The influence of authentic leadership on the learning organization at the organizational level: The mediating role of employees' affective commitment*

*Bojana Milić**, Leposava Grubić-Nešić, Bogdan Kuzmanović, Milan Delić*

This study examines the impact of authentic leadership capabilities on the learning organization at the organizational level through employee affective commitment in Serbian organizations. Although these indirect interrelations are very important for improving the conditions for building the learning climate and culture, previous research has not usually explored them. The analysis of a survey of 502 employees in the manufacturing and service companies in the Republic of Serbia confirms these influences empirically. The results reveal that perceived authentic leadership capabilities moderately and positively influence employee affective commitment, which in turn partly affects the learning organization at the organizational level.

Diese Studieuntersucht den Einflussauthentischer Führung auf lernende Organisationen auf organisatorischer Ebenedurch Messung der emotionalen Mitarbeiterbindung in serbischen Organisationen. Obwohldieseindirekte Wechselbeziehungsehrwichtigist, um eineständige Verbesserung des Lernklimas und der Lernkultureiner Organisation zugewährleisten, wurde in bisherigen Studienkaumdaraufeingegangen. Anhand der Analyse einerUmfrageunter 502 Angestellten in serbischen Unternehmen des industriellensowie des dienstleistenden Sektors, konnte der Einflussempirischnachgewiesenwerden. Die Ergebnissezeigen, dasseinaktivwahrgenommenerauthentischerFührungsstileinenpositivenEinfluss auf die emotionale Mitarbeiterbindung hat, die wiederum Teile der organisatorischen Ebene von lernenden Organisationenbeeinflusst.

Keywords: authentic leadership, affective commitment, learning organization, learning culture, organizational learning

Introduction

The present business world is characterized by constant and rapid changes in the global economy which forces organizations to make transformations to reflect processes of learning, behaviour change and performance improvement in order to survive and succeed. In fact, the capacity to learn faster than competitors and

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adopt the strategies and behaviours of the Learning Organization may be the only sustainable competitive advantage for organizations (De Geus 1988; Stata 1989; Slater/Narver1995; Marquardt 2002; Škerlavaj/Su/Huang 2013). In this sense, it is more important than ever to understand the mechanisms by which organizations can influence the learning process.

Leadership is considered the key to fostering organizational learning and to affecting the success or failure of learning organization efforts (Senge 1990; Prewitt 2003; Kinicki/Kreitner 2006; Mazutis/Slawinski 2008). The most effective leaders are those who are able to create an organizational climate that enables themselves and followers to continually learn and grow (Gardner et al. 2005). Although previous research has shown that leadership positively affects the learning organization, prior studies that highlight the role of positive psychological qualities and strong ethics in leader behaviour (authentic leadership) for the development of learning organization are still scarce. Leadership skills and capacities with ethical and moral connotations, characterized as authentic leadership (Luthans/Avolio 2003), are particularly important bearing in mind that the time of modern economic development in recent decades was based on the principle "achieve more with less". This led to the crisis of morality and loss of confidence in business leaders (George 2003). Hence, apart from the importance of the role that leadership plays in the process of becoming a learning organization, it is more important that we increase our understanding of the authentic leadership' components influence on the learning organization's efforts.

Furthermore, leaders cannot independently transform the organization into a learning organization. They can do this only in synergy with their employees. Employees are the ones who largely contribute to organizational learning and therefore their commitment is very important in building a learning organization. Committed employees work harder, perform better (Meyer/Allen 1997), and they are truly motivated to transfer knowledge in the organization (Lin 2007; Nonaka/Takeuchi1995). It follows that, to facilitate and strengthen an organization's orientation towards learning, authentic leaders should stimulate positive affective commitment through creating work climates that are characterized by transparency, openness, and trust.

Although theory generally supports this reasoning, the empirical evidence on these interrelations is still scarce. That is to say, that several researchers have identified the role of authentic leadership in increasing levels of affective commitment (e.g., Jensen/Luthans 2006; Walumbwa et al. 2008; Leroy et al. 2012; Peus et al. 2012). However, each of the authentic leadership components has not previously been explicitly examined in relation to affective commitment and yet, they may help explain how authentic leaders attain the postulated effect. Furthermore, the literature is still short on empirical examinations related to the impact that affective commitment can have on the learning organization (Song et al.

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2013). In previous studies the learning organization is positioned as the starting point for improving affective commitment among employees (e.g., Wang 2007; Song/Kim 2009; Song et al. 2009 b; Joo 2010). Nevertheless, it is expected that affective commitment could be a factor that contributes to the conditions for forming the learning organization (Song et al. 2013). In general, most contributions in the field of interest, both in terms of the theoretical frameworks developed as well as empirical research published came from the United States and Western European countries. Very little is known about research conducted in the Eastern European countries which are characterised by considerably different institutional, legislative, and cultural contexts (Buhovac/Groff, 2012).

In order to present the business environment of analysed organizations we shall present the Serbian economic and business situation. Serbia (as a republic in the former Yugoslavia) was largely independent of the influence of the Soviet Communist bloc during the Cold War and, therefore, had a specific position as a socialist country (Nikolić et al. 2014). During that period, the workers' self-management system in Serbia had certain characteristics of participative management. Participation in the decision-making process had historical roots since large consultative bodies combined with a paternalistic leadership style (asking the opinion of others) was a dominant pattern of leadership in Serbian organizations (Vukonjanski et al. 2012). The Serbian transition period started in 2000, the process of transition and restructuring is not finished and the GDP growth is still very slow. The World Bank report (2002) has indicated that in Serbia, like in many countries in Eastern Europe, direct sale of assets to strategic investors was unavailable, for the most part, which has enabled companies to become assets of ineffective owners in a context of weak corporate leadership. Following such political and economical changes there was a significant reduction in the role of Serbian workers in the decision-making process in many companies, with the exception of large foreign-owned companies present in Serbia's market. Communication between employees and managers became mostly a top-down style (Nikolić et al. 2014). This state can result in numerous negative consequences because of the importance of information exchange and transparency for many organizational outcomes. Seeking solutions to such problems is of vital importance to the health and continued development of Serbia's economy.

In spite of growing interest in many Eastern European countries to understand leadership processes and culture in their organizations following the aforementioned political and economical changes, there is a lack of such investigations in Serbian organizations (Vukonjanski et al. 2012). This points to the need for research that will support the establishment of effective corporate leadership in Serbia and the creation of an organizational climate that supports learning and growth.

