

# Fostering Perceptions of Authenticity via Sensitive Self-Disclosure

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Leaders' perceived authenticity—the sense that leaders are acting in accordance with their “true self”—is associated with positive outcomes for both employees and organizations alike. How might leaders foster this impression? We show that sensitive self-disclosure, in the form of revealing weaknesses, makes leaders come across as authentic (Studies 1 and 2)—because observers infer that the discloser is not engaging in strategic self-presentation (Study 3). Further, the authenticity gains of sensitive self-disclosure have positive downstream consequences, such as enhancing employees' desire to work with the leader (Studies 4A and 4B). And, as our conceptual account predicts, these benefits emerge when the revealed weakness is made voluntarily (as opposed to by requirement; Study 5), and are more pronounced if the disclosure is made by a relatively high-status person (Study 6). We also present anecdotal field evidence (Study 7) consistent with the causal effects identified in Studies 1–6.

### Public Significance Statement

When a leader self-discloses a weakness, s/he can be perceived as authentic, leading to positive downstream consequences, such as enhancing employees' desire to work with the leader. This research suggests that leaders can consider sensitive self-disclosure as a tool to achieve positive outcomes—for themselves, their employees, and the firm alike.

**Keywords:** authenticity, weaknesses, self-disclosure, leaders' interpersonal perception

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Authenticity has become increasingly important (Sergent, 2016; Szalai, 2015; Talbot-Zorn & Marz, 2016; Zimmer, 2016; Zogby, 2016). Research in organizational behavior indicates that employees prefer leaders whom they perceive to be authentic (e.g., Clapp-Smith et al., 2009; D. S. Wang & Hsieh, 2013; H. Wang et al., 2014), with Generation Z being particularly likely to prioritize authenticity over other factors when choosing whom to work with (Cronin, 2019; Laudert, 2018). Consistent with these preferences, perceived authenticity—the perception that leaders are being genuine, acting in accordance with their true selves (Cha et al., 2019; George et al., 2007; Lehman et al., 2019)—is associated with positive outcomes for both employees and organizations. When followers perceive leaders to be authentic, they experience greater well-being (Rahimnia & Sharifirad, 2015; H. Wang et al., 2014), are more trusting of the organization (Avolio et al., 2004; Norman et al., 2010), perform better (Hannah et al., 2011; Leroy et al., 2012;

Lyubovnikova et al., 2017; Rego et al., 2013, 2015), work harder (Hirst et al., 2016), and make more ethical decisions (Cianci et al., 2014; Zhu et al., 2011).

Despite these benefits, research also suggests that leaders struggle to come across as authentic (Hahl & Zuckerman, 2014; Hahl et al., 2017). Leaders are sometimes seen as manipulating their public images to seek power and status—regardless of whether they are actually engaging in such manipulation—which poses a barrier to being perceived as authentic (Fine, 2003; Hahl & Zuckerman, 2014; Zukin, 2008). Thus, the question arises: What can help leaders to come across as authentic? We propose that leaders can foster perceptions of authenticity by engaging in sensitive self-disclosure, which we operationalize in this context as revealing work-related weaknesses. In the following sections, we review the prior literature that forms the basis of our predictions, and provide an overview of our empirical work.

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## Conceptual Development

### Avoidance of Sensitive Self-Disclosure

People tend to shy away from revealing sensitive personal information (Bruk et al., 2018; De Angelis et al., 2012; Gromet & Pronin, 2009; John et al., 2016; Leary & Allen, 2011; Paulhus & Reid, 1991; Turnley & Bolino, 2001)—that is, self-relevant information that makes a person vulnerable to being judged negatively by others (Derlega et al., 1993; Kelly & McKillop, 1996; Laurenceau et al., 1998; Moon, 2000). Within our context of interest—leaders' disclosures within the workplace—we define “sensitive self-disclosure” as revealing work-related weaknesses. This is because disclosing job-related weaknesses, such as not being good at public speaking, not being good at time management, or lacking a vision, plausibly makes a leader vulnerable to being judged negatively by followers—it may threaten followers' perceptions of that leader's ability to lead effectively. Indeed, shying away from sensitive self-disclosure can be sensible. For one, people tend to overweigh negative information relative to positive information (Baumeister et al., 2001; Herr et al., 1991). Prior work also indicates that revealing weaknesses can diminish others' perceptions of the discloser's status (Gibson et al., 2018).

At the same time, people tend to be willing to reveal favorable personal information—this is especially true in the workplace, where self-presentation concerns—the fundamental motive to be seen positively by others (Baumeister, 1982; Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Tetlock, 2002)—loom large. Accordingly, people tend to manipulate their images in an effort to be perceived in a desirable light (De Angelis et al., 2012; Leary & Allen, 2011; Paulhus & Reid, 1991; Turnley & Bolino, 2001); and doing so can result in social and material rewards (Gilmore & Ferris, 1989; Leary, 1996; Schlenker, 1975). For instance, in job interviews, people engage in extensive image creation, to the point of making up fictional stories to showcase their strengths (Levashina & Campion, 2007). Relatedly, as organizational theorists have long noted, there is often a gap between the *frontstage*—that is, a person's public persona—and their *backstage*, whereby the frontstage is manipulated by the actor to gain extrinsic rewards (Trilling, 1972; Turner, 1976).

### Sensitive Self-Disclosure and Authenticity

We posit that the reticence to reveal unfavorable personal information comes with a cost: perceptions of inauthenticity. Self-presentational acts are often subject to assessments of authenticity (Buss & Briggs, 1984; Leary, 1993; Schlenker, 1975; Tesser & Moore, 1986), as observers infer whether the actor appears to be presenting her true self (Deci & Ryan, 2000, 2002; Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Lenton et al., 2013; Sedikides et al., 2017). If we only reveal our desirable qualities, we are only showing a very narrow “sample” of our true selves. Observers who notice such selective presentation may infer that the actor must be motivated to impress others and thus presenting an insincerely positive image to others.

In contrast, when a person engages in sensitive self-disclosure, observers may infer that the actor has not filtered out information. This may create the impression that the actor is revealing himself in a more complete, comprehensive, or unbiased way. As a result, we argue, observers perceive that actor as authentic. In making this proposition, we draw on seminal work in sociology on “staged

authenticity”—the notion that access to “back regions” can enhance the intimacy, and perceived authenticity, of an experience (MacCannell, 1973)—as when, for example, a diner enters the kitchen area of a restaurant. Here, we posit that in interpersonal interactions, voluntarily allowing a person into one's “backstage” by revealing something sensitive, can foster perceptions of authenticity.

Central to our account, we propose that the capacity for sensitive self-disclosure to foster perceptions of authenticity is driven by observers' inferences about the discloser's self-presentation motives. Prior work indicates that observers routinely make inferences about the motives that underlie others' behavior (Campbell & Kirmani, 2000; Heider, 1958; Pizarro et al., 2003). For example, when a salesperson flatters a consumer prior to making a sale, consumers perceive that salesperson as insincere—because consumers infer that the salesperson has an ulterior motive (i.e., the salesperson is being complimentary only to make the sale; Campbell & Kirmani, 2000). Conversely, when a person uses politically incorrect (vs. correct) language, she comes across as authentic because she is perceived to lack strategic motives (Rosenblum et al., 2020).

What inferences might observers make from a leader's sensitive self-disclosures? As in, what do observers perceive to be the leader's motive for engaging in sensitive self-disclosure? We posit observers to make inferences about the leader's self-presentation motives—or rather, the lack of such motives. Self-presentation is perceived as strategic behavior (Eastman, 1994), and acting strategically, we posit, is perceived as antithetical to behaving authentically. Thus, we propose that witnessing a leader self-disclose a weakness underscores an implicit assumption held by observers—that the person who discloses a weakness must *not* have filtered out information. Therefore, when a leader discloses a weakness, observers infer that leader is not engaging in strategic self-presentation. As a result, the leader is perceived as relatively authentic.

### Relevance to Prior Work

We build on prior work that points not to the pitfalls of sensitive self-disclosure—which may be what people typically focus on—but rather, to its *surprising benefits*; most notably, self-disclosure leads to liking (Collins & Miller, 1994; Cozby, 1972; Dalto et al., 1979; Jourard, 1959; Worthy et al., 1969). More recent work has elucidated that the capacity for self-disclosure to foster liking is augmented by interpersonal attributions—that is, by inferences that the discloser is engaging in sensitive self-disclosure in the interest of building rapport with the recipient (Jiang et al., 2011; Kashian et al., 2017). Accordingly, this prior work has shown that in dyadic conversations, the relationship between sensitive self-disclosure and liking is mediated by such interpersonal attributions. Like this prior work, attributions are also central to our theorizing. However, we posit the sensitive self-disclosure authenticity link to be driven by dispositional attributions—that is, perceptions of the discloser's motivations for engaging in sensitive self-disclosure.

The present research is also related to the stereotype content model (SCM)—Fiske et al. (2002) influential model of person perception, which posits two primary dimensions of person perception: warmth and competence. From a SCM perspective, it is plausible that a leader's sensitive self-disclosure could affect how warm and competent she comes across—and these effects could

potentially “crowd out” that of authenticity. Moreover, the SCM would seem to treat the construct of “authenticity” as being a component of “warmth;” Fiske et al. (2002) include “sincere” in their multi-item measure of warmth. However, more recent work suggests that perceived authenticity is distinct from warmth. For example, Rosenblum et al. (2020) showed that speaking in politically incorrect tones makes people come across as authentic but *not* warm. Thus, we predict that sensitive self-disclosure will increase perceived authenticity even when controlling for the SCM’s two dimensions of person perception: warmth and competence.

Finally, past research has shown that negative information can have positive effects in the context of interpersonal attractiveness (Aronson et al., 1966; Collins & Miller, 1994), on the management of malicious envy from peers (Brooks et al., 2019), and on enhancing the effectiveness of persuasive appeals (e.g., two-sided messaging; see Crowley & Hoyer, 1994 as an example). We extend these findings and demonstrate that sensitive self-disclosure can enhance perceptions of authenticity. And, as we delineate in the next section, we further distinguish our account from related work by showing that it makes unique predictions about when sensitive self-disclosure will—versus will not—foster perceptions of authenticity.

