



## **Believability and Trust Foundation of Credible Leadership: Duality of Competence and Character as Persuasive Antecedents**

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# Believability and Trust Foundation of Credible Leadership: Duality of Competence and Character as Persuasive Antecedents

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## Abstract

This qualitative study examined how credible leadership manifested itself through the dual dimensions of competence and character, drawing on in-depth interviews with three prominent community leaders: a County Assembly Member, a local Chief, and a Pastor. Drawing on Social Exchange Theory and Authentic Leadership Theory, the study looked at how leaders established and maintained credibility by consistently demonstrating both professional excellence and moral integrity in their leadership practices. The study took a phenomenological approach to leadership credibility, using semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis to understand the lived experiences of leaders who had successfully maintained credibility across diverse stakeholder groups. The study's methodology included rigorous data collection through 90-minute interviews with each participant, followed by systematic thematic analysis to identify patterns in leadership credibility development and maintenance. The results of the study revealed five major themes: the foundational interplay between competence and character in establishing leadership credibility; strategic approaches to building and maintaining trust through transparent communication and authentic relationship building; the importance of navigating credibility challenges while maintaining ethical standards; the critical role of cultural sensitivity and community engagement in leadership effectiveness; and These insights significantly improved our understanding of how leaders could effectively integrate professional capability and moral character to establish long-term credibility in contemporary organisational contexts. The study had practical implications for leadership development programs and provided valuable guidance for aspiring leaders looking to establish and maintain credibility across a variety of organisational environments.

**Keywords:** *Believability, Trust, Credible Leadership, Competence, Character*

## **1.0 Introduction**

The quest for credible leadership is a defining challenge in today's organisational landscape, with empirical studies demonstrating its profound impact on institutional success, employee engagement, and long-term governance (Williams et al., 2023). Leadership credibility has a significant impact on organisational legitimacy and stakeholder trust in rapidly changing business environments (Jakobsen et al., 2022). Edward R. Murrow's words, "To be persuasive we must be believable; to be believable we must be credible; to be credible we must be truthful," resonate strongly with modern leadership challenges in a variety of organisational contexts (Kouzes & Posner, 2021). Leadership credibility is strongly correlated with organisational performance metrics such as employee satisfaction, stakeholder engagement, and financial outcomes in both public and private sector institutions (Ramnund-Mansingh & Naidoo, 2023). Leadership credibility is a multifaceted concept that includes both technical competence and moral character, making it an important factor in organisational transformation and long-term development (Atiku et al., 2023). According to Kamau and Oginde (2022), leadership credibility is essential in today's global environment, where organisations seek leaders who have a strong sense of responsibility and purpose. They argue that authentic leaders can translate values to employees and build public trust, giving organisations a significant competitive advantage. In addition, their research shows that credibility is the foundation of leadership and embodies qualities such as honesty, visionary thinking, inspiration, and competence.

The increasing complexity of modern organisations necessitates a sophisticated understanding of leadership credibility that incorporates multiple dimensions of leader effectiveness and ethical behaviour (Sturm et al., 2017). Successful leaders must demonstrate both technical expertise and moral integrity while cultivating genuine relationships with their followers (Gardner et al., 2021). Credible leaders consistently demonstrate strong decision-making abilities and ethical judgement, which contributes to increased organisational resilience and adaptability (Walumbwa et al., 2020). Leadership credibility emerges from the dynamic interplay of professional capability and personal integrity, which influences both individual and organisational outcomes (Seijts et al., 2015). Credible leadership has a long-term impact on organisational culture and stakeholder relationships across diverse business environments, in addition to immediate performance metrics (Hannah & Avolio, 2011). The shift in leadership expectations in response to global challenges has fundamentally changed the criteria for establishing and maintaining credibility across cultural and organisational boundaries (Eva et al., 2019). Servant leadership principles are essential for establishing long-term credibility and cultivating authentic relationships within complex organisational structures (Van Dierendonck et al., 2014). According to Brown and Treviño (2020), ethical leadership practices build trust and commitment among followers, paving the way for long-term success in organisations. Leadership credibility is linked to ethical decision-making frameworks and moral reasoning abilities in modern business environments (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2020). Inclusive leadership practices increase credibility in a variety of organisational settings while promoting social justice and equitable outcomes for all stakeholders (Gotsis & Grimani, 2016; Larson & Murtadha, 2002).