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Hence, in an attempt to fill this gap, this study explores the authentic leadership capabilities influence on the learning organization at the organizational level through affective commitment from the perspective of a transitional country. In this research we attempted to find the answer on how different factors such as the authentic leadership and affective commitment influence learning organization efforts. Generally, this paper suggests authentic leadership and employee affective commitment as integrated components that promote the creation of the learning organization. Identification and better understanding of these influences can help Serbian organizations to create the climate and culture which will be a sustainable competitive advantage as it cannot be easily replicated.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. The second part provides a theoretical framework and hypotheses. The research method section presents the data and the method used to analyse empirically the hypotheses developed. The section on the results presents the findings. Finally, the implications, limitations, and future research areas are discussed.

Theoretical background

Authentic leadership

The concept of authentic leadership is a framework of leadership that has generated increased interest among scholars and practitioners in the last decade (Mazutis/Slawinski 2008; Walumbwa et al. 2010; Gardner et al. 2011; Peus et al. 2012). Luthans and Avolio (2003) build their authentic leadership theory using insights from positive organizational behaviour, transformational leadership and ethics. They describe authentic leadership with terms genuine, reliable, trustworthy, and veritable. Authentic leadership is considered as a root construct underlying other forms of positive leadership - transformational, charismatic, spiritual and other (Avolio/Gardner 2005; Gardner et al. 2011). It is discussed as a leadership process that may occur at any level within the organization.

While there are several different conceptualizations of authentic leadership (e.g., Luthans/Avolio 2003; Kernis 2003; Ilies et al. 2005), the concept that dominates current theorizing as well as empirical research is the one proposed by Gardner and his colleagues (e.g., Gardner et al. 2005; Avolio/Gardner 2005). This concept goes beyond the notion of authenticity - being true to oneself, which all concepts of authentic leadership centre on, to encompass authentic relations with followers. More specifically, this concept of authentic leadership comprises four components (cf. Walumbwa et al. 2008): self-awareness, balanced processing, relational transparency, and an internalized moral perspective. The term *self-awareness* is used to describe the process by which leaders come to understand their unique capabilities, knowledge and experience (Avolio/Gardner 2005) through internal introspection or external evaluation, and is particularly linked with how often the leaders demonstrate that they are aware of their impact on

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other people. Related to the concept of self-awareness is balanced processing. *Balanced processing* involves objectively analysing both positive and negative information about themselves and their leadership style (Gardner et al. 2005) collected through the process of gaining self-awareness. Balanced processing is considered as "the heart of personal integrity and character", significantly influencing a leader's decision making and strategic actions (Ilies et al. 2005). *Internalized moral perspective* refers to leader behaviours and actions that are guided by internal moral standards and values, as opposed to being based on external forces such as peers, organizational and societal pressures. Authentic leaders demonstrate consistency between exposed theories and actions (Avolio/Gardner 2005). Finally, *relational transparency* encompasses all of the above components in the process of self-disclosure (Ilies et al. 2005). Disclosure includes openly sharing information and expressions of leaders' true thoughts and feelings, through which leaders build trust and foster cooperation. A central thesis of this framework is that authentic leaders actively and continuously model for followers through their words and deeds high levels of self-awareness, balanced processing, transparency, and moral behaviour (Gardner et al. 2005). Walumbwa et al. (2008) provided preliminary evidence for the validity of this four-component authentic leadership construct.

Current theorizing on authentic leadership posits that authentic leadership may positively affect a variety of employee outcomes such as commitment, work engagement, job satisfaction and job performance (Avolio et al. 2004; Gardner et al. 2005; Ilies et al. 2005), which then contribute to sustained and veritable organizational performance. These relationships, supported and predicted by theory, were further empirically tested and confirmed in several studies (e.g., Walumbwa et al. 2008; Walumbwa et al. 2010; Peterson et al. 2012).

Although much has been written about relationships between authentic leadership and positive organizational outcomes, the processes through which these influences are realized remains unclear. This is where – like in other theoretical concepts of positive leadership – a gap appears – a lack of clarity in the definition of essential qualities and the explanation of influence processes. Since the theory is still in the formative stages some concepts in the practical approaches are not fully developed, or substantiated. For instance, cognition of one's authentic essence through self-exploration is problematic since individuals often submit themselves - even unconsciously - to external expectations or social roles and act in a conformist way (Berkovich 2014). Similarly, the supposition of a coherent and consistent self is highly questionable given that in everyday life individuals play different and even opposing social roles (Algera& Lips-Wiersma, 2012). Berkovich (2014) emphasises that this theory appears unwilling to recognize pressures on leaders to be consistent with the dominating positive images of leadership and can cause them to suppress or hide parts of their true selves. Further, some concepts are assumed to be worthy as an element in authentic leader-

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ship behaviour without being qualified through discursive consideration. For example, the role of moral component of authentic leadership is not fully explained. From a practical point of view, "developing leaders' commitment to a personal ethical philosophy can inadvertently foster in them feelings of moral superiority, which may cause them to act unethically, for example, by silencing and delegitimizing followers who resist them, and in this way harm interpersonal relations and organizational performance" (Berkovich 2014:247). Revealed shortcomings indicate the need for further theory testing in order to move the field of study forward. Additionally, previous research did not attempt to advance and test specific hypotheses about the separate relationships of the authentic leadership components with focal variables. Research that examines what components are most important, in particular situations and relationships, is needed to develop a deeper understanding of the authentic leader - follower relationships (Gardner et al. 2011). Hence, in concordance with recent call from the literature (Walumbwa et al. 2008; Gardner et al. 2011), we focus our attention on the four components of authentic leadership, each of which most likely has somewhat different consequences depending on the construct to which it is being related.

Affective commitment

Positive attitudes of employees towards the organization are related to the concept of organizational commitment (Greenberg/Baron 2008). Over the years, a number of definitions of organizational commitment have appeared in literature (e.g., Mowday et al. 1982; Meyer/Allen 1991). As a result of the desire to integrate numerous different approaches of organizational commitment Meyer and Allen (1991) proposed a three component model of organizational commitment. This organizational commitment model is the most popular and widely validated multidimensional model (Vandenberghe/Tremblay 2008). The first component in the model is *affective commitment*, which refers to employees' emotional attachment to the organization, identification with organizational goals, involvement and desire to be and remain a part of the organization. The second component, continuance commitment, refers to commitment based on the costs that employees associate with leaving the organization. The last one, normative commitment, refers to employees' feelings of obligation to remain with the organization. Employees can experience each of these psychological states to varying degrees. However, previous studies (e.g., Steers 1977; Mathieu/Zajac 1990; Meyer et al. 2002; Vandenberghe et al. 2004; Pool/Pool 2007) clearly indicate that affective commitment, in comparison to the other two components, has the most positive effect on individual and organizational performance and organizational effectiveness. For this reason affective commitment was chosen to represent commitment in the model to be tested (see Figure 1).