## Moderators

### Voluntariness

We suggest that for leaders’ disclosure of their weaknesses to boost perceived authenticity, they must be made *voluntarily*. This prediction stems from the fact that in making dispositional inferences about a person, observers take intentions into account. For example, actors are judged to be more moral and less blameworthy when they inadvertently, as opposed to intentionally, cause something bad to happen (Greene et al., 2009; Pizarro et al., 2003). And, of particular relevance to the domain of self-disclosure, the negative signal that can arise from explicitly withholding information (e.g., refusing to answer a direct question) is restricted to situations in which a person volitionally withholds, as when, for example, they refuse to answer a question (as opposed to not answering simply because they did not see the question; John et al., 2016). Analogously, we propose that for leaders to reap the authenticity benefits of revealing weaknesses, followers must perceive those leaders to be revealing on their own accord. Thus, it is not enough for followers to have awareness of their leaders’ weaknesses; the act of *voluntary* self-disclosure is crucial to boosting perceptions of authenticity.

### Status

We posit the authenticity gains from self-disclosing weaknesses in organizations to be pronounced for high-status individuals—that is, leaders within the organization. First, this prediction is rooted in work at the intersection of social identity and leadership. Specifically, as Giessner and van Knippenberg (2008) demonstrated, leaders are sometimes given a “license to fail” (Giessner & van Knippenberg, 2008): relative to low-status individuals, high-status individuals were treated more favorably after they failed to achieve a goal. Applied to the present context, this suggests that when leaders reveal weaknesses, they may be particularly poised to reap the

benefits of doing so, and to avoid potential pitfalls. Note, too, that the focus is on *relative* status (for instance, in a consulting firm, a director is of high status compared to a junior associate, but is of relatively low status compared to a partner).

Second, prior work indicates that leaders are particularly driven to present themselves in a favorable light (Bolino et al., 2008; Peck & Hogue, 2018)—for example, when managers have information that makes them look bad, they are particularly likely to keep this information private (Harrison & Harrell, 1993). Thus, given leaders’ particular reticence to reveal negative self-relevant information, we reason that when they do reveal such information, they are particularly likely to come across as authentic. Indeed, the results of a pilot study point to leaders’ reticence to reveal weaknesses. We asked 110 full-time U.S. managers ( $M_{\text{age}} = 37.2$  years,  $SD = 10.5$ ; Male: 50.0%; White: 80.9%; Median income: \$90,000–\$99,999) to write three pieces of self-relevant information: something favorable (i.e., something they are good at in the workplace), something neutral (i.e., hobbies), and something unfavorable (i.e., a workplace weakness). We then asked them which, if any, of these three facts about themselves they would include when introducing themselves to a new hire at work. Only 34.5% chose to disclose the weakness; by comparison, 96.3% chose to include the strength, and 64.5% chose to include the neutral fact (details in the Supplemental Materials).

## Overview of Studies

Our empirical package consists of four sections. In Section 1, we demonstrate the effect of a leader’s disclosure of a weakness on perceptions of authenticity (Studies 1 and 2, Supplemental Studies 1A–1D) and the inferences that we posit to underlie it (Study 3). We begin by presenting vignette studies (Study 1 and S1A–S1D), followed by a more naturalistic study in which participants watch a video of a Google executive who either discloses or does not disclose a weakness within a self-introduction (Study 2). Pointing to the distinctiveness of the effect, we also show that it holds when controlling for liking (S1B), as well as perceived warmth and competence (Studies 1 and 2). Next, we show that the capacity for a leader’s sensitive self-disclosure to foster authenticity is driven by the perception that he is *not* engaging in strategic self-presentation (Study 3).

The goals of Section 2 are twofold: to further increase realism by using live interaction paradigms; and to assess positive behavioral consequences of leaders’ self-disclosure of weaknesses—consequences that are downstream from the effect on perceived authenticity identified in Section 1. We show that followers are more likely to put their own earnings at risk in the hands of (Study 4A), and to choose to work with (Studies 4A and 4B), leaders who disclose weaknesses. Tying these patterns back to the basic effect identified in Section 1, in Section 2, we also show that these positive behavioral consequences are mediated by perceived authenticity.

Section 3 tests our theory-derived moderators: voluntariness (Study 5) and status (Study 6). Specifically, Study 5 shows that downstream positive consequences of revealing weaknesses in the workplace are limited to situations in which the disclosure is made voluntarily, as opposed to by requirement. Study 6 shows that these positive consequences are pronounced when the disclosure is made by a relatively high-status person (Study 6). Again, we tie these patterns back to the basic effect identified in Section 1; here,

by measuring perceived authenticity and documenting moderated mediation.

In Section 4, we conclude by presenting anecdotal field evidence consistent with the causal effects identified in Sections 1–3. Specifically, using actual disclosures from a professional social networking app, we show that there is indeed a positive association between sensitive self-disclosure and reactions to those revelations (Study 7).

## Transparency and Openness

In total—across the main article and supplement—we report the results from twelve studies ( $N = 38,785$ ; consisting of  $n = 3,712$  from eleven experiments and  $n = 35,073$  from a field study). Online subjects were recruited via Amazon Mechanical Turk or Prolific; Lab participants were recruited from a northeastern U.S. university. As for sample size, for our online experiments, we preset our sample size based on a power analysis that used the effect size from a preliminary study (Supplemental Study 1A; Cohen's  $d = 0.50$ ) which indicated that 100 participants per condition would be required to have 95% power to detect an effect. Thus, in these studies (Studies 1–3, 4B, 5, and 6), we preset our target sample size to at least 100 per cell; specifically, we preset the sample size to 100 participants per condition in Studies 4B and 5, to 150 per condition in Studies 1, 3, and 6, and to 200 per condition in Study 2. For Study 4A, which was our in-person lab experiment (conducted prior to the power analysis), we preset our sample size to 50 participants per cell. For the field data (Study 7), we analyzed all of the data that our field partner gave us. All the studies were approved by the institutional review board of a northeast university. We report all manipulations and measures; for brevity, some measures are only reported in the supplement. See Table 1 for a design overview of each study, and the supplement for more information about our supplemental studies, samples and designs. Most of our studies, not all of them, are preregistered.

## Data, Analytic Methods, and Materials

Details of the stimuli and procedure used in these studies, data, and the analytic code needed to reproduce analyses are available at <https://tinyurl.com/m2m46wrd>.

### Section 1: Basic Effect and Mechanism

#### Study 1: Vignettes

In a series of vignette studies, we experimentally test the idea that when leaders disclose their weaknesses, they come across as authentic. Here, we present one of these studies in full. As for the others, we provide details on their relative contribution and a meta-analysis of their effect sizes; see the supplement for the full write-up of these additional studies.

#### Method

The study was a single-factor (weakness disclosed vs. control) between-subjects design; the primary outcome measure was perceived authenticity.

**Participants.** Full-time working professionals were recruited on Prolific ( $N = 298$ , 147 males;  $M_{\text{age}} = 32.8$  years,  $SD = 9.8$ ; White: 81.8%). We preregistered our hypotheses, sample size, and measures ([https://aspredicted.org/F9N\\_FWS](https://aspredicted.org/F9N_FWS)).

**Materials and Procedure.** Participants imagined that they were a new employee of a (fictitious) company called RockInvest and they met different managers who they would have the opportunity to work with if they wanted to. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: a *control* condition, in which the manager did not disclose a weakness, or an *experimental* condition, in which he disclosed a work-related weakness.

Specifically, in the control condition, participants were told:

I began my career as a mortgage trader at RockInvest. The company, launched in 1988, initially focused on bonds. But thanks to shrewd acquisitions, the firm is now the world's largest asset manager, with \$870 billion, offering a slew of equity funds and multi-asset funds. I take care of my staff, offering health benefits even to part-timers. I like to climb mountains in Colorado and collect American folk art.

In the experimental condition, we appended the following sentence, in which the manager disclosed a weakness: "Even if I am a manager of a multibillion company, I am not good at public speaking. When I make a speech, my mouth gets dry and I sometimes start to panic."

**Measures.** We assessed perceived authenticity by asking participants to rate the chief executive officer (CEO) on six items,  $\alpha = .95$ : authentic, real, sincere, genuine, inauthentic (reverse-coded), phony (reverse-coded) on a 7-point scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*). We combined these items to form a composite measure of perceived authenticity. The items were adapted from established perceived authenticity scales (see Cheshin et al., 2018; Gershon & Smith, 2020; Grandey et al., 2005; Hahl & Zuckerman, 2014). We also assessed competence ( $\alpha = .92$ : competent, efficient, intelligent) and warmth ( $\alpha = .93$ , warm, kind, easygoing; Aaker et al., 2010; Fiske et al., 2007; Goodwin et al., 2014). The order of the authenticity, competence, and warmth measures was randomly assigned.

## Results

**Perceived Authenticity.** The manager was perceived as more authentic when he disclosed a weakness relative to when he did not ( $M_{\text{experimental}} = 5.65$ ,  $SD = 0.92$ ;  $M_{\text{control}} = 4.97$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ),  $t(296) = 5.69$ ,  $p < .0001$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.56$ .

**Perceived Competence and Warmth.** The manager was perceived to be just as competent when he disclosed a weakness relative to when he did not ( $M_{\text{experimental}} = 5.41$ ,  $SD = 0.85$ ;  $M_{\text{control}} = 5.33$ ,  $SD = 0.90$ ),  $t(296) = .77$ ,  $p = .44$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.09$ ; he was also perceived to be just as warm when he disclosed a weakness relative to when he did not ( $M_{\text{experimental}} = 5.02$ ,  $SD = 1.02$  vs.  $M_{\text{control}} = 4.80$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ),  $t(296) = 1.81$ ,  $p = .07$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.25$ . Moreover, the effect of condition on perceived authenticity held when controlling for both perceived competence and warmth,  $t(294) = 6.31$ ,  $p < .0001$ , suggesting the effect of disclosure on perceptions of authenticity is independent of perceptions of warmth and competence.