### **1.1 Believability in Leadership**

Contemporary research identifies believability as a fundamental component of leadership effectiveness, manifesting through the consistent demonstration of expertise, ethical behaviour, and authentic relationship building in organizational contexts (Gardner et al., 2005; Shamir & Eilam, 2005). Studies examining leadership effectiveness across various sectors demonstrate that believable leaders consistently align their actions with stated values while maintaining

transparent communication and decision-making processes that resonate with diverse stakeholder groups (Ilies et al., 2005; Walumbwa et al., 2020). The multifaceted nature of leadership believability encompasses both technical competence and moral character, requiring leaders to demonstrate professional excellence while maintaining ethical standards in their daily practices (Hannah & Avolio, 2011). Research investigating leadership credibility reveals that believable leaders consistently exhibit strong decision-making capabilities alongside ethical judgment, creating sustainable patterns of trust and engagement within their organizations (Brown & Treviño, 2020). Empirical studies have established clear connections between leadership believability and organizational performance metrics, highlighting the critical importance of maintaining consistency between words and actions in building lasting credibility across diverse operational contexts (Kouzes & Posner, 2021; Williams et al., 2023). The impact of leadership believability extends beyond immediate performance indicators to influence long-term organizational culture, stakeholder relationships, and institutional success in increasingly complex business environments (Eva et al., 2019; Seijts et al., 2015).

The development of leadership believability requires sustained effort and consistent demonstration of both professional competence and moral integrity, particularly in challenging organizational situations that test leader credibility (Ciulla, 2020; Johnson, 2020). Research examining leadership effectiveness demonstrates that believable leaders consistently display the ability to navigate complex challenges while maintaining ethical standards and authentic relationships with followers (Ramnund-Mansingh & Naidoo, 2023). Studies focusing on leadership development reveal that believability emerges through consistent patterns of behaviour that demonstrate both technical expertise and moral courage in addressing organizational challenges (Clark et al., 2023). The integration of professional excellence with ethical decision-making has emerged as a critical factor in establishing and maintaining leadership believability across diverse organizational contexts (Jakobsen et al., 2022). Contemporary research emphasizes the importance of developing strong foundational capabilities while maintaining authentic relationships with stakeholders, particularly in rapidly evolving business environments where trust and credibility are increasingly valuable (Sturm et al., 2017). Empirical investigations have demonstrated that leaders who successfully balance professional requirements with ethical considerations while maintaining transparent communication practices are more likely to establish and maintain believability with their followers (Gardner et al., 2021; Avolio et al., 2020).

The sustainability of leadership believability depends significantly on a leader's ability to maintain consistency between stated values and demonstrated behaviours across various organizational situations (Carmeli et al., 2019; Walumbwa et al., 2020). Research examining long-term leadership effectiveness reveals that believable leaders consistently demonstrate both technical competence and moral character while adapting their approaches to meet evolving organizational needs (Kirkman & Stoverink, 2021). Studies focusing on leadership credibility development demonstrate that successful leaders build believability through consistent ethical behaviour, transparent decision-making processes, and authentic relationship building practices that resonate with diverse stakeholder groups (Adler, 2021). The integration of professional excellence with moral integrity has emerged as a crucial factor in maintaining leadership believability across different organizational contexts and cultural boundaries (Chen & Sriphon, 2022). Contemporary research emphasizes the critical importance of developing and maintaining strong believability foundations through consistent demonstration of both competence and character in leadership practice (Gotsis & Grimani, 2016). Empirical studies have shown that leaders who successfully maintain alignment between their values, actions, and organizational requirements while fostering authentic relationships with followers create

sustainable patterns of trust and credibility that enhance their overall effectiveness (Larson & Murtadha, 2002; Athota & Malik, 2019).