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Learning Organization at the Organizational level

Interest in the learning organization as the source of organizational success and competitive advantage has been a strong focus in the field of management in past decades (e.g., Argyris/Schon, 1978; Swieringa/Wierdsma 1992; Garavan 1997; Ellinger et al. 2002; Yang et al. 2004). Over a number of years different approaches and perspectives on defining and conceptualizing the learning organization have emerged. However, the concept was formally introduced by Peter Senge (1990), who conceived the learning organization as "a place where people could expand their competency to lead to desirable results, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are persistently learning how to learn together" (Senge 1990:3). The elements of Senge's learning organization model are integrated in most of the subsequent models (e.g., Watkins/Marsick1993; Garvin 2000; Marquardt 2002). According to Watkins and Marsick (1993), the concept of the learning organization could be explained as "one that is characterized by continuous learning for continuous organizational improvement, and by the capacity to transform itself …The learning organization has embedded systems to capture and share learning" (Watkins/Marsick1993: 8). They focused more on the system approach concerning the workplace applications and supportive environment that promote continuous learning processes. Generally, three commonalities regarding the learning organization were drawn from the literature study: people's continuous learning, climate that supports learning and leadership (Argyris/Schon, 1978; Senge 1990; Watkins/Marsick1993; Garvin 2000). This study is theoretically based on Watkins and Marsick's framework of the learning organization (1997).

In the learning organization, continuous learning results in individual performance improvement. Learning by individuals is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for learning at the organizational level to occur. It is not a mere sum of many people learning (Marsick/Watkins 2003). For organizational learning to occur, appropriate mechanisms to enable, support, share and reward the use of what is learned at the individual level should be created by the organization. Watkins and Marsick's model of the learning organization grew out of this conception of organizational learning.

According to Watkins and Marsick (1993; 1996), there are seven dimensions in the model of a learning organization. "Continuous learning" and "inquiry and dialogue" are used to describe the individual level learning. The team, or group level, is reflected by "collaboration and team learning"; while learning at the organizational level is constituted of four dimensions: "embedded systems" (technology systems for sharing learning are created and used in the work, and employees have free access to accumulated knowledge), "empowerment"(individuals are involved in creating and implementing a collaborative vision; the respon-

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sibility for its implementation rests with those who are involved in the decision-making process), "system connections" (the organization is linked to its external community; people can use information from organizations in the environment and adapt their work;), and "strategic leadership for learning" (leaders promote and support learning, and strategically employ learning for obtaining better business results).

It is also interesting to note that the organizational level learning activity could serve as a refining function by filtering and incorporating individual and group learning into the organization's systems, practices, and structures so that it can be shared and regularly used to intentionally improve changes in organizational performance (Yang 2003). Therefore, the organizational level dimensions of the learning organization are most likely to influence ultimate performance outcomes (Marsick/Watkins 2003) and for this reason our attention is focused precisely on Learning Organization at the Organizational level.

While researchers agree that the learning organization concept is an important one for organization science, the idea of the learning organization is not without critique. The literature (Driver 2002, King/Lawley 2013) highlights three critical areas that may prevent the learning organization from being an ideal or achievable form of operating in organizations. First, while a learning organization may not employ the forms of rationalized control, its shared vision relies on a strong shared culture, which itself can be seen as a form of control. The idea of a shared vision also means that there is an element of control that prevents dissent against that vision. Second, the assumption of trust, open communication, and a sharing of knowledge ignores the influence of organizational politics where people may choose to retain or restrict access to knowledge as a source of power for their own personal advantage. The third criticism is that the learning organization assumes that people have the ability and desire to engage in constant learning and development. As seen with orientations to work some people prefer to do repetitive and unchallenging work as a means of simply getting a wage.

While the concept of the learning organization is thus open to critique, in this paper we outline how learning and knowledge are still important to the contemporary organizations and economy.

Hypothesis development

Authentic Leadership –Affective Commitment

The relationship between authentic leadership and follower affective commitment can be understood through the theoretical mechanisms of positive social exchanges and the personal and social identification of the follower with the leader (Avolio/Gardner 2005). In organizations, there is often a considerable amount of interaction between leaders and followers. As such, leaders are likely

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to be the most prominent role model in the organizational context (Ilies et al. 2005). Positive modelling is viewed as a primary means whereby authentic leaders affect followers (Gardner et al. 2005).This modelling includes high levels of self-awareness, balanced processing, moral development, and transparency. As an outcome of authentic leader–follower relationships, followers develop affective commitment (Ilies et al. 2005; Walubwa 2008).

Authentic leaders display higher levels of self-awareness with followers, and therefore make followers feel the leader understands the way he/she impacts followers, while making appropriate adjustments in his/her behaviour to accommodate their emotional and motivational needs (Peterson et al. 2012). This empathetic response enhances a positive connection to the organization – affective commitment. In addition, self-awareness relates particularly to the leaders' actions in accordance with their end values. When authentic leaders demonstrate consistency between exposed theories and actions, it has been asserted to be related to elevated levels of organizational commitment among followers (Gardner et al. 2005). Further, balanced processing and choosing challenging situations with high developmental potential have important implications for leaders' decision making and the organizational outcomes resulting from their decisions, as well as, for follower-relevant outcomes (Ilies et al. 2005). Through more balanced processing authentic leaders are expected to provide higher levels of constructive feedback to their followers which is positively related to outcomes such as followers' affective commitment (Walumbwa et al. 2010). Moreover, as followers observe the leader displaying an understanding of self-awareness and engage in transparent decision making that reflects integrity and a commitment to core ethical values, they develop trust in the leader (Gardner et al. 2005) which in turn contributes to their commitment. Further, Gardner et al. (2005) argued that authentic leaders have a high level of moral development. In light of that description, it follows that authentic leaders are able to enhance follower commitment (Avolio et al. 2004, Walumbwa et al. 2008), bearing in mind that the commitment is characterized by the sense of moral duty (Meyer/Parfyonova 2010). By setting a personal example of high moral standards of integrity, authentic leaders are expected to evoke a deeper sense of personal commitment among employees (Walumbwa et al. 2008). Finally, through encouraging transparent relationships reflected in openness, truthfulness (Ilies et al. 2005) and rapid and accurate transfer of information to others (Walumbwa et al. 2008), authentic leaders make it easier for followers to trust them (Avolio/Gardner 2005), identify with the leader as the organizational representative and thereby elicit increases in commitment. Therefore, arguments suggest that employees led by authentic leaders develop higher levels of affective commitment.