Finally, given that some of the prior work in-person perception has treated authenticity as a subdimension of warmth, we also conducted a factor analysis of our authenticity and warmth measures. As further evidence of the distinctiveness of the authenticity



**Table 1**  
*Overview of Study Designs, Materials, and Key Measures*

Study	Materials	Key-dependent measures	Sample
Section 1: Effect of disclosure of a weakness on authenticity			
Study 1 (preregistered)	<i>Not good at public speaking</i> : "I am not good at public speaking. When I make a speech, my mouth gets dry and I sometimes start to panic."	Authenticity	Prolific full-time employed
S1A	<i>Speaking weakness</i> : "I am nervous about public speaking and I have a habit of cracking my knuckles."	Authenticity	Mturk
S1B (three conditions)	<i>Speaking weakness</i> : same as S1A <i>Technological weaknesses</i> : "I feel that as the company keeps growing, I feel a little under the water. The skills the company needs to succeed now are skills I do not seem to have. I am not able to keep track of the technological changes."	Authenticity	Mturk
S1C (preregistered)	<i>Technological weakness</i> : "as a manager I struggle with keeping track of technological changes" <i>Control</i> : "as a manager I keep track of technological changes"	Authenticity	Prolific full-time employed
Keeping disclosure length constant			
S1D	<i>Speaking weakness</i> : same as S1A Gender of the discloser: male leader vs. female leader	Authenticity	Mturk
Study 2 (preregistered)	Real leader's video	Authenticity	Prolific full-time employed
Study 3 (preregistered)	<i>Technological weakness</i> : same as S1B	Authenticity (strategic self-presentation as mediator)	Prolific full-time employed
Section 2: The outcomes of disclosure			
Study 4A	Dyad lab interaction study (with script): Speaking weakness as S1A	Authenticity Entrusting manager with money Willingness to work	Students and community members from a university lab
Study 4B (preregistered)	Dyad online chat study (naturalistic setting): Self-generated weaknesses	Authenticity Willingness to work	Prolific full-time and part-time employed
Section 3: Moderators			
Study 5	Voluntary vs. requested disclosure: Speaking weakness as S1A	Authenticity Willingness to work	Mturk
Study 6	High vs. low status: <i>Experimental</i> : "About myself, I need to fly several times a month, but I am afraid of flying." <i>Control</i> : "About myself, I need to fly several times a month, and I enjoy flying."	Authenticity Willingness to work	Mturk
Section 4: Field evidence			
Study 7	Field study	Likes and engagement of the posts	NA

construct, the factor analysis revealed two factors, with all of the authenticity items loading on one factor, and all of the warmth factors loading on the other factor (see the [Supplemental Materials](#), for details).

### Conceptual Replications

**Different Weaknesses.** [Supplemental Studies 1A-1D](#) are conceptual replications of the basic effect, showing that it emerges across a variety of weaknesses (see [Table 1](#), for the weakness used in each study).

**Sequence.** In [Supplemental Study 1A](#), we manipulated whether the weakness was presented at the beginning versus end of the leader's statement; the effect emerged in both cases. This robustness

is noteworthy, as it distinguishes our effect from a related phenomenon, namely, how incorporating a small dose of negative information in product descriptions can lead to positive evaluations ([Ein-Gar et al., 2012](#)). [Ein-Gar et al. \(2012\)](#) show that this effect arises because negative information, when placed after positive information, makes the positive information more salient; their effect does not emerge when the negative information is presented first. By contrast, the present effect holds regardless of whether the weakness is disclosed upfront versus prefaced with the disclosure of neutral or desirable information.

**Liking.** Past research has demonstrated disclosure leads to liking ([Collins & Miller, 1994](#)). Thus, one important question is whether the authenticity pathway is independent of the liking pathway. Therefore, we measured liking in [Supplemental Study 1B](#). A factor

analysis indicated that the liking items and authenticity items each loaded onto their own distinct factor. Further, the perceived authenticity pathway held even when controlling for liking (see the [Supplemental Materials](#), for details).

**Disclosure Length.** In Study 1, the leader's statement was longer in the experimental condition relative to the control condition. Therefore, we ran [Supplemental Study 1C](#), in which we replicated the basic effect, this time keeping the length of the disclosure the same. Specifically, in [Supplemental Study 1C](#), in the weakness-disclosed condition, the weakness *replaces* a (positive) piece of information in the control condition (as opposed to merely appending the weakness, as we did in Study 1). Study 6 is similar in this regard.

**Gender.** In Study 1, the leader was male. Given the large body of research documenting differences between male and female leaders (for a review, see [Eagly, 2005](#); [Eagly & Karau, 2002](#); [Rudman, 1998](#)), in [Supplemental Study 1D](#), we tested whether the effect also emerges with female leaders; it did.

**Meta-Analysis.** Finally, we performed a meta-analysis of the effect of self-disclosure of a weakness on perceived authenticity using the data from all of the above-mentioned studies. We used the R package *meta* ([Schwarzer, 2007](#), v. 4.19-1) and used a random effects model by using the inverse variance method. The test of heterogeneity,  $Q(6) = 2.85$ ,  $p = .827$ , was nonsignificant, suggesting that the studies consistently documented a significant condition effect of self-disclosure on perceived authenticity. The average effect size is Cohen's  $d = 0.55$  (95% CI [0.45, 0.65]). The results are in [Figure 1](#).

## Study 2: Increasing Realism

In Study 2, we invited a Google executive to record a video in which we instructed him to introduce himself, and to include a weakness. We did not give the executive guidance on what weakness to disclose; we wanted the stimuli to be as naturalistic as possible. We then edited the video to create two clips; in the *experimental* condition, we included the self-disclosed weakness, and in the *control* condition, we simply omitted it. We recruited working professionals, asked them to imagine that they had recently joined the company, and randomly assigned them to view one of the two versions of the video.

## Method

The study was a single-factor (weakness disclosed vs. control) between-subjects design; the primary outcome measure was perceived authenticity.

**Participants.** As outlined in our preregistration ([https://aspredicted.org/QJY\\_DNV](https://aspredicted.org/QJY_DNV)), we recruited full-time U.S. working professionals from Prolific ( $N = 400$ , 203 females;  $M_{age} = 32.5$  years,  $SD = 9.6$ ; White 76.4%).

**Materials and Procedure.** The executive was instructed to think about how he may introduce himself to new employees at his company, and to include anything he would like to this self-introduction. In addition, we asked him to disclose a weakness of himself; he disclosed that he had joined the company "after applying to nearly 36 other roles and consequently receiving 35 other rejections." See the supplement for the full video transcript. Between-subjects, we manipulated whether this sentence was present. Next, we recruited working professionals and instructed them to imagine that they had just joined a company and were meeting different managers who they could choose to work with (or not). Participants were randomly assigned to watch one of the two videos of the executive—the only difference being that in the *experimental* condition, the manager disclosed a weakness; whereas in the *control* condition, he did not.

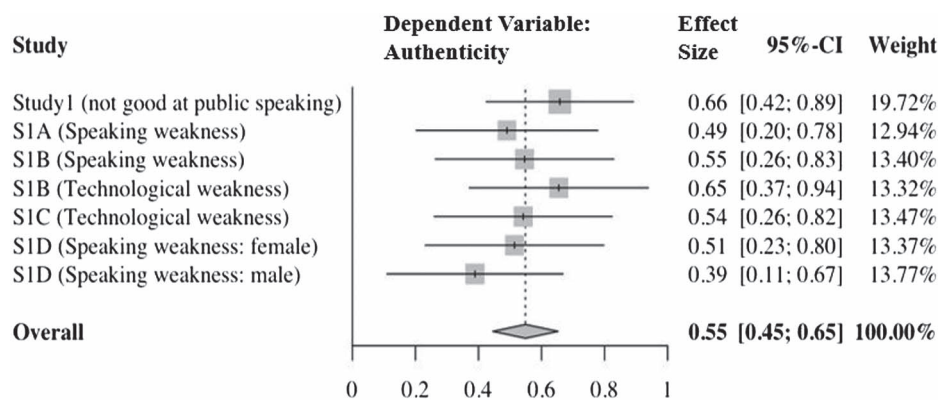
**Measures.** We used the same measures of authenticity ( $\alpha = .94$ ), competence ( $\alpha = .91$ ), and warmth ( $\alpha = .91$ ) as in Study 1; their order of administration was randomly assigned.

## Results

**Perceived Authenticity.** The manager was perceived as more authentic when he disclosed a weakness relative to when he did not ( $M_{experimental} = 5.51$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ;  $M_{control} = 5.24$ ,  $SD = 1.16$ ),  $t(398) = 2.41$ ,  $p = .016$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.24$ .

**Perceived Competence and Warmth.** The manager was perceived as just as competent when he disclosed a weakness relative to when he did not ( $M_{experimental} = 6.06$ ,  $SD = 0.83$ ;  $M_{control} = 6.01$ ,  $SD = 0.81$ ),  $t(398) = .67$ ,  $p = .50$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.06$ . He was also perceived as just as warm when he disclosed a weakness relative to when he did not ( $M_{experimental} = 4.85$ ,  $SD = 1.16$  vs.  $M_{control} = 4.68$ ,

**Figure 1**  
Meta-Analysis Results for Study 1, S1A–S1D



Note. CI = confidence interval.

$SD = 1.22$ ),  $t(398) = 1.43$ ,  $p = .15$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.14$ . Moreover, the effect of condition on perceived authenticity held when controlling for warmth and competence,  $t(396) = 2.50$ ,  $p = .013$ .<sup>1</sup>

### Study 3: Perceived Strategic Self-Presentation as Mechanism

We propose that when a leader discloses a weakness, it makes observers less likely to perceive that leader to be acting strategically, in turn fostering perceptions of authenticity. Thus, in Study 3, we test whether the effect of disclosing a weakness on perceived authenticity is mediated by inferences of strategic self-presentation. We use procedures similar to Study 1.