## **1.2 Trust in Leadership**

Trust emerges as a fundamental pillar of leadership credibility, built through consistent demonstration of both competence and character in organizational contexts (Gotsis & Grimani, 2016; Larson & Murtadha, 2002). Research examining trust development in leadership relationships reveals that credible leaders consistently demonstrate technical expertise alongside ethical decision-making capabilities, fostering sustainable relationships with followers and stakeholders across diverse organizational settings (Athota & Malik, 2019; Jenkins & Credle Jr, 2021). The multifaceted nature of leadership trust encompasses cognitive, emotional, and behavioural dimensions that collectively influence how followers perceive and respond to leader actions (Thakadipuram, 2024; Grimes & Bennett III, 2017). Studies focusing on trust formation in organizational contexts demonstrate that successful leaders build credibility through transparent communication practices, consistent ethical behaviour, and authentic relationship-building strategies that resonate with diverse stakeholder groups (Andrews, 2017; Mburu, 2020). Contemporary research emphasizes the critical role of trust in establishing and maintaining leadership credibility across cultural boundaries and diverse organizational contexts, particularly in increasingly complex global business environments (Avelino et al., 2022; Rotberg, 2012). Empirical investigations have consistently shown that trust serves as a crucial mediating factor between leadership behaviours and organizational outcomes, influencing everything from employee engagement to institutional performance (Williams et al., 2023; Clark et al., 2023).

The development and maintenance of trust in leadership requires sustained effort and deliberate attention to both professional excellence and ethical conduct, particularly in challenging organizational situations that test leader credibility (Kouzes & Posner, 2021; Eva et al., 2019). Research examining trust dynamics in leadership relationships demonstrates that successful leaders consistently align their actions with stated values while maintaining open communication channels and transparent decision-making processes (Brown & Treviño, 2020; Hannah & Avolio, 2011). Studies investigating trust formation patterns reveal that leaders who demonstrate both technical competence and moral courage in addressing organizational challenges are more likely to establish and maintain strong trust relationships with their followers (Gardner et al., 2021; Walumbwa et al., 2020). The integration of professional expertise with ethical decision-making has emerged as a critical factor in building and maintaining trust across diverse organizational contexts and stakeholder groups (Sturm et al., 2017; Seijts et al., 2015). Contemporary investigations emphasize the importance of developing robust trust foundations through consistent demonstration of both capability and character in leadership practice, particularly in environments characterized by rapid change and uncertainty (Johnson, 2020; Ciulla, 2020). Longitudinal studies have demonstrated that leaders who successfully maintain alignment between their professional responsibilities and ethical obligations while fostering authentic relationships create sustainable patterns of trust that enhance their overall effectiveness and organizational impact (Ramnund-Mansingh & Naidoo, 2023; Jakobsen et al., 2022).

The sustainability of trust in leadership relationships depends significantly on a leader's ability to maintain consistency between professional competence and ethical behaviour across various organizational situations and challenges (Carmeli et al., 2019; Kirkman & Stoverink, 2021). Research examining long-term trust development in organizational contexts reveals that successful leaders consistently demonstrate both technical expertise and moral integrity while adapting their approaches to meet evolving stakeholder needs and expectations (Avolio et al.,

2020; Chen & Sriphon, 2022). Studies focusing on trust maintenance patterns demonstrate that leaders who prioritize both professional excellence and ethical conduct while maintaining transparent communication practices are more likely to sustain trust relationships through periods of organizational change and uncertainty (Adler, 2021; Bongomin et al., 2020). The integration of competence-based trust with character-based trust has emerged as a crucial factor in maintaining sustainable leadership relationships across different organizational contexts and cultural boundaries (Kolzow, 2014; Feltman, 2024). Contemporary research emphasizes the critical importance of nurturing trust through consistent demonstration of both professional capability and moral courage in leadership practice, particularly in complex global business environments (Maina, 2020; Kelly, 2023). Empirical investigations have established that leaders who successfully balance technical requirements with ethical considerations while fostering authentic relationships create resilient trust patterns that enhance their credibility and organizational effectiveness over time (Roux & Härtel, 2018; Maxwell, 2020).