The empirical evidence, although scarce, generally supports these assertions. In their study, Walumbwa et al. (2008) analysed the effect of authentic leadership on affective commitment and reported a significant positive relationship be-

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tween the two constructs. Similarly, from more recent research, Peus et al. (2012) reported that affective commitment was directly attributable to the nature of authentic leadership exhibited by one's leader.

Accordingly, on the basis of existing theoretical arguments and empirical evidence it can be argued that authentic leadership instils elevated levels of employees' commitment. However, previous research did not attempt to advance and test specific hypotheses about the relationships of the authentic leadership components with affective commitment. The influential role of each of the four authentic leadership components should be examined (Walumbwa et al. 2008). Based on this reasoning, we advance the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1 a: Authentic leadership self-awareness has a positive effect on employee affective commitment.

Hypothesis 1 b: Authentic leadership balanced processing has a positive effect on employee affective commitment.

Hypothesis 1 c: Authentic leadership internalized moral perspective has a positive effect on employee affective commitment.

Hypothesis 1 d: Authentic leadership relational transparency has a positive effect on employee affective commitment.

Affective Commitment –Learning Organization at the Organizational level

Although there has been some theoretical work linking employee commitment to supportive learning organization environment, most prior research has focused primarily on the employee commitment as an outcome variable in the learning organization-employee commitment relationship (e.g., Wang 2007; Song/Kim 2009; Song et al. 2009 b; Joo 2010). By contrast, some scholars have suggested that employee commitment can influence the conditions for forming the learning organization culture (e.g., Song et al. 2013). Namely, organizations often expect that individuals will share what they know in ways that promote learning in groups and throughout the organization (Marsick/Watkins 2003).Yet, to promote those practices, a higher level of commitment in the organization is required (Kleiner2003).

Despite this reasoning, we are only aware of one set of empirical studies that tested the employee's commitment effects on the learning organization (Pool/ Pool 2007). Pool and Pool (2007) found that high levels of employee commitment result in an organization with higher levels of organizational learning. A high level of commitment encourages sharing of knowledge and willingness to participate in collaborative practices (Lin 2007; Nonaka/Takeuchi 1995); consequently, it could enhance the richness of the continuous organizational learning

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process. For this reason, the affective commitment can be considered as a bolstering factor in the development of learning organization practices (Song et al. 2013). A continuous learning practice requires more than a knowledge management system or regular networking among people who build their knowledge together; it requires the commitment (Kleiner 2003).

In this regard, there is a need to examine if affective commitment could influence the conditions for the formation of a sustained and veritable learning organization. Thus, we propose the following:

Hypothesis 2: Employee affective commitment is positively related to the learning organization at the organizational level.

Authentic Leadership –Affective Commitment–Learning Organization at the Organizational level.

Leadership behaviours that reinforce learning are essential for the organization to learn and to adapt to challenges (Garvin et al. 2008). Leaders should foster a climate supportive of learning and develop mechanisms for the transfer of learning from individuals and teams into the organization's store of knowledge and experience (Sadler, 2003).

While clear theoretical arguments and research evidence for the influence of supportive leadership (transformational characteristics) on organizational learning and the creation of a learning organization exist (e.g., Senge 1990; Aragon-Correa et al. 2005; Jansen et al. 2009; Zagoršek et al. 2009), there is no direct empirical evidence linking authentic leadership and learning organization. However, such a relationship is supported and predicted by theory. Namely, Gardner et al. (2005) claim that not much learning in an organization could take place without authentic leaders who are able to create and sustain an organizational climate that provides open access to information, resources, support and opportunity for everyone to learn. More specifically, by promoting and building transparent relationships authentic leaders facilitate open and free exchange of knowledge and information (Luthans/Avolio 2003; May et al. 2003; Gardner et al. 2005), which leads to mutual cooperation, teamwork and effective learning in organization (Gardner et al. 2005; Walumbwa et al. 2008). When leaders actively question and listen to employees - and thereby prompt dialogue and debate - people in the organization feel encouraged to learn. When leaders demonstrate through their own behaviour a willingness to entertain alternative points of view, employees feel encouraged to offer up new ideas and options (Garvin et al. 2008). Hence, one might expect that authentic leadership behaviours foster and influence the learning organization within the organizational learning process. However, learning oriented leadership behaviours alone are not enough (Garvin 2008).

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We believe these positive effects of authentic leadership on the learning organization can be better understood by considering the role of employees' affective commitment. As employees and managers make up an integral element of organizations, organizations can then except to gain knowledge from these individuals (Kim 1993). Yet, employees may be hesitant to share the knowledge they have acquired. On the other hand, affectively committed employees are intrinsically motivated to disseminate knowledge (Lin 2007). Therefore, we expect that affective commitment can impact on the efficacy of learning in the organization. Simultaneously, leaders are needed to influence behaviours and attitudes of others. Employees led by behaviourally authentic leaders are more committed not only to work hard at their standard work tasks, but also, to remain open to changes, take personal initiative and learn. In turn, this should effectively bolster an organization's orientation toward learning.

Based on these theoretical arguments, we expect that perceptions of affective commitment will mediate the effects of authentic leadership capabilities on the learning organization. We assert that authentic leadership, through employee commitment, contributes to learning outcomes for the organizations that are sustainable over time. Thus, we hypothesize as follows:

Hypothesis 3 a: Affective commitment mediates the relationship between authentic leadership, self-awareness and the learning organization at the organizational level.

Hypothesis 3 b: Affective commitment mediates the relationship between authentic leadership balanced processing and the learning organization at the organizational level.

Hypothesis 3 c: Affective commitment mediates the relationship between authentic leadership, internalized moral perspective and the learning organization at the organizational level.

Hypothesis 3 d: Affective commitment mediates the relationship between authentic leadership, relational transparency and the learning organization at the organizational level.

The conceptual model is given in Figure 1.

Research method

As mentioned previously, the primary purpose of this research is to examine the relations among several factors at all the levels of organizational entity: leaders' authentic capabilities; a supportive learning culture as an environmental factor of the organization; and employee affective commitment. In this research, the authors assessed the direct effects of variables based on the conceptual model (see Figure 1), and the indirect effects between authentic leadership components

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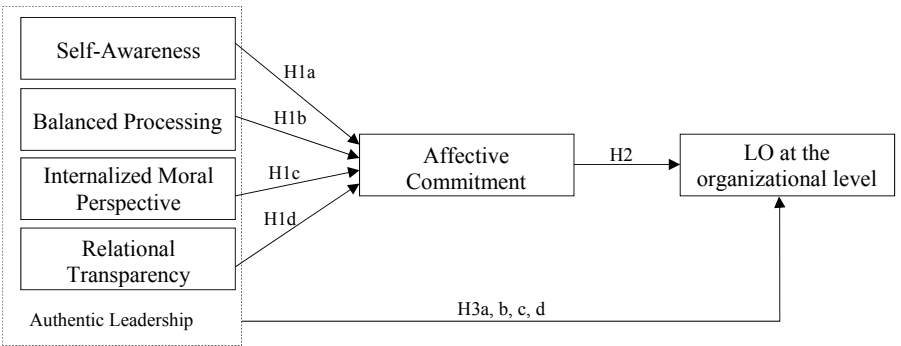
Figure 1. Conceptual model



and the learning organization at the organizational level. This research employed the instruments, sample and data collection and analysis strategies described below. Finally, all cases for the current research are individuals' perceptive responses.