#### Method

The study was a single-factor (weakness disclosed vs. control) between-subjects design; the primary measures were perceived authenticity and our mediator, strategic self-presentation.

**Participants.** U.S. full-time working professionals from Prolific ( $N = 300$ , 146 males;  $M_{\text{age}} = 31.9$  years,  $SD = 8.6$ ; 78.5% White) participated. We preregistered our hypotheses, sample size, and measures ([https://aspredicted.org/blind.php?x=/TBG\\_TG8](https://aspredicted.org/blind.php?x=/TBG_TG8)).

**Materials and Procedure.** Participants imagined that they were a new employee of a (fictitious) company called RockInvest and were meeting different managers with whom they could choose to work. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: a *control* condition, in which the manager did not disclose a weakness, or the *experimental* condition, in which he disclosed a weakness. Specifically, in the control condition, participants were given the same description of the manager as in Study 1. In the experimental conditions, this sentence was appended: "Even though I have managed the company for many years, I struggle with adapting to new technologies, and as a manager I am not on top of technological changes." Participants then completed the dependent measures and provided demographic information.

**Measures.** We used the same measure of authenticity ( $\alpha = .94$ ) as in Study 1, and added a measure of perceived strategic self-presentation, adapted from Rosenblum et al. (2020). Specifically, participants were asked: "to what extent does the manager's self-introduction seem to be strategic?" on a 7-point scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*).

#### Results

**Perceived Authenticity.** The manager was perceived as more authentic when he disclosed a weakness relative to when he did not ( $M_{\text{experimental}} = 5.59$ ,  $SD = 0.92$ ;  $M_{\text{control}} = 4.79$ ,  $SD = 1.25$ ),  $t(298) = 6.37$ ,  $p < .0001$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.73$ ).

**Perceived Strategic Self-Presentation.** The manager was perceived as less likely to be engaging in strategic self-presentation when he disclosed a weakness relative to when he did not ( $M_{\text{experimental}} = 5.08$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ ;  $M_{\text{control}} = 5.73$ ,  $SD = 1.23$ ),  $t(298) = -4.67$ ,  $p < .0001$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.54$ .

**Mediation.** Bootstrapping analyses (with 10,000 resamples) showed that perceived strategic self-presentation mediated the relationship between weakness disclosure and perceived authenticity: the index of indirect effect excluded zero ( $b = .100$ ,  $SE = .046$ , 95% CI [.027, .211]), suggesting a significant indirect effect (Hayes, 2017).

Specifically, self-disclosure of a weakness decreased perceptions of strategic self-presentation ( $b = -.650$ ,  $SE = .139$ ),  $t(298) = -4.67$ ,  $p < .0001$ , which in turn heightened perceived authenticity ( $b = -.153$ ,  $SE = .052$ ),  $t(298) = -2.96$ ,  $p = .003$ . Perceptions of strategic self-presentation explain 14.5% of the variance in perceived authenticity.

In sum, and consistent with our theorizing, Study 3 suggests that when a leader reveals a weakness, observers are less likely to think he is engaging in strategic self-presentation, which, in turn, increases perceived authenticity.

## Section 2: Live Interactions and Behavioral Outcomes

So far, via vignette and video paradigms, we have documented that leaders can come across as authentic when they reveal weaknesses, and that this effect is driven by dampened perceptions of strategic self-presentation. And, pointing to the distinctiveness of the effect, it holds when controlling for perceptions of warmth and competence. The goals of Section 2 were twofold: to further increase realism by using live interaction paradigms; and to assesses positive behavioral consequences of leaders' self-disclosure of weaknesses—consequences downstream from the effect on perceived authenticity identified in Section 1. Specifically, we show that leaders' sensitive self-disclosure produces credible positive outcomes: employees are willing to risk their own money at the hands of the leader (Study 4A), and to choose to work with that leader for a subsequent task (Study 4B). Moreover, tying these patterns back to the basic effect identified in Section 1, in Section 2, we also show that the positive behavioral consequences of a leader's sensitive self-disclosure are mediated by perceived authenticity.

### Study 4A: In-Person Interaction Study

In Study 4A, participants engaged in a face-to-face, simulated employment task. In this interaction, the participant randomly assigned to the role of manager was privately instructed to disclose—or to not disclose—a weakness to the other participant, who was randomly assigned to the role of prospective employee. In an incentive-compatible task, we then assessed whether employees were willing to entrust the manager with their money. Secondly, we also assessed whether managers instructed to disclose a weakness would accurately predict that doing so would lead to positive behavioral outcomes (relative to managers randomly assigned to *not* disclose a weakness).

#### Method

The study was a single-factor (weakness disclosed vs. control) between-subjects design; the primary measures were perceived authenticity, willingness to work with the manager, and an incentive-compatible behavioral outcome.

**Participants.** We recruited students and community members ( $N = 218$ , 99 males;  $M_{\text{age}} = 22.3$  years,  $SD = 4.3$ ; White: 40.8%; Part-time employed: 42%; Full-time employed: 4%) to come to a

<sup>1</sup> We also measured perceived competence in some of the studies in Sections 2 and 3. Consistent with Studies 1 and 2, the results hold when we control for competence. Due to space constraints, however, we report these secondary results in the supplement.

lab at a northeastern university. Participants received a \$15 base payment plus study earnings, as described below.

**Materials and Procedure.** In a simulated hiring task, we randomly assigned half of participants to the role of manager and the other half to the role of prospective employee, and randomly grouped participants into manager–employee dyads. Participants began the session in individual cubicles, where they were informed of their assigned role and given information on the task to follow.

At the start of the study, prospective employees were told that they would be participating in a simulated employment task and that in a moment, they would meet their potential manager, who would have a task for them to complete. Therefore, they were told, the manager would be evaluating the prospective employee's performance on the task.

Managers were informed that they would be meeting their potential employee for their team and would assign the employee a ten-item "word correction" task. The word-correcting task served as a cover story. Managers were further informed that in a few minutes, they would meet their employee, at which point they should introduce themselves using a script provided for this purpose. Critically, the script manipulated whether managers would disclose a weakness. Specifically, in the *control* condition, managers were instructed to introduce themselves by saying:

Hi, I am [name], the manager. I am going to direct the task and the standards by which the work is to be evaluated. In addition, I will also evaluate you at the end of the session in a private questionnaire. Let me introduce myself a little bit: I am the president of the graduate student association at the university. I get to travel often to cities across the country to give presentations. I enjoy what I do.

In the *experimental* condition, the script was the same, except that the following sentences were appended to the end: "I'm quite shy. I am nervous about public speaking, and I have a habit of cracking my knuckles."

Next, participants were randomly assigned to manager–employee dyads; each dyad was ushered into their own private room to complete the task. Managers were given a few minutes to practice the script so that they could deliver it from memory, without a written script, when they introduced themselves to the employees. Next, the manager assigned the employee the task and, using a stopwatch, gave the employee 1 min to complete it.

**Survey Measures.** After the task, participants returned to their individual cubicles. Each prospective employee assessed their manager's authenticity ( $\alpha = .88$ ) as in Study 1, and their desire to work with the manager: "Would you want to be paired with this manager again for a subsequent task?" measured on a 7-point scale from 1 (*want to work with a different manager*) to 7 (*want to work with this manager*).

Managers indicated how they thought the prospective employee viewed them; specifically, we asked managers: "Do you think the prospective employee would want to be paired with you as a manager again for a subsequent task?" on a scale from 1 (*want to work with a different manager*) to 7 (*want to work with this manager*).

Finally, both managers and prospective employees indicated whether they knew each other before the experiment; three pairs did, and therefore were excluded from the data analysis, leaving 212 participants. The results are substantively equivalent when these three dyads are included.

**Incentive-Compatible Behavioral Outcome Measure.** Participants engaged in a trust game (Berg et al., 1995), which served as an incentive-compatible measure of cooperative behavior (Cesarini et al., 2008; Epley et al., 2006). Essentially, we were interested in whether employees' positive assessments of a leader who self-discloses a weakness might manifest in a willingness to entrust the manager with their money; the trust game measures the extent to which people are willing to put their own money at risk by entrusting their counterpart (in this case, the manager) with it.

We explained the game to participants, telling them that the employee would receive an initial endowment of \$3 (in quarters), and would have to decide how much, if any, of this money to transfer to the manager. Any amount transferred would be tripled. Next, the manager would decide how much, if any, of this tripled amount s/he would like to send back to the employee.

Participants were encouraged to ask questions or reread the instructions if they did not understand how the game worked. Upon checking a box labeled "I understand how the game works," participants proceeded to the game, with each employee indicating how much, if any, money to transfer to their manager, and with the manager then indicating how much, if any, of this money to return to their employee. Participants were given real money to play the trust game and could earn as much as \$9 (plus the \$15 base payment). At the end of the experiment, participants provided demographic information and were debriefed.

## Results

### Employees.

**Perceived Authenticity.** Prospective employees perceived their manager as more authentic when their manager disclosed a weakness relative to when s/he did not ( $M_{\text{experimental}} = 5.43$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ;  $M_{\text{control}} = 4.92$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ ),  $t(104) = 2.42$ ,  $p = .017$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.49$ .

**Willingness to Work With the Manager.** Prospective employees were more interested in continuing to work with their manager when that manager disclosed a weakness relative to when s/he did not ( $M_{\text{experimental}} = 5.41$ ,  $SD = 1.34$ ;  $M_{\text{control}} = 4.78$ ,  $SD = 1.38$ ),  $t(104) = 2.37$ ,  $p = .019$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.46$ .

**Incentive-Compatible Behavioral Outcome.** Prospective employees transferred more money when their manager disclosed a weakness relative to when s/he did not ( $M_{\text{experimental}} = \$2.39$ ,  $SD = 0.84$ ;  $M_{\text{control}} = \$2.00$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ),  $t(104) = 2.04$ ,  $p = .043$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.41$ .