### 1.3 Character in Leadership

Leadership character manifests through moral fortitude, ethical decision-making and principled conduct that shapes organizational culture and stakeholder relationships (Johnson, 2020; Ciulla, 2020). Recent empirical research has established strong correlations between leader character and sustainable organizational success, particularly in environments where ethical challenges test leadership credibility (Brown & Treviño, 2020). Character in leadership transcends traditional notions of personal values, encompassing moral judgment, ethical awareness, and principled decision-making that actively shape organizational behaviour and culture (Gardner et al., 2021; Williams et al., 2023). Despite emphasising competence and character as critical elements for credible leadership (Williams et al., 2023), entrenched systemic issues often hinder the practical realisation of these values. Ogunyemi et al (2022a) posits that historical patterns of corruption and weak governance structures create environments where even well-intentioned leaders struggle to establish trust and transparency. The confrontation to accountability and the prevalence of patronage systems further exacerbates the strain in encouraging ethical leadership (Ogunyemi et al., 2022b). Angana (2021) delved that in environments where corruption is normalised, leaders with genuine intentions may struggle to maintain their ethical integrity as they face systemic pressures that incentivise self-serving actions. Further, mentorship programs can encourage ethical values in emerging leaders, as demonstrated in the works of Angana (2021). Such frameworks can cultivate an enduring credible and value-based culture of integrity. Studies examining ethical leadership have revealed that character serves as a foundational element that distinguishes truly effective leaders from those who merely occupy positions of authority (Seijts et al., 2015). The impact of leadership character extends beyond individual moral conduct to influence collective organizational ethics, stakeholder trust, and long-term institutional legitimacy (Kouzes & Posner, 2021). Contemporary research increasingly recognizes character as a dynamic capability that requires continuous development and conscious application in everyday leadership practices (Clark et al., 2023).

Character development in leadership contexts involves complex interactions between personal values, professional responsibilities, and organizational demands (Gotsis & Grimani, 2016). Modern organizational challenges require leaders to demonstrate moral courage in addressing ethical dilemmas while maintaining operational effectiveness (Athota & Malik, 2019). Research has identified several critical dimensions of leadership character, including moral awareness, ethical judgment, and principled decision-making processes that consistently prioritize long-term organizational health over short-term gains (Jenkins & Credle Jr, 2021). The emergence of ethical leadership frameworks has highlighted how character-driven leadership creates sustainable competitive advantages through enhanced stakeholder trust and

organizational reputation (Thakadipuram, 2024). Studies focusing on global leadership effectiveness demonstrate that character-based leadership transcends cultural boundaries while adapting to local ethical contexts and expectations (Andrews, 2017; Mburu, 2020). Leaders who successfully integrate strong character with professional competence create organizational cultures that naturally resist ethical compromises while pursuing performance excellence (Avelino et al., 2022).

Organizations increasingly recognize that leadership character significantly influences their ability to navigate complex ethical challenges while maintaining stakeholder trust (Carmeli et al., 2019). Research examining leadership effectiveness in crisis situations reveals that character serves as a crucial stabilizing force, enabling leaders to maintain organizational integrity during periods of significant pressure or uncertainty (Avolio et al., 2020). Modern leadership development programs have begun incorporating character-building components that emphasize practical application of ethical principles in real-world leadership situations (Chen & Sriphon, 2022). Studies focusing on organizational culture demonstrate that leadership character shapes collective behaviour patterns and ethical decision-making frameworks throughout organizations (Adler, 2021). The integration of character development with traditional leadership training reflects growing recognition that ethical leadership capabilities are as crucial as technical competencies in determining long-term leadership success (Bongomin et al., 2020).

#### **1.4 Biblical Credibility Perspective**

The apostle Paul describes the gifts of the Holy Spirit as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (The Holy Bible: New International Version, 1984, Gal. 5:22-23). The teachings of Paul in Galatians chapters 3 and 4 provide valuable insights that can inform and inspire credible leadership. By emphasizing unity in Christ, leaders are encouraged to foster trust and believability-based governance whose credibility is skewed towards values diversity. The biblical narrative of leadership credibility, particularly exemplified in Galatians Chapter 2, provides profound insights into the relationship between character, competence, and leadership authenticity. In a pivotal moment of leadership confrontation, Paul's public rebuke of Peter at Antioch (Galatians 2:11-14) demonstrates the critical importance of maintaining leadership credibility through consistent ethical behaviour and unwavering commitment to truth (Andrews, 2017). This historical incident illustrates how Peter, despite his established apostolic authority, compromised his leadership credibility by showing favouritism to Jewish believers and requiring Gentile Christians to observe Jewish customs - actions that contradicted the inclusive nature of the gospel message (Jenkins & Credle Jr, 2021). Paul's response, "I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned," exemplifies how authentic leadership demands moral courage to confront inconsistency, even when challenging respected authorities. The apostle's stand against Peter's hypocrisy demonstrates that leadership credibility requires alignment between proclaimed values and demonstrated behaviour, regardless of hierarchical position or previous reputation. To strengthen their leadership credibility, a leader must comprehend their responsibilities and be dedicated to fulfilling anticipated goals (Ang'ana, 2022).