Sampling and Data Collection

The population for this study consisted of the manufacturing and service companies from the Republic of Serbia, according to the database of the Serbian Chamber of Commerce (Table 1). Participating companies ranged from small to large-sized organizations, demonstrating diverse industries. Within these companies, our sampling design focused on selecting employees from all levels.

Of the 9,900 companies (manufacturing and services) listed in the database of the Serbian Chamber of Commerce, a probability random sampling was performed to identify 370 potential companies (Dillman, 2011). Using the size of the companies (small, medium, and large), the 9,900 properties were stratified into three categories. To arrive at the target sample of 370 companies, a proportional number of companies were randomly selected from each of the three stratified levels. All selected companies were contacted to take part in the survey. Out of 370 companies 240 agreed to participate in the research and provided 1980 email addresses. The survey was conducted in the first half of 2013. Following Dillman's (2011) recommendations, by applying the total design method of surveys, we emailed 1980 employees. A total of 518 responses were received over a period of six months during 2013, representing a response rate of 26.16%. After conducting non-engaged bias analysis, 16 responses were deleted and the remaining 502 useful responses were available for data analysis, yielding a 25.35% usable response rate.

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Table 1. The Organization characteristics composition

Characteristic	Number	Percentage
Organization types		
Manufacturing	261	52.0
Service	241	48.0
Organization size		
Small	122	24.3
Medium	103	20.6
Large	277	55.1

Among the 502 respondents, over half (52%) were female and 48% were male. The distribution of respondents according to age was from below 24 up to 55 or above, with a majority from the 25 to 34 and 35 to 44 groups (62% and 21.1%, respectively); only 3.2% were aged 55 or more. In terms of work experience, over half (52.6%) had been in the specific organization for 2–10 years, a depth of knowledge and experience that gives added value to this survey. In relation to the organizational hierarchy, 43.6% of respondents were in some of the management positions and 56.4% were front-line employees. Detailed descriptive statistics relating to the demographic characteristics are shown in Table 2.

Research instrument

In this research, the instrument comprised three sections:
(1) perceived authentic leadership capabilities;
(2) perceived learning organization at the organizational level; and
(3) perceived level of affective commitment.

All constructs used multi-item scales that have been developed and used in the United States. The instruments were prepared for use in Serbia with the use of appropriate translation and back translation procedures, content validity and pretesting. To elaborate, the ultimate translated questionnaire was developed in several steps. To begin, we asked a translator in the field of HR to translate the questionnaires into Serbian. Next, another translator translated the Serbian questionnaire back into English with an aim to revise any possible inappropriate Serbian wordings and translations. Eventually, a third translator compared the original questionnaire and back translation, item by item, to assess the consistency of the translation. Items of disagreement, or errors, were further discussed and revised until all three translators reached a consensus. Following this process, content validity and pre-test were conducted. For the purpose of content validity the final version of the Serbian research instrument was reviewed through interviews with three university professors in the field of human resource and two HR managers from private sector companies. The purpose of this final step was

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Table 2. The demographic composition

Characteristic	Number	Percentage
Gender		
Female	261	52.0
Male	241	48.0
Age		
<24	10	2.0
25-34	311	62.0
35-44	106	21.1
45-54	59	11.7
>55	16	3.2
Work experience		
<2 years	161	32.1
2-5 years	146	29.1
5-10 years	118	23.5
10-15 years	48	9.6
15-20 years	14	2.7
>20 years	15	3.0
Job position		
Superiors	219	43.6
Followers	283	56.4

to ensure that the final version of the Serbian research instrument was clear, culturally adequate and included the common language used by workers in firms. At these interviews each expert was given a copy of the Serbian instrument to review the questionnaire item by item. No problems were found and the experts decided that the questionnaire could be used as provided. In the pre-testing phase, the final research instrument was sent to 15 HR practitioners in Serbia in order to collect feedback on whether the instrument and its' instructions were understandable and the technical terms in the instrument were interpretable in Serbia. All of the selected practitioners had HR work experience of more than five years. The pre-test was a checkpoint for the readability and functionality of the translated instrument. The comments provided by these HR practitioners indicated that the instrument seemed appropriate for use in Serbia. The length of the instrument was not changed due to the multiple purposes of this study. Therefore, all thirty-one items were retained and distributed.

The survey questionnaire with a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) was used.

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Authentic leadership

The four-factor Authentic Leadership Inventory (ALI) (Neider/ Schriesheim2011) was developed to measure the authentic leadership construct. In our study, we used ALI to examine subordinates' perception of their immediate superior's authentic leadership capabilities. The development of 14-items for ALI was based on the authentic leadership theoretical framework and dimensions definitions provided by Walumbwa et al. (2008). In addition, seven out of fourteen items were adopted from the Authentic Leadership Questionnaire created by Walumbwa and colleagues: three items measuring self-awareness (ALI_S) and three measuring relational transparency (ALI_T), with four (each) measuring internalized moral perspective (ALI_M) and balanced processing (ALI_B). It can be said that ALI actually represents the refinement of ALQ that was based on a more rigorous content validity assessment procedure. Neider and Schriesheim (2011) reported the lowest ALI coefficient alpha was 0.74, while the highest was 0.85. A sample item included: "My leader clearly states what he/she means."

Affective commitment

The affective commitment (AC) construct was measured with the five-item affective commitment scale adopted from Meyer et al. (1993). Allen and Meyer (1996) reported that the median reliability of many research studies is 0.85. A sample item is, "I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career with this organization."