**Mediation.** We conducted a mediation analysis with willingness to work as the dependent variable to test mediation by authenticity. A 10,000-sample bootstrap analysis (Hayes, 2017, Model 4) showed that the index of mediation excluded zero ( $b = .330$ ,  $SE = .146$ , 95% CI [.078, .652]), indicating a significant indirect effect. Perceived authenticity explained 30.2% of the variance in willingness to work. We observed similar mediation analyses results with incentive-compatible behavioral outcome—money allocation ( $b = .130$ ,  $SE = .069$ , 95% CI [.028, .315]) as dependent variable, again indicating a significant indirect effect. The direction of the mediations indicates that revealing a weakness increased perceived authenticity, in turn increasing both willingness to work with the manager, and money transferred. Perceived authenticity explained 11.8% of the variance in money allocation.



**Managers.** There were no differences between conditions in managers' predictions of whether the prospective employee would want to be paired with them again for a subsequent task ( $M_{\text{experimental}} = 4.81$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ;  $M_{\text{control}} = 4.56$ ,  $SD = 1.19$ ),  $t(104) = 1.16$ ,  $p = .25$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.22$ . This result suggests that would-be disclosers may be unaware of the benefits of sensitive self-disclosure: managers induced to disclose a weakness did not appear to anticipate that doing so would cause their employees to want to work with them. This result is consistent with the pilot study reported in the introduction, in which the majority of managers chose to *not* disclose a weakness in a self-introduction to a prospective employee.

## Study 4B: Online Interaction Study With Working Professionals

Study 4B replicates and extends Study 4A in several ways. In Study 4B, we further enhanced realism in two ways. First, instead of giving participants a script, in Study 4B participants' weakness disclosures were self-generated. Second, we recruited working professionals (as opposed to students and community members, as we had in Study 4A); participants in Study 4B worked in various industries, in a wide range of professions. In addition, Study 4B examined the effect in the context of a manager-employee relationship rather than in an interview context.

### Method

The study was a single-factor (weakness disclosed vs. control) between-subjects design; the primary measures were employees' perceptions of the manager's authenticity, and their willingness to work with that manager.

**Participants.** We recruited working professionals from Prolific ( $N = 400$ , 187 males;  $M_{\text{age}} = 30.5$  years,  $SD = 10.7$ ; White: 72.1%). We preregistered our hypotheses, sample size, and measures ([https://aspredicted.org/Z8N\\_GND](https://aspredicted.org/Z8N_GND)).

**Materials and Procedure.** We randomly assigned half of participants to the role of manager and the other half to the role of employee, randomly grouping them into manager-employee dyads in real time. We used Qualtrics and SMARTRIQS software to perform this matching (cf. Molnar, 2019). The matching procedure operates by having participants enter the survey at the same time—participants wait for up to 2 min until another participant joins; if no participant joins within 2 min, then the participant is thanked and paid for their participation. This procedure resulted in 80.3% of participants being matched (as indicated in our preregistration, our target sample size was 400 *matched* participants). Importantly, this matching procedure occurred prior to randomization.

Each dyad was given 4 min to chat, ostensibly to get to know each other before engaging in a task together. Critically, it was during this "get-acquainted" chat session that we induced the managers to either disclose a weakness (*experimental* condition) or not (*control* condition). Thus, prior to the chat session, participants were given the following information.

**Employees.** At the start of the study, employees were told that they would be participating in a task together with the manager. Before the task, they would chat with their manager using a chat window.

**Managers.** Managers were instructed to start the chat with the employee by introducing themselves and were randomly assigned to

one of the two conditions. In both conditions, before entering the chat, managers were told:

First, we would like you to chat with the employee, to get to know each other a bit. As the manager, you will start the conversation by telling your employee a bit about yourself. Please chat in a natural way and make sure you respond to your employee.

Further, managers were given specific information on what to include in their self-introduction, as follows:

What to include in your introduction:

1. Your profession (but not where you work).
2. What you are good at.

For managers assigned to the *experimental* condition, there was a third bullet point, which read: "3. A work-related weakness." To help managers come up with a weakness, we further told these participants:

For the work-related weakness, sometimes it's hard for people to come up with this. Here are some prompts that might help you come up with a weakness to reveal.

- Do you sometimes procrastinate? If so, you could say something like "I sometimes procrastinate and do things last minutes."
- Do you sometimes let your personal life interfere with your performance? If so, you could say something like "I have to admit that sometimes my personal life interferes with my job."
- Do you sometimes arrive late? If so, you could say something like "I am only human . . . occasionally I start work a little late."

Next, each pair was given 4 min to chat freely in a chat box in real time. After the chat, employees completed several measures, described next. Managers provided demographic information, were debriefed that there was no additional task, and paid.

**Measures.** Employees rated their managers' perceived authenticity, as in Study 4A. Employees were also asked to choose whether they would like to work with the manager to complete the task:

For a subsequent task you are going to complete, you have the option to choose whether you want to work with this manager or to be paired with another manager. How much are you willing to work with the manager in the subsequent task?

on a scale of 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*). The order of authenticity and willingness to work questions were counter-balanced. Next, all participants were asked: "Did you feel the chat to be natural?" (1 = *yes*, 2 = *no*), provided demographic information, and were debriefed.

## Results

**Managers.** All matched managers chatted with their employees. About 92.3% of participants indicated that they thought the chat to be natural. Compliance was high: In the control condition, no managers disclosed a weakness, whereas in the experimental condition, 94.0% did so. A research assistant coded the managers'

disclosures; they disclosed a wide range of work-related weaknesses: 22.3% disclosed weaknesses in time management (e.g., procrastinating, being late for work), 19.1% in stress management, 18.1% in public speaking, 10.6% in social struggle, 7.4% in project management, 6.4% in the ability to focus, 5.3% in being patient, and 1.1% in being overconfident. We adopt an intent-to-treat approach to data analysis, whereby all employees were included in analysis, regardless of whether their manager complied. The results remained significant when the noncompliers were removed from the analysis.<sup>2</sup>

### Employees.

**Perceived Authenticity.** Employees perceived their manager as more authentic when their manager was instructed to disclose a weakness relative to when s/he was not ( $M_{\text{experimental}} = 4.96$ ,  $SD = 1.35$ ;  $M_{\text{control}} = 4.43$ ,  $SD = 1.73$ ),  $t(198) = 2.45$ ,  $p = .015$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.34$ .

**Willingness to Work With the Manager for a Subsequent Task.** Employees were more interested in working with their manager when their manager was instructed to disclose a weakness relative to when s/he was not ( $M_{\text{experimental}} = 5.41$ ,  $SD = 1.43$ ;  $M_{\text{control}} = 4.90$ ,  $SD = 1.91$ ),  $t(198) = 2.14$ ,  $p = .034$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.30$ .

**Mediation.** We conducted a mediation analysis with willingness to work as the dependent variable to test mediation by authenticity. A 10,000-sample bootstrap analysis (Hayes, 2017; Model 4) showed that the index of mediation excluded zero ( $b = .359$ ,  $SE = .157$ , 95% CI [.083, .703]), suggesting a significant indirect effect. The direction of the mediation indicates that revealing a weakness increased perceived authenticity, which in turn increased willingness to work with the manager. Perceived authenticity explained 39.1% of the variance in willingness to work.

In sum, Studies 4A and 4B provide converging evidence that sensitive self-disclosure can make leaders come across as authentic, resulting in positive downstream consequences, such as a heightened interest in working for that leader.

## Section 3: Moderators

In Section 3, we test theory-derived moderators: voluntariness (Study 5) and status (Study 6). First, we predicted that downstream positive consequences of revealing weaknesses in the workplace are limited to situations in which the disclosure is made voluntarily, as opposed to by requirement (Study 5). Second, we predicted that these consequences would be pronounced when the disclosure is made by someone of relatively high status (Study 6).

### Study 5: Voluntariness

In Study 5, participants read a manager's disclosure and indicated their willingness to work with that manager, as well as their perceptions of that manager's authenticity. The study was a 2 × 2 between-subjects design; we manipulated the disclosure (weakness disclosed vs. no weakness disclosed), and the voluntariness of the disclosure (voluntary vs. required). We measured participants' perceptions of the manager's authenticity, and their willingness to work with the manager. We predicted an interaction such that interest in working for the manager would be heightened only in the condition in which the weakness was disclosed voluntarily, as opposed to by requirement. We also predicted that this effect would

arise via gains in perceived authenticity—that is, we predicted moderated mediation.

## Method

**Participants.** U.S. MTurk workers ( $N = 392$ , 174 males;  $M_{\text{age}} = 29.8$  years,  $SD = 12.3$ ; White: 80%; Median income: \$50,000–\$99,999) participated.

**Materials and Procedure.** Participants read how a previous participant had ostensibly introduced themselves in a prior experiment:

I am a manager of a technological company. I began my career as an engineer at this company. Thanks to shrewd acquisitions, the firm is now one of the big companies in the field. As a manager, I take care of my staff, offering health benefits even to part-timers. I like to climb mountains in Colorado and collect American folk art.

We manipulated whether the manager disclosed a weakness by, for half of randomly selected participants, appending the following self-disclosure: "Even though I am a manager of the company, I am nervous about public speaking and I have a habit of cracking my knuckles."

We manipulated whether the manager's disclosures were made voluntarily by informing half of participants that the disclosure had been required. (In the *voluntary* condition, we simply omitted this note, on the assumption that, unless stated otherwise, participants would assume that the disclosure had been made voluntarily.) Specifically, when the manager had disclosed a weakness, participants randomly assigned to the *required disclosure* condition were further told that: "In the previous study, the individual was required to include some negative [positive] self-relevant information in the introduction."

**Measures.** We measured participants' perceptions of the manager's authenticity ( $\alpha = .92$ ) as in Study 1. We measured participants' willingness to work with the manager. Specifically, participants were asked "If you were looking for a job and were offered a job from this manager, how likely would you accept the job and work for the manager?" on a 7-point scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*). The order of the two sets of questions was randomly assigned.

## Results

**Perceived Authenticity.** A 2 × 2 analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed a main effect of disclosing a weakness,  $F(1, 388) = 17.43$ ,  $p < .0001$ : The manager was viewed as more authentic when he disclosed a weakness relative to when he did not ( $M_{\text{weakness}} = 5.57$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ ;  $M_{\text{no\_weakness}} = 5.11$ ,  $SD = 1.06$ ),  $t(388) = 4.17$ ,  $p < .0001$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.44$ . However, this main effect was qualified by an interaction,  $F(1, 388) = 4.90$ ,  $p = .027$ , which suggested that the authenticity benefit of revealing a weakness was driven by managers who had done so voluntarily, as

<sup>2</sup> The results held when we excluded the 6.0% of employees whose manager did not comply with the disclosure manipulation: Perceived authenticity:  $M_{\text{experimental}} = 4.98$ ,  $SD = 1.35$ ;  $M_{\text{control}} = 4.43$ ,  $SD = 1.73$ ,  $t(192) = 2.45$ ,  $p = .015$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.35$ . Willingness to work:  $M_{\text{experimental}} = 5.45$ ,  $SD = 1.42$ ;  $M_{\text{control}} = 4.90$ ,  $SD = 1.91$ ,  $t(192) = 2.25$ ,  $p = .025$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.33$ . The mediation still held ( $b = .370$ ,  $SE = .160$ , 95% CI = [.083, .706]).

opposed to by requirement. Specifically, when managers voluntarily revealed a weakness, they were perceived as more authentic relative to when they only voluntarily revealed their strengths ( $M_{\text{weakness\_volunteered}} = 5.75$ ,  $SD = 0.96$ ;  $M_{\text{no\_weakness\_volunteered}} = 5.06$ ,  $SD = 1.06$ ),  $t(193) = 4.52$ ,  $p < .0001$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.68$ . However, when managers were required to reveal a weakness, this difference disappeared ( $M_{\text{weakness\_required}} = 5.39$ ,  $SD = 1.17$ ;  $M_{\text{no\_weakness\_required}} = 5.18$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ),  $t(195) = 1.39$ ,  $p = .17$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.18$ .

**Willingness to Work With the Leader.** Mirroring the authenticity results, a  $2 \times 2$  ANOVA revealed that disclosing a weakness only increased willingness to work with the manager when he did so voluntarily ( $M_{\text{weakness\_volunteered}} = 5.85$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ ;  $M_{\text{no\_weakness\_volunteered}} = 5.51$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ),  $t(193) = 2.19$ ,  $p < .03$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.32$ , as opposed to by requirement ( $M_{\text{weakness\_required}} = 5.59$ ,  $SD = 1.00$ ;  $M_{\text{no\_weakness\_required}} = 5.66$ ,  $SD = 1.15$ ),  $t(195) = -0.43$ ,  $p = .66$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.07$ .

**Moderated Mediation.** A moderated mediation analysis with willingness to work with the leader (10,000 sample bootstrap analysis, Hayes, 2017, Model 7) indicated that the index of moderated mediation excluded zero ( $b = .301$ ,  $SE = .132$ , 95% CI [.051, .570]), suggesting a significant indirect effect. Authenticity mediated the relationship between disclosure of weaknesses and willingness to work when disclosure was done voluntarily ( $b = .434$ ,  $SE = .098$ , 95% CI [.256, .641]) but not when disclosure was by requirement ( $b = .133$ ,  $SE = .101$ , 95% CI [-.059, .338]). Perceived authenticity explained 39.0% of the variance in willingness to work.

In sum, Study 5 suggests that for leaders to reap benefits from self-disclosing weaknesses, they must do so voluntarily.

## Study 6: Status

In Study 6, we test the hypothesis that positive outcomes arising from self-disclosing weaknesses mainly emerge for high-status disclosers. The study was a  $2 \times 2$  between-subjects design; we manipulated the disclosure (weakness disclosed vs. no weakness disclosed) and the discloser's status (*high* vs. *low*). We measured participants' perceptions of the manager's authenticity and their willingness to work with that manager. We predicted an interaction, such that there would be heightened interest in working for a high status, but not for a low status, colleague who disclosed a weakness. And, as in Study 5, we also predicted that this effect would arise via gains in perceived authenticity—that is, we predicted moderated mediation.

## Method

**Participants.** U.S. MTurk workers ( $N = 614$ , 310 males;  $M_{\text{age}} = 41.4$  years,  $SD = 12.9$ ) participated.

**Materials and Procedure.** Similar to prior studies, participants imagined that they were a new employee in the role of an analyst of a (fictitious) company called RockInvest and were meeting different people with whom they could choose to work. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions. We manipulated discloser status by randomizing participants to imagine that Elis was either one of the senior managers (*high-status* condition) or one their peers (*low-status* condition). In all condition, Elis started with saying

I began my career at RockInvest. The company, launched in 1988, initially focused on bonds. But thanks to shrewd acquisitions, the firm is now the world's largest asset manager, with \$870 billion, offering a slew of equity funds and multi-asset funds.

Participants were then randomly assigned to one of two conditions: a condition in which Elis disclosed a weakness (*weakness*), or a condition in which he did not disclose a weakness (*no weakness*). In the weakness condition, they read: "About myself, I need to fly several times a month, but I am afraid of flying." In the no weakness condition, this sentence instead read: "About myself, I need to fly several times a month, and I enjoy flying."

**Pretest.** We conducted a pretest to ascertain whether the disclosed weakness was perceived as similarly sensitive across the status manipulation. We randomly assigned U.S. MTurk participants ( $N = 391$ , 172 males;  $M_{\text{age}} = 37.0$  years,  $SD = 11.8$ ) to one of the above four conditions in a  $2$  (weakness vs. no weakness)  $\times$   $2$  (high vs. low status) between-subjects design. We told these pretest participants:

We are interested in your judgment of the sensitivity of information that Elis disclosed to you above. By "sensitive" we mean information that is risky for Elis to disclose, in the sense of making him vulnerable to negative consequences arising from that disclosure.

We then asked: "How vulnerable, if at all, is Elis making himself in disclosing this information?" on a scale from 1 to 5 (1 = *not at all*; 5 = *extremely vulnerable*).

A  $2 \times 2$  ANOVA revealed only a main effect of disclosing a weakness,  $F(1, 387) = 18.31$ ,  $p < .0001$ : disclosing a fear of flying made Elis more vulnerable relative to when he did not do so ( $M_{\text{Weakness}} = 2.15$ ,  $SD = 0.85$ ;  $M_{\text{No-Weakness}} = 1.79$ ,  $SD = 0.81$ ),  $t(387) = 4.38$ ,  $p < .0001$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.44$ . Importantly, there was no other main effect or interaction, suggesting that the weakness disclosure was seen as equally sensitive across status, hence, the disclosure manipulation was equally strong as a function of status.

**Measures.** Participants provided their perceptions of the discloser's authenticity ( $\alpha = .96$ ) as in Study 1, and willingness to work with the manager as in Study 5 with one question "How much are you willing to work with Elis?"

## Results

**Perceived Authenticity.** A  $2 \times 2$  ANOVA revealed a main effect of disclosing a weakness,  $F(1, 610) = 36.68$ ,  $p < .0001$ : The person was viewed as more authentic when he disclosed a weakness relative to when he did not ( $M_{\text{weakness}} = 5.27$ ,  $SD = 1.19$ ;  $M_{\text{no\_weakness}} = 4.64$ ,  $SD = 1.40$ ),  $t(612) = 6.05$ ,  $p < .0001$ . This main effect was qualified by an interaction,  $F(1, 610) = 8.19$ ,  $p = .004$ , which suggested that the authenticity benefit of revealing a weakness was stronger for managers compared to nonmanagers. Specifically, disclosing a weakness boosted perceived authenticity of both the high-status discloser ( $M_{\text{Weakness\_HighStatus}} = 5.46$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ ;  $M_{\text{NoWeakness\_HighStatus}} = 4.53$ ,  $SD = 1.39$ ),  $t(308) = 6.34$ ,  $p < .0001$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.75$ , and low-status discloser ( $M_{\text{Weakness\_LowStatus}} = 5.08$ ,  $SD = 1.46$ ;  $M_{\text{NoWeakness\_LowStatus}} = 4.75$ ,  $SD = 1.34$ ),  $t(302) = 2.25$ ,  $p = .025$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.24$ . However, the effect size is greater for the high-status discloser.

**Willingness to Work With the Discloser.** A  $2 \times 2$  ANOVA revealed a main effect of status,  $F(1, 610) = 7.91$ ,  $p = .005$ , a main effect of weakness disclosure,  $F(1, 610) = 15.83$ ,  $p < .0001$ ,

qualified by an interaction,  $F(1, 610) = 4.54, p = .034$ : When the discloser was high status, disclosing a weakness enhanced participants' interest in working with him ( $M_{\text{Weakness\_HighStatus}} = 5.78, SD = 1.14$ ;  $M_{\text{NoWeakness\_HighStatus}} = 5.09, SD = 1.50$ ),  $t(308) = 4.34, p < .0001$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.52$ —this effect was not observed when the discloser was low status ( $M_{\text{Weakness\_LowStatus}} = 5.22, SD = 1.47$ ;  $M_{\text{NoWeakness\_LowStatus}} = 5.01, SD = 1.47$ ),  $t(302) = 1.30, p = .19$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.14$ .

**Moderated Mediation.** We conducted a moderated mediation analysis with willingness to work with the discloser as the dependent variable. A 10,000-sample bootstrap analysis (Model 7) showed that the index of moderated mediation excluded zero ( $b = .460, SE = .175, 95\% \text{ CI } [.129, .811]$ ), suggesting a significant indirect effect (Hayes, 2017). Authenticity mediated the relationship between disclosure of weaknesses and willingness to work for high-status disclosers ( $b = .736, SE = .123, 95\% \text{ CI } [.510, .992]$ ) and for low-status disclosers ( $b = .277, SE = .128, 95\% \text{ CI } [.026, .527]$ ), but the effect is stronger for high-status disclosers.

In sum, Study 6 suggests that positive outcomes arising from self-disclosing weaknesses are stronger for high-status disclosers.

#### Section 4: Field Evidence

In Section 4, we conclude by presenting anecdotal field evidence consistent with the causal effects identified in Sections 1–3. Specifically, data from a professional social networking platform reveal a positive association between sensitive self-disclosure and subordinates' reactions to those revelations. Another feature of this study is that we used a broader definition of sensitive self-disclosure: whereas the studies so far have operationalized sensitive self-disclosure in terms of revealing a weakness; here, we code any disclosure judged as making the discloser vulnerable to negative judgment, as sensitive (cf. Derlega et al., 1993). As such, this study speaks to the generalizability of the effect. In addition, given the variation in status among users, we test for the moderating effect of status.

#### Study 7: Leaders' Sensitive Self-Disclosure on a Social Networking Platform

We obtained a large dataset from a social networking platform that allows professionals to connect with other relevant professionals both within their company and across their industry. We assessed the positivity of reactions to senior leaders' posts as a function of whether the post contained a sensitive self-disclosure. This platform presents an ideal context for our research, because in addition to housing common, nonrevelatory, and even self-promoting posts as on LinkedIn, self-disclosive posts are also prevalent.

We obtained a large anonymized dataset of posts and comments from senior leaders on this platform, as well as the reactions (i.e., "likes" and comments) that these posts garnered. Using machine learning, we trained a classifier on a set of human-coded data and predicted labels for the remaining set of the data. In other words, we first had human coders code a small subset of posts and comments for the presence versus absence of self-disclosive content. Next, we trained a machine learning algorithm to categorize the remaining sample as either sensitive or nonsensitive disclosure. Our primary interest was in testing whether reactions to, and comments on, these posts and comments differed as a function of whether the content

was self-disclosive. We hypothesized that self-disclosive content would garner more positive reactions and comments relative to less disclosive content. Second, although our dataset consisted only of senior leaders' posts, there was nonetheless variation in status; partners are the highest status in this sample, followed by directors, followed by principals. Thus, this variation allowed for a convergent test of our hypothesis, supported in Study 6, that the effect is moderated by status. Specifically, as our dataset consists entirely of senior leaders' posts, our account holds that the positive effect of self-disclosive posts may be observed across the ranks in the sample; however, it also predicts an interaction, such that the positive effect increases with status.

#### Method

**Data.** Our dataset consists of posts and comments from senior leaders on a professional social networking platform, as well as reactions to, and comments on, those posts. A post is the initiation of a new topic or thought. As on Facebook, fellow users can then respond to that post in two ways: by reacting and/or commenting. A reaction entails pressing a button to choose one of five possible reactions, all of which are positive: "like" (the default), "helpful," "funny," "uplifting," or "smart." A comment is a written response to the post (and, in turn, people can react to, and comment on, comments). Unlike Facebook, this social network is exclusive; at the time of data collection, it only granted access to those employed at certain firms within consulting and advertising. The platform only requires that users reveal their rank and/or employer. We requested the posts and comments from all senior leaders (operationalized as principals and above) within consulting firms, and the reactions and comments accompanying these posts and comments. We focused on consulting firms because of its strict hierarchy (advertising firms tend to have flatter organizational structures).

Our dataset consisted of 1,484 posts, which, collectively, garnered 159,221 reactions and 33,589 comments. The vast majority (93%) of reactions were "likes"; the remaining 7% were distributed as follows: 6.1% "funny," 0.98% "smart," 0.73% "helpful," and 0.73% "uplifting." The number of reactions garnered by any given post or comment ranged from zero to 1,121; however, most (78%) garnered between zero and five reactions. Posts generally received more reactions than comments: the modal number of reactions was one for posts and zero for comments; the average number of reactions was nine for posts and four for comments.

**Procedure.** First, one of the authors worked iteratively with three research assistants to develop a binary coding scheme to code all (1,484) posts and a random selection of 2,000 comments. We conducted a sensitivity analysis using GPower (Faul et al., 2009) to find the low bound of effect size. The analysis, assuming two-tailed  $\alpha = 0.05$  and 80% power, revealed a minimum effect size of  $d = 0.05$  (this sensitivity analysis is a rough estimate only, as our analysis was nonparametric). Hereafter, we refer to these posts and comments as "observations." This quantity of observations was large enough to train a machine learning algorithm, yet reasonable for human coders to code manually. Observations containing sensitive self-disclosure were coded as 1; those not displaying such disclosure were coded as 0.

Per prior work, we defined sensitive self-disclosure as information that made the discloser vulnerable to being judged negatively by others (cf. Derlega et al., 1993; Kelly & McKillop, 1996;



Laurenceau et al., 1998; Moon, 2000). The human coding process went as follows: The team of four coders independently coded approximately ten randomly selected observations, resolved disagreements by discussion, and used that discussion to build a refined understanding of what, within this context, qualifies as sensitive self-disclosure. The team repeated this process twice for a total of approximately 30 randomly selected observations. Next, two of the research assistants independently coded approximately 50 additional randomly selected observations. Their agreement rate was 79.4%. Disagreements were resolved via discussion. One of the research assistants then coded the remaining ~3,400 observations.

Next, we used the 3,484 human-coded observations to train a classifier capable of predicting labels for the remaining 31,589 observations that had not been human-coded. To do so, we used Bidirectional Encoder Representations for Transformers (BERT; Devlin et al., 2018), the state-of-the-art deep-learning model in natural language processing which has recently received attention and been applied in different setting by researchers (Hartmann et al., 2021; Puranam et al., 2021). BERT learns contextual relations between words in text data. When used as a classifier, BERT adds a neural layer on top of the base model and predicts a label for a given input text.

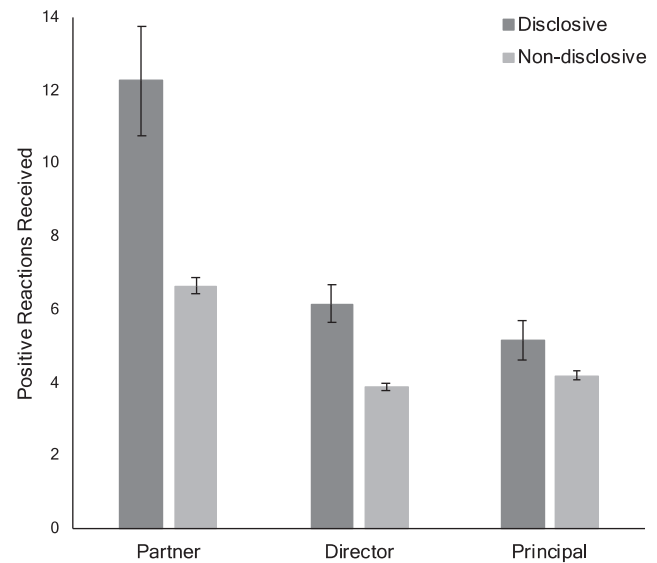
We tested the predictive validity of the classifier by training it on a randomly selected sample of 80% of the 3,484 human-coded observations and applying it to the 20% holdout sample. The classifier achieved 96% accuracy in this holdout sample—that is, for 96% of observations, the classifier’s categorization agreed with that of the human-coder classification.

## Results

Posts and comments categorized as self-disclosive garnered more (positive) reactions relative to nonself-disclosive ones ( $M_{\text{disclosive}} = 6.98$ ,  $SD = 16.15$ ;  $M_{\text{nondisclosive}} = 4.44$ ,  $SD = 14.04$ ),  $t(1529.1) = -5.89$ ,  $p < .001$ , Cohen’s  $d = 0.17$ ). Looking at the different reactions separately; each reaction type, with the exception of “funny” was more prevalent for self-disclosive posts relative to no-self-disclosive ones: likes ( $M_{\text{disclosive}} = 6.41$ ,  $SD = 14.38$ ;  $M_{\text{nondisclosive}} = 4.06$ ,  $SD = 12.06$ ),  $t(1517.1) = -5.94$ ,  $p < .001$ , Cohen’s  $d = 0.18$ ; helpful ( $M_{\text{disclosive}} = 0.09$ ,  $SD = 0.51$ ;  $M_{\text{nondisclosive}} = 0.04$ ,  $SD = 0.30$ ),  $t(1477.9) = -3.41$ ,  $p < .001$ , Cohen’s  $d = 0.12$ ; uplifting ( $M_{\text{disclosive}} = 0.10$ ,  $SD = 0.68$ ;  $M_{\text{nondisclosive}} = 0.03$ ,  $SD = 0.29$ ),  $t(1457.8) = -3.61$ ,  $p < .001$ , Cohen’s  $d = 0.13$ ; smart ( $M_{\text{disclosive}} = 0.06$ ,  $SD = 0.30$ ;  $M_{\text{nondisclosive}} = 0.03$ ,  $SD = 0.23$ ),  $t(1,494) = -3.4$ ,  $p < .001$ , Cohen’s  $d = 0.11$ ; funny ( $M_{\text{disclosive}} = 0.32$ ,  $SD = 1.90$ ;  $M_{\text{nondisclosive}} = 0.27$ ,  $SD = 2.87$ ),  $t(1727.3) = -0.94$ ,  $p = .35$ , Cohen’s  $d = 0.02$ ). Results are equivalent when analyzing the two types of observations—posts versus comments—separately (see the Supplemental Materials).