The theological implications of this leadership confrontation extend beyond personal disagreement to fundamental principles of leadership credibility (Grimes & Bennett III, 2017). Paul's leadership demonstrates that credibility emerges from unwavering commitment to core principles, even when such commitment necessitates challenging established leadership norms. The universality of the gospel message, which Paul vigorously defended, underscores that credible leadership must maintain consistency between stated beliefs and practical actions. Peter's temporary lapse into behavioural inconsistency, driven by fear of the circumcision

party, highlights how external pressures can compromise leadership credibility when leaders prioritize social acceptance over principled action. This biblical account provides a timeless illustration of how leadership credibility requires both the competence to understand theological truth and the character to maintain ethical consistency in its application (Thakadipuram, 2024). The resolution of this conflict further demonstrates that credible leadership seeks reconciliation and unity without compromising fundamental principles.

The broader context of the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) and its aftermath reveals the complex dynamics of maintaining leadership credibility in diverse organizational contexts (Mburu, 2020). Paul's leadership effectiveness stemmed from his ability to balance strong conviction with respectful engagement, even in confrontational situations. The narrative emphasizes that leadership credibility requires more than positional authority or theological knowledge; it demands consistent demonstration of both competence in understanding truth and character in applying it (Kapotwe & Bamata, 2023). Peter's eventual recognition of his error and the subsequent restoration of unity illustrates how authentic leadership includes the humility to acknowledge mistakes and the wisdom to accept correction. This biblical example continues to inform contemporary understanding of leadership credibility, demonstrating that true leadership authority stems from the consistent integration of competence and character, particularly when faced with challenges that test both dimensions simultaneously (Andrews, 2017).

## **2.0 Literature Review**

The systematic examination of leadership credibility has evolved significantly over the past decades, reflecting growing recognition of its central role in organizational effectiveness and sustainable governance (Walumbwa et al., 2020; Kouzes & Posner, 2021). Early research focused primarily on trait-based approaches to leadership effectiveness, but contemporary scholarship has shifted toward understanding the dynamic interplay between leader attributes and follower perceptions in establishing and maintaining credibility across diverse organizational contexts (Gardner et al., 2021; Williams et al., 2023). Studies examining leadership effectiveness across various cultural and organizational settings have identified consistent patterns in how credible leaders build trust, foster engagement, and drive sustainable organizational outcomes through the demonstration of both technical competence and moral character (Brown & Treviño, 2020; Ramnund-Mansingh & Naidoo, 2023). The comprehensive analysis of leadership credibility has revealed its multifaceted nature, encompassing elements of emotional intelligence, cultural awareness, ethical decision-making, and authentic relationship building in increasingly complex organizational environments (Shakeel et al., 2019; Clark et al., 2023).

The evolution of leadership theory has witnessed a significant shift from traditional hierarchical models toward more inclusive and ethically grounded approaches that emphasize the importance of credibility in achieving organizational objectives (Eva et al., 2019; Gotsis & Grimani, 2016). Contemporary research highlights the critical role of leadership credibility in fostering organizational resilience, promoting innovation, and maintaining stakeholder trust during periods of significant change and uncertainty (Adler, 2021; Kirkman & Stoverink, 2021). Studies examining leadership effectiveness across different sectors have consistently demonstrated strong correlations between leader credibility and key organizational outcomes, including employee satisfaction, team performance, and organizational adaptability (Seijts et al., 2015). The integration of spiritual principles, ethical frameworks, and cultural intelligence into leadership development has emerged as a crucial factor in building sustainable credibility across diverse organizational settings (Kapotwe & Bamata, 2023).