Learning organization at the Organizational level

To measure changes in organizational learning practices and culture, as suggested by Marsick and Watkins (2003), this study used twelve items related to learning at the organizational level from the Yang (2003) shortened version of the Dimensions of Learning Organization Questionnaire (DLOQ), originally developed by Watkins and Marsick (1997). Learning at the organizational level (DLOQ_O) is represented by four dimensions of the learning organization (empowerment; embedded systems; system connections; and leadership for learning), each of which is constituted of three items. Numerous research studies verified the construct validity and score reliability of the DLOQ in several international contexts (e.g., Yang 2003; Yang et al. 2004; Lien et al. 2006; Song et al. 2009 a; Sharifirad 2011). Yang (2003) reported that the reliability estimates for the seven dimensions ranged from 0.68 to 0.83 for Cronbach's alpha coefficient. Because, what is to be investigated in this study is the employees' perception of the learning organization, it will be based on an individual (perception) level of analysis. A sample item included: "My organization encourages people to think from a global perspective."

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Results

In general, co-variance based SEM (SPSS Amos) was used to examine the model fit for each construct (to assess the measurement model) and to test the relationships among the constructs (to test the hypotheses in the structural model). Structural equation modelling was performed to estimate direct and indirect effects with the correlation matrix and asymptotic covariance matrix as input (Bollen, 1989). This type of analysis has the advantage of correcting unreliability of measures and also gives information on the direct and indirect paths between multiple constructs after controlling potentially confounding variables, which is suitable for mediation.

Measurement model

In our analysis, IBM SPSS Amos 20.0.0 was used to test the measurement model. The reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity of the factors were estimated by the Composite Reliability (CR), Average Variance Extracted (AVE), Maximum Shared Variance (MSV), and Average Shared Variance (ASV). The results are presented in Table 3. All the composite reliability values satisfied the minimum criterion value of 0.70 or greater, as suggested by Hair et al. (2009). The average variances extracted were all above the recommended 0.50 level (Hair et al. 2009), which meant that more than one-half of the variances observed in the items were accounted for by their hypothesized factors. CR was greater than AVE for each factor. Thus, all the factors in the measurement model had adequate convergent validity. Following Hair et al.'s (2009) recommendation, MSV greater than AVE and ASV greater than AVE will lead to discriminant validity problems. None of the factors had convergent validity concerns (see Table 3). In summary, the measurement model had adequate reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity.

Next, following goodness of fit tests were conducted: the ratio of $\chi 2$ to degrees-of-freedom (df), adjusted goodness of fit index (AGFI), normalized fit index (NFI), comparative fit index (CFI), and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA). As shown in Table 4, all the model-fit indices exceeded their respective common acceptance levels suggested by previous research (Hu/Bentler 1999; Asparouhov/Muthén 2009; Schmitt 2011), thus demonstrating that the measurement model exhibited a fairly good fit with the data collected ($\chi 2$=1081 with df=398, AGFI=0.843, NFI=0.906, CFI=0.925, RMSEA=0.059).

Finally, the CFA results indicated that all of the items loaded on their designated dimensions with strong associations, which represent a viable measurement model. Standardized coefficients among assigned indicators and four latent constructs of authentic leadership were in the range 0.79-0.92. Measurement coefficients among indicators that build latent construct affective commitment were all of significant influence ranging from 0.78 to 0.88. Values for standardized

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Table 3. Reliability, convergent validity, and construct correlations

Factor	CR	AVE	MSV	ASV	ALI_S	ALI_B	ALI_M	ALI_T	AC	DLOQ_O
ALI_S	0.757	0.615	0.332	0.255	0.784[a]					
ALI_B	0.872	0.630	0.283	0.232	.78**	0.794[a]				
ALI_M	0.721	0.505	0.285	0.208	.55**	.56**	0.711[a]			
ALI_T	0.848	0.651	0.377	0.313	.70**	.75**	.62**	0.807[a]		
AC	0.877	0.591	0.508	0.392	.49**	.52**	.35**	.46**	0.769[a]	
DLOQ_O	0.983	0.830	0.558	0.395	.62**	.70**	.55**	.64**	.64**	0.911[a]

Note: CR = composite reliability; AVE = average variance extracted; MSV = maximum shared variance; ASV = average shared variance; [a]It indicates the square root of AVE of the construct; ** p < .01 (two-tailed).

Table 4. Summary of goodness of fit statistics for CFA and SEM

Model	$\chi 2/df$	AGFI	NFI	CFI	RMSEA
Measurement model	2.72	0.84	0.91	0.93	0.06
Structural model	2.79	0.82	0.90	0.91	0.06
Recommended value	< 3.00	> 0.80	> 0.90	> 0.90	< 0.08

Note: AGFI = adjusted goodness of fit index; NFI = normalized fit index; CFI = comparative fit index; RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation.

coefficients among all indicators and latent construct learning organization at the organizational level were in the range 0.76-0.81. Overall, all coefficients in the measurement model were greater than 0.76 which helps in the accumulation of reasons to show the measurement model fit in the Serbian context.

Structural model

The same set of fit indices was used to examine the structural model. As Table 4 shows, all fit indices values are in the acceptable range, indicating a good fit of the model ($\chi 2$=1185 with df=425, AGFI=0.821, NFI=0.901, CFI=0.914, RMSEA=0.064). Path coefficients, p-values, and variance explained are shown in Figure 2. The findings (see Figure 2 depicting standardized path coefficients) showed that some of the predicted paths failed to show significance for the proposed model.

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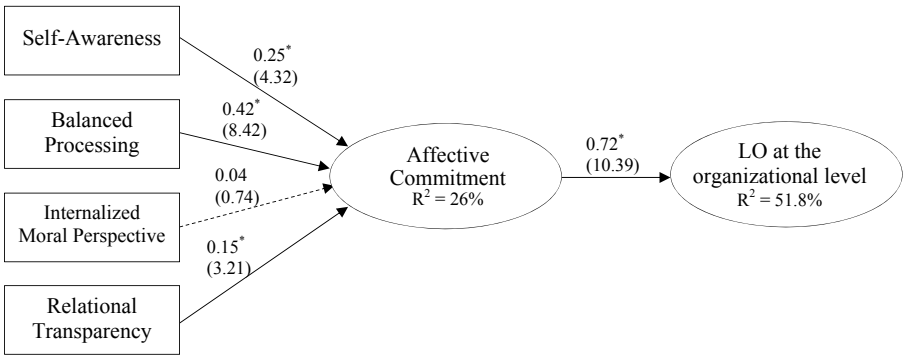
Figure 2. Structural Model



Note: Statistically significant ---------; Statistically non-significant --------; * p < .001; () z-score.

Three out of four relationships between authentic leadership components and affective commitment were found to be significant at 0,001 significance level. Authentic leadership self-awareness has a positive effect on employees' affective commitment (H1 a: path coefficient=0.25; t=4.32). Authentic leadership balanced processing was also significantly associated with affective commitment (H1 b: path coefficient=0.42; t=8.42). In addition, the path coefficient from authentic leadership relational transparency to affective commitment was moderate and significant (H1 d: path coefficient=0.15; t=3.21). However, the path coefficient from authentic leadership internalized moral perspective to affective commitment was insignificant (H1 c: path coefficient=0.04; t=0.74). Further, the results showed that affective commitment had a strong and significant relationship with the learning organization at the organizational level (H2: path coefficient=0.72; t=10.39).

We used bootstrapping with 5000 resamples and a 0.95 confidence interval (Hair et al. 2009) to determine the effects of variables and the significance of the path within the structural model in order to test the mediating role of affective commitment in the relationship between authentic leadership and the learning organization at the organizational level. To clearly present the research results, based on which the hypotheses related to mediation were tested and the corresponding conclusions formulated, direct, indirect and total effects coefficients are displayed in a separate Table 5. Based on the effect estimates it is possible to determine whether mediation exists and what is the degree of mediation (partial, full, or simply indirect) between focal variables.

As shown in Table 5, self-awareness component of authentic leadership is only indirectly (0.1, p < .001) related to the learning organization at the organizational level. Thus, as predicted in Hypothesis 3 a, one of the essential characteristics that a company must consider in analysing the learning organization at the orga-

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nizational level is authentic leaders' self-awareness through affective commitment (full mediation). The influence of balanced processing, as a component of authentic leadership on the learning organization at the organizational level, is directly (0.4, $p < .000$) and indirectly (0.16, $p < .001$) significant.

The bootstrapping method confirmed statistically significant mediation (partial) effect of balanced processing on the learning organization supporting Hypothesis 3 b. Hypothesis 3 c holds because the parameter estimates verify only a positive and statistically significant direct effect (0.26, $p < .05$) between authentic leadership internalized moral perspective and the learning organization at the organizational level. The lack of indirect effect (through affective commitment) implies that no mediation exists. Finally, as shown in table 5, the direct (0.13, $p > .05$) and indirect effects (0.06, $p > .05$) of authentic leadership relational transparency on the learning organization at the organizational level are not significant. Hence, Hypothesis 3 d is not supported which indicates no mediation.

Table 5.Effect estimates

Effect from		To	Direct Effects[a]	Indirect Effects[a]	Total Effects[a]
ALI_S	→	DLOQ_O	0.13	0.1**	0.23**
ALI_B	→	DLOQ_O	0.40***	0.16**	0.56***
ALI_M	→	DLOQ_O	0.26*	-	0.26*
ALI_T	→	DLOQ_O	0.13	0.06	0.19

Note: [a]Standardized Structural Coefficients; *p < .05; **p < .001; ***p < .000

Discussion

The results of this study partially support the findings of previous studies (e.g. Walumbwa et al. 2008; Leroy et al. 2012; Peus et al. 2012; Pool/Pool 2007). However, the relationships among authentic leadership components, affective commitment, and learning organization in conditions of increased market uncertainty in transition, such as Serbia, are arguable.

Firstly, the findings revealed a significant positive relation between the leaders' self-awareness, balanced processing and relational transparency with employee affective commitment, suggesting that the immediate superiors' authenticity does play a significant role in contributing to the employees' emotional attachment and identification with the organization. Thus, our findings generally support previous research (Walumbwa et al. 2008; Leroy et al. 2012; Peus et al. 2012) which indicates that authentic leaders possess the ability to enhance follower commitment by encouraging open and honest mutual relations. Yet, according to theoretical assumptions, leaders' moral standards should also contribute to the development of affective commitment (Gardner et al. 2005; Meyer/Parfyonova 2010). Kliuchnikov (2011) discovered a positive and significant re-

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lationship between authentic leadership and affective organizational commitment in Eastern Europe.

However, our results showed no direct impact of authentic leadership moral component on employees' affective commitment. According to Yukl (2010), if a leader's values and actions are consistent (i.e. moral perspective), but most followers reject these values, then the leader is unlikely to have much influence over follower commitment. Based on Yukl (2010) it may be suspected that this is the reason for the obtained result. Moral perspective of leaders and employees in the transitional economy is not at the same level, in other words, it is not the driving force of affective commitment.

Secondly, the results demonstrated that affective commitment is positively related to the learning organization at the organizational level in organizations under transition like those in Serbia. The link is itself worthy of note, especially since Song et al. (2013) suggest that employee commitment can influence the conditions for forming the learning organization culture. Our findings are consistent with early research (see Pool/Pool 2007) which has confirmed that higher levels of commitment among employees result in higher levels of organizational learning. Thus, this study offers some support for the generalizability of the effects of affective commitment on the learning organization, suggesting that affectively committed employees may provide greater agency for enhancing a culture that supports and reinforces learning in organizations. It can be said that the continuous learning organization practice requires more than a knowledge management system, risk enablement, networking among people or working together with the outside community to build knowledge; it also requires employee commitment.

Finally, the results showed that authentic leadership self-awareness is related to learning organization at the organizational level and that this effect is fully mediated through affective commitment. The results indicated that there is no direct relationship between the self-awareness component and the learning organization but only an indirect one, through affective commitment. The logic that lies behind this relationship is that as authentic leaders gain self-awareness, their decisions and actions become increasingly self-determined and consistent with their internalized values and goals which have been shown to be related to elevated levels of employees' affective commitment (Gardner et al. 2005). That, in turn, results in an improved organizational learning process (Pool/Pool 2007). Hence, an organization's orientation toward learning might be achieved, or improved, in organizations operating in distinctive transitional economy through employee affective commitment when self-awareness of leaders' is built. Similarly, affective commitment has a partial mediating role between perceived leaders' balanced processing and the learning organization. The results revealed that authentic leadership balanced processing have a strong and significant influence on the learning organization at the organizational level. This relationship is addi-

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tionally emphasized with the presence of affective commitment. The obtained results suggest that in the process of transition it is essential for every leader to utilize followers' inputs in making decisions. In that case, followers are more likely to experience meaningfulness and commitment in their work because they are taking on more responsibility (Walumbwa et al. 2010). By soliciting views about important work-related matters and processing it in a balanced way, leaders are likely to increase commitment among organizational members (Peus et al 2012). Committed employees are further willing to perform tasks beyond their contractual obligations (Peus et al 2012) and to contribute to the learning process in organizations (Pool/Pool 2007). Finally, in the case of the relationship between the perceived leader's relational transparency and moral perspective with the learning organization, the results demonstrated that affective commitment does not have a mediating role. The findings indicated that there is a direct effect of authentic leadership moral component on the learning organization and that affective commitment does not have any significant influence on it. The obtained results suggest that consistency of leader values and actions in a transitional economy may provide great influence on strengthening an organization's orientation toward learning. The result which dealt with the relationship between the leader's relational transparency and the learning organization was also noteworthy. The results demonstrated neither direct nor indirect (through affective commitment) effects of the leader's relational transparency on the learning organization. Based on these results, it can be argued that having certain levels of relational transparency may simply be insufficient for other organizational members to grant their leaders the opportunity to create a culture that fosters learning in organizations that operate in the conditions of increased market uncertainty.

The results of this study not only provide a new direction for the learning organization research on key variables, but also generate an important implication for organizational practice in transitional economies. Highlighting the importance of authentic leaders' predictability for employees' affective commitment and indirectly, for a learning organization, is of practical relevance since it may draw leaders' particular attention to the way they behave and interact with their employees and may be targeted in authentic leadership development initiatives in the organizations which operate in a market similar to Serbia.

Research limitations and directions for further research

Several limitations need to be recognized for this study in terms of the data collection approach, proposed research constructs, and sample diversity.

Firstly, all of the variables in this study were measured by the self-reported perceptual responses by using only quantitative measures. Future studies should be conducted to evaluate the resulting model, using a qualitative approach. The question is what would be the results of the study if the qualitative observations

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from Serbian industries were incorporated into the analysis. In addition, human behavioural interactions could be observed more accurately with a longitudinal approach wherein both qualitative and quantitative data are collected over repeated observations to provide greater insights. Further, the conceptual framework in the current study was developed based on theoretical assumptions. However, lack of clarity in the explanation of influential processes between authentic leaders and followers in this theoretical leadership concept represents a limiting factor in the development of our research model. Future studies should focus on empirical research dealing with the mechanisms by which leader's values are transferred to followers. Additionally, an alternative framework could possibly be considered based on the data analysis results. For instance, future research could consider various interactive external factors that might influence leaders' authentic behaviours and additionally their effect on employees' commitment – for example, cultural values might reduce or, emphasize, this effect as both authentic leadership and affective commitment are based on values (Meyer/Allen 1991; Gardner et al. 2005). This study has homogeneous cultural representation among employees in organizations included in the sample. Taking Serbia as a target population contributes to the research's generalizability, but could also be its weakness. Future research should assess the generalizability of our findings by drawing samples in other organizational environments, or national cultures. Furthermore, an extension of the research to introduce a cross-cultural dimension to the context and to cross-validate the model in different settings (e.g., South-Eastern Europe, EU countries, etc.) would significantly contribute to a better understanding of the link between authentic leadership, learning organization and affective commitment.

Conclusions

In this paper, we strived to increase our understanding of how both authentic leadership components and affective commitment contribute to the development of the learning organization in the context of a transitional economy, such as that of Serbia. Specifically, this study adds an important contribution to the literature by producing for the first time initial empirical evidence on the impact that each of the four authentic leadership components may have on employees' affective commitment and learning organization at the organizational level, as well as, pointing out affective commitment as a mediator in the relationship between authentic leadership and the learning organization. The results of this study confirm significant relationships between most focal variables, but also indicate some significant differences compared to theoretical assumptions (statistically significant impacts of authentic leadership moral component on employees' affective commitment and authentic leadership relational transparency on the learning organization were not determined here). It is assumed that the main causes of unexpected results are current market conditions. Regardless of these

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specific results, the study basically emphasises authentic leadership and affective commitment as integral components of the learning organization. Authentic leadership generates trust among employees and builds a culture of commitment. Once the employees are committed, they are motivated to remain with the organization, put additional efforts into accomplishing organizational goals and help foster the development of the learning organization.

To date, there is limited systematic research directly linking authentic leadership and affective commitment, providing only hints regarding the role of authentic leadership capabilities in promoting affective commitment. Further, affective commitment has not been emphasized as an antecedent of forming the learning organization so far, nor was it tested as a mediator in the relationship between authentic leadership and the learning organization. It is our hope that we have made a significant contribution to this end and that this research will stimulate future examinations of this fusion. Finally, it will help organizations that operate in conditions of increased market uncertainty, similar to Serbia's, to cope with challenges and to succeed.

Appendix A

Indicate the degree of agreement or disagreement with respect to the following statements. Response choices are: (1) Disagree strongly; (2) Disagree; (3) Neither Agree nor Disagree; (4) Agree; and (5) Agree strongly. Please note that the term 'leader' means your immediate or direct supervisor.

Authentic Leadership

1. My leader clearly states what he/she means. (T)
2. My leader shows consistency between his/her beliefs and actions. (M)
3. My leader asks for ideas that challenge his/her core beliefs. (B)
4. My leader describes accurately the way that others view his/her abilities. (S)
5. My leader uses his/her core beliefs to make decisions. (M)
6. My leader carefully listens to alternative perspectives before reaching a conclusion. (B)
7. My leader shows that he/she understands his/her strengths and weaknesses. (S)
8. My leader openly shares information with others. (T)
9. My leader resists pressures on him/her to do things contrary to his/her beliefs. (M)
10. My leader objectively analyses relevant data before making a decision. (B)
11. My leader is clearly aware of the impact he/she has on others. (S)
12. My leader expresses his/her ideas and thoughts clearly to others. (T)

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13. My leader is guided in his/her actions by internal moral standards. (M)
14. My leader encourages others to voice opposing points of view. (B)

Affective Commitment

1. I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career with this organization.
2. I really feel as if this organization's problems are my own.
3. I do feel "emotionally attached" to this organization.
4. I do feel like "part of the family" at my organization.
5. This organization has a great deal of personal meaning for me.

Learning Organization at the organizational level

1. My organization creates systems to measure gaps between current and expected performance.
2. My organization makes its lessons learned available to all employees.
3. My organization measures the results of the time and resources spent on training.
4. My organization recognizes people for taking initiative.
5. My organization gives people control over the resources they need to accomplish their work.
6. My organization supports employees who take calculated risks.
7. My organization encourages people to think from a global perspective.
8. My organization works together with the outside community to meet mutual needs.
9. My organization encourages people to get answers from across the organization when solving problems.
10. In my organization, leaders mentor and coach those they lead.
11. In my organization, leaders continually look for opportunities to learn.
12. In my organization, leaders ensure that the organization's actions are consistent with its values.

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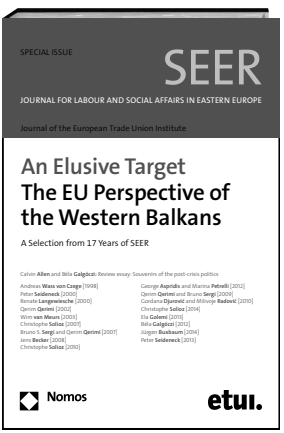

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