Further, there was a significant interaction between self-disclosiveness and status ( $\beta = 2.32$ ,  $p < .001$ ; Figure 2): self-disclosive posts and comments received more reactions when the discloser was of higher status. Specifically, self-disclosive posts by partners were particularly likely to receive garner positive reactions,  $M_{\text{disclosive}} = 12.26$ ,  $SD = 23.29$ ;  $M_{\text{nondisclosive}} = 6.65$ ,  $SD = 16.91$ ,  $t(256.61) = -3.74$ ,  $p < .001$ , Cohen’s  $d = 0.28$ ; followed by directors,  $M_{\text{disclosive}} = 6.17$ ,  $SD = 15.36$ ;  $M_{\text{nondisclosive}} = 3.89$ ,  $SD = 14.34$ ,  $t(912.85) = -4.22$ ,  $p < .001$ , Cohen’s  $d = 0.15$ ;

**Figure 2**  
Status Moderation Results for Study 7



followed by principals,  $M_{\text{disclosive}} = 5.18$ ,  $SD = 9.89$ ;  $M_{\text{nondisclosive}} = 4.19$ ,  $SD = 11.47$ ,  $t(374.54) = -1.81$ ,  $p = .07$ , Cohen’s  $d = 0.09$ .

The above results are based on a binary coding scheme—each observation was coded as either containing, or not containing, a sensitive self-disclosure. In a supplementary analysis (see full details in the Supplemental Materials), we asked two research assistants to code all 1,484 posts on a scale of 1 (*not sensitive at all*) to 5 (*very much sensitive*); their ratings were highly correlated ( $r = .84$ ) and disagreements were not more than one score apart. We then used the average of the two coders’ scores for each post to train a BERT model to predict the sensitivity scores for the remaining data. There was a positive correlation between sensitivity score and positive reactions ( $r = .08$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Results held when analyzing the two types of observations—posts versus comments—separately (see the Supplemental Materials).

In sum, these results are consistent with our basic hypothesis, revealing an association between leaders’ propensity to engage in sensitive self-disclosure, and the positive reactions that this activity appears to garner. That said, we acknowledge that positive reactions on social media may not always be indicative of positive reactions in face-to-face interactions.

## General Discussion

Although authenticity in organizations has benefits, leaders, in particular, face barriers to being perceived as such (Hahl & Zuckerman, 2014). We show that leaders can increase perceptions of their authenticity by engaging in sensitive self-disclosure—and that this effect is mediated by dampened perceptions of strategic self-presentation. Moreover, the increased perceptions of authenticity arising from leaders’ sensitive self-disclosures translate into broader desirable outcomes (e.g., willingness to work for the leader). Also consistent with our conceptual account, these positive effects are extinguished when the self-disclosure is involuntary and pronounced when the self-discloser is of relatively high status.

## Contribution to Theory

Most importantly, our research contributes to the leadership as well as authenticity literatures. Indeed, [Hewlin et al. \(2020\)](#) called for more research focusing on the dynamics and role of authenticity in the organizational context. The concept of authenticity (either experienced and perceived) has been attracting a lot of attention from psychologists and management scholars, as well as popular press (for recent reviews, see [Cha et al., 2019](#); [Lehman et al., 2019](#); [Sedikides et al., 2019](#)). As we reviewed briefly, felt and perceived authenticity has been linked to numerous positive outcomes at work. However, questions related to what makes some people to be perceived as authentic and does perceived authenticity matter or not are largely unanswered. Here, we examine the role of sensitive self-disclosure on perceived authenticity and document the positive consequences for perceived authenticity for high-status employees. Given that leaders are prone to being perceived as inauthentic ([Hahl & Zuckerman, 2014](#)) and given the organizational benefits of having authentic leaders ([Avolio et al., 2004](#); [Norman et al., 2010](#)), uncovering how, when, and whose self-disclosure can boost perceived authenticity is important. Our theory suggests that for leaders to realize the benefits of sensitive self-disclosure, the disclosure has to be voluntary in nature. Importantly, we found that the positive effect of engaging in sensitive self-disclosure also emerge for female leaders.

We also contribute to the self-disclosure literature. Whereas past research has emphasized the relationship between self-disclosure and liking ([Collins & Miller, 1994](#)), we focus on the role of self-disclosure in work relationships, specifically in the context of leader–follower relationships, and we demonstrate the effect of self-disclosure on perceptions of authenticity and subsequent outcomes over and above liking. Similar to [Gibson et al. \(2018\)](#), our work broadens the scope of self-disclosure from dyad relationships to organizationally relevant settings. Complementing [Gibson et al. \(2018\)](#), our work suggests that perceived authenticity is a unique input to work-relevant interpersonal outcomes.

Accordingly, since we show a positive effect of self-disclosure, namely on perceptions of authenticity, that is distinct from the previously documented effect on liking, we also demonstrate process evidence. Specifically, prior work has shown that the positive relationship between self-disclosure and liking is driven by interpersonal attributions—that is, by inferences that the discloser is engaging in sensitive self-disclosure in the interest of having rapport with the recipient ([Jiang et al., 2011](#); [Kashian et al., 2017](#)). In contrast, we show that the sensitive self-disclosure authenticity link is driven by a different type of attribution, namely, dispositional ones: perceptions of the discloser’s motivations for engaging in sensitive self-disclosure. Future work may further distinguish these two types of attribution processes.

Finally, our research contributes to the self-presentation literature by uncovering one way to soften the “braggart” image that is associated with self-promotion, and focusing on the work-related relationships in organizations. Motivated by self-presentation concerns, actors seek to maximize their perceived competence by self-promoting; however, self-promotion can decrease liking without boosting perceived competence ([Scopelliti et al., 2015](#)). We suggest that by disclosing weaknesses, leaders may be able to come across as more authentic and generate more favorable outcomes without diminishing perceptions of their competence.

## Contribution to Practice

Our research also offers practical implications. First and foremost, our research suggests that managers stand to benefit from revealing their weaknesses, at least to their subordinates. Interestingly, managers do not seem to intuit the benefits of such self-disclosure, raising the importance of disseminating our findings. Relatedly, disclosing weaknesses may not come naturally, especially to the high-achieving manager type. Thus, managers may need to be quite intentional, at least at first, in applying our insights, pointing to a potential paradox: if the self-disclosure comes across as overly planned, would this impede the disclosure from coming across as authentic? Our work would suggest yes—to the extent that such “premeditated” self-disclosures come across as involuntary. Future work could explore the best ways for managers to realize the benefits of sensitive self-disclosure, while mitigating its pitfalls.

Notably, we documented positive effects of sensitive self-disclosure even when controlling for liking. This finding may suggest that managers who are disliked could nonetheless benefit from sensitive self-disclosure, as it may at least make them come across as authentic. Finally, our research also speaks to the importance of self- and situational-awareness in realizing the benefits of sensitive self-disclosure. Specifically, Studies 6 and 7 imply that *relative* status matters, and this varies inherently from situation to situation: the higher relative status of the leader, it seems, the bigger the benefits of disclosing weaknesses. Thus, it behooves leaders to be aware of their position in the status hierarchy when using this work prescriptively.

## Future Research Directions

In addition to the future directions noted above, future work could identify additional moderators and boundary conditions. Although Study 7 operationalized “sensitive self-disclosure” as broader than disclosure of a workplace weakness (as in the other studies), additional research could systematically test other types of sensitive self-disclosures, to see our effects hold. For example, would they persist if the leader disclosed a disability or stigmatizing health condition? Relatedly, disclosure of serious weaknesses or immoral behavior may not forge positive impressions, for the authenticity gains of doing so may be offset by negative impressions. Relatedly, future work could assess whether knowing more diverse information about someone—that is, that speaks to a person’s multifacetedness—may produce similar positive effects as we have documented here.

Future research could also assess whether self-disclosure of weaknesses works equally for different people. We found the effect to hold for both male and female disclosers (see [Supplemental Study 1D](#)) but future research could explore other dimensions, such as the age and cultural background of the discloser. We showed the effect to emerge for high-status disclosers (Study 6); and the field data indicated that the higher status the discloser, the more pronounced the effect. Although status (i.e., respect and admiration) and power (i.e., resource control) are distinct constructs, they often co-occur (e.g., [Magee & Galinsky, 2008](#)); that is, organizational leaders are often high in both status and power. Future work could therefore explore the “off-diagonals” (e.g., [Blader et al., 2016](#); [Fast et al., 2012](#))—that is, what happens when a high-status but low-power individual makes sensitive self-disclosures relative to someone who

is low in status but high in power. In addition, even though we examined a wide range of sensitive self-disclosures relevant to work, future work can explore self-disclosures of other vulnerabilities such as disclosing of disabilities.

Another future direction would be to examine how audience size and audience structure influence the observed effect. Does self-disclosing weaknesses to a large audience (e.g., broadcasting) lead to higher or lower perceptions of authenticity than self-disclosing to a small audience (e.g., one person, or narrowcasting)? Past research suggests that actors' motives differ across audience size: Actors tend to focus on the audience when talking to one or two people (narrowcasting) but on the self when talking to a large group (broadcasting, Barasch & Berger, 2014). However, from the recipients' perspective, whether recipients perceive an actor who discloses to a small group (vs. large group) of people as more authentic is an empirical question for future research. Similarly, the audience structure might impact the observed effect. In Study 7, we focused on consulting firms because of their strict hierarchy, but the effects might weaken in flatter organization structures.

Finally, conceptually, authenticity may have some overlap with the construct of warmth. We demonstrated that our effect holds when controlling for perceived warmth and competence; however, future research could aim to further distinguish warmth from authenticity. Such an investigation could further our understanding of the distinction between these two constructs and their differential effects on perception and behavior. Furthermore, the SCM (Fiske et al., 2002) states that competence and warmth are two major dimensions of person perception, but the two dimensions may not be the only dimensions. Our results suggest it is possible that authenticity may be an additional dimension in addition to competence and warmth. Future research may examine this possibility more closely using exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses.

## Conclusions

By making sensitive self-disclosures, leaders can enhance how authentic their followers perceive them to be, leading to positive interpersonal outcomes, and potentially organizational ones as well. In sum, we conclude that despite their apprehension to reveal weaknesses, leaders may reap surprising benefits from doing so.

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