## 2.1 Theoretical Framework

### 2.1.1 Social Exchange Theory

Social Exchange Theory provides a fundamental framework for understanding how leadership credibility develops through reciprocal relationships between leaders and followers in organizational contexts (Cropanzano et al., 2017). The theory's core premise suggests that social behaviour is an exchange of both material and non-material goods, where leadership credibility becomes a valued currency that is earned through consistent demonstration of both competence and character (Blau, 1964). Within organizational settings, these exchanges create patterns of reciprocal obligations between leaders and followers, establishing a foundation for trust and mutual benefit that directly influences leadership effectiveness and credibility (Cook et al., 2013). Research examining leadership through this theoretical lens demonstrates that credible leaders consistently engage in high-quality exchanges characterized by fairness, transparency, and mutual respect, leading to enhanced organizational outcomes and stronger leader-follower relationships (Emerson, 1976; Shore et al., 2020).

The application of Social Exchange Theory to leadership credibility reveals intricate patterns of reciprocity that shape how leaders build and maintain trust with their followers over time (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). When leaders consistently demonstrate both technical competence and moral character in their exchanges, they create positive reciprocal relationships that reinforce their credibility and enhance their ability to influence organizational outcomes (Williams et al., 2023). Studies have shown that these exchange relationships operate on multiple levels simultaneously, encompassing both formal organizational transactions and informal social interactions that collectively contribute to a leader's perceived credibility (Clark et al., 2023). The theory emphasizes that leadership credibility is not a static attribute but rather a dynamic quality that must be continuously earned and maintained through positive exchange relationships characterized by mutual trust, respect, and benefit (Kolzow, 2014). Research applying this theoretical framework has demonstrated strong correlations between the quality of leader-follower exchanges and various measures of leadership effectiveness, including employee engagement, organizational commitment, and performance outcomes (Hannah & Avolio, 2011).

The theoretical framework of Social Exchange Theory also illuminates the crucial role of consistency and fairness in building leadership credibility across diverse organizational contexts (Brown & Treviño, 2020). Leaders who maintain equitable exchange relationships with followers while demonstrating both competence and character create sustainable patterns of trust and reciprocity that enhance their credibility over time (Ramnund-Mansingh & Naidoo, 2023). The theory suggests that successful leader-follower exchanges require a delicate balance between organizational requirements and individual needs, where credible leaders must consistently deliver value while maintaining ethical standards and authentic relationships (Gardner et al., 2021). Studies examining these exchange dynamics have revealed that leaders who successfully navigate this balance are more likely to establish and maintain credibility across different organizational levels and stakeholder groups (Kouzes & Posner, 2021). The theoretical perspective emphasizes that leadership credibility emerges through accumulated positive exchanges over time, requiring sustained effort and consistent demonstration of both professional competence and moral character (Eva et al., 2019).

### 2.1.2 Authentic Leadership Theory

Authentic Leadership Theory provides a comprehensive theoretical framework for examining how leaders build and maintain credibility through genuine self-expression and consistent ethical behaviour (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). The theory identifies four fundamental

components that contribute to leadership credibility: self-awareness, internalized moral perspective, balanced processing, and relational transparency, each playing a crucial role in establishing and maintaining authentic leader-follower relationships (Walumbwa et al., 2008). Research examining these components demonstrates that leaders who maintain alignment between their values, beliefs, and actions while practicing transparent decision-making processes are more likely to establish and maintain credibility with their followers (Luthans & Avolio, 2003). Studies have consistently shown that authentic leadership practices contribute significantly to building trust, fostering positive organizational cultures, and enhancing leader effectiveness through the demonstrated integration of both competence and character (Gardner et al., 2005).

The theoretical framework emphasizes the importance of self-awareness and personal authenticity in developing leadership credibility across diverse organizational contexts (Ilies et al., 2005). Authentic leaders build credibility by maintaining consistency between their internal values and external behaviours while adapting their approach to meet evolving organizational challenges and stakeholder needs (Shamir & Eilam, 2005). The theory suggests that authentic leadership emerges through a developmental process where leaders cultivate deep self-knowledge and ethical awareness while building genuine relationships with followers (Avolio et al., 2004). Research examining this developmental aspect has revealed that authentic leaders consistently demonstrate higher levels of emotional intelligence, moral reasoning, and interpersonal effectiveness, contributing to enhanced credibility and organizational outcomes (Gardner et al., 2021). Studies have shown that authentic leadership practices foster psychological safety, encourage open dialogue, and promote positive organizational citizenship behaