in you, transparency and consistency in building genuine relationships and productive connections. A report on SOE of the future and new capabilities by PWC (2015) acknowledges the importance of the interplay of authenticity with stakeholder-centric and relational perspectives, emphasising the collective wisdom and frequent and active contributions of both internal and external influence. As such, ASL must weave a web of quality and mutual influence of different internal and external stakeholders of an SOE. Patterns of leading–following relationships emerge from a co-constructed and iterative social influence between strategic leaders, followers and key internal and external stakeholders. Transparency and mutuality of influence and impact are central to authentic engagement with and of stakeholders. Authentic stakeholder relationship is crucial as an SOE faces the challenge of living up to higher public expectations while remaining under increased pressure from politicians, media, citizens and civil society organisations to add value to society through efficient processes and effective service (Ministry of Finance,2022). Strategic leaders and SOEs are accountable to a larger group of stakeholders, often having to inspire confidence and 'please as many people as possible whilst achieving results. Reciprocal influence opens the door to understanding and managing diversity positively across hierarchy and organisational boundaries. Stakeholders' relational and iterative mutual influence in SOEs accelerates two-way trust instead of one-sided authenticity, which is critical to achieving DAC.

#### **4.6 Positive long-term direction: DAC**

Strategic leaders shaped the long-term direction of SOEs. The extant models of AL are silent on how authenticity contributes to the setting and showing of strategic direction but also ensures alignment and commitment of key stakeholders. Thus, there is a gap in the models arising from silence on how AL create DAC as leadership outcomes. ASL in SOE in Malawi faces the challenge of achieving DAC in an ethically and politically compromised environment typified by political patronage and weak oversight, undermining inclusivity and ethical organisation (Kaunda,2022). Samimi et al. (2022) emphasise that strategic leaders make strategic decisions that affect the whole organisation and require significant resources to pursue the long-term direction of a firm. In politicised contexts, ASL drives change in a collaborative and consultative approach involving diverse stakeholders to avoid the unacceptable cost to the leader and followers of creating a positive organisational context. There is a broad need to cultivate a web of leadership and followership beliefs and practices that support and sustain DAC in organisations such as SOEs in Malawi (Drath et al., 2008).

Iterative and reciprocal feedback to strategic leaders and stakeholders from authentic interactions maintains and refines the strategic authenticity, nature, and quality of stakeholders' mutual and genuine influence in an SOE. ASL in SOEs hinges on the transparent, iterative and relational impact between the strategic leader and the various stakeholders in achieving DAC. For ASL, the capacity and responsibility for authentic behaviours and activities are shared with the leaders and every organisation member. Following the discussion on the six themes that depict dimensions and how they are interrelated, below in Figure 6 is a visual depiction. Figure 6 shows an integrative framework of ASL of SOEs in Malawi derived from the themes and gaps identified in the extant five different models of AL.



**Figure 4: Integrative framework of authentic strategic leadership of SOEs in Malawi**  
**Source: Authors` construction**

## 5. Managerial implications

This paper has provided a variety of dimensions of authenticity that strategic leaders of SOEs can use to create a positive organisational context and build the capacity of followers to achieve DAC. As the practice of ASL in most SOEs in Malawi is complex and challenging, there are two managerial implications for improving strategic leadership and enacting authenticity in a politically and ethically compromised organisational context. First, the paper recommends that ASL adopt a collaborative and transparent engagement of diverse stakeholders (e.g. government, politicians, employees) to build trust and optimism for collective action in creating a more inclusive, caring, and ethical organisational context. This sounds straightforward. However, it is only feasible if the government, as the powerful owner of SOEs, quickly change the view of strategic leadership in SOEs as a reward to politically connected and compromised individuals, which breeds a culture of mediocrity, bailout and misplacement of strategic

priorities. Success in SOEs demands treating ASL as a strategic resource and capability to entrench ethical and positive organisational context necessary for improved, collective and consistent performance.

Second, the paper provides insight for executive leadership development practitioners on the nature and variety of dimensions of ASL, which require attention to improve on how strategic leaders lead self and others authentically in ways that integrate the relational lens of authenticity and the stakeholder-centric perspective of strategic leadership in a politicised environment to improve the performance of SOEs.

Given the nature and variety of context-specific dimensions of ASL, executive leadership development practitioners have a foundation to use when in developing tailored programmes to build the capacity of ASL regarding the various dimensions highlighted in the proposed framework if these leaders are to navigate the politics of SOEs, positively manage social capital and drive strategic performance of SOEs in Malawi.

## **6. Conclusions, Limitations and Future Research**

The paper concludes that ASL is multifaceted and requires internal and external stakeholders' collaborative, iterative and authentic influence to achieve DAC and reinforce authenticity at the individual, team and organisational levels. The limitation of this paper is that it is conceptual and focuses on the authenticity of leaders at the level of executives only. We need to adequately include followers' views to understand authentic followership as part of leading others and following authentically.

There are two key implications for future research on ASL. First, future research may adopt the notion of authenticity-as-a process to explore how each of the identified six dimensions of ASL contributes to the development of authentic engagement for an SOE to become an authentic corporate citizen, especially in a politicised context. In a different vein, research may adopt authenticity-as-a capability to explore how institutional limitations can restrict the ASL's capability to lead authentically in SOEs in Malawi and other developing countries. These issues are critical to examining the complexity of AL style within ethically and politically compromised institutional contexts. Second, future exploratory research involving a diverse sample of strategic leaders and key stakeholders of various SOEs in Malawi and other countries is crucial in validating or revising the dimensions and enriching the framework's explanatory power.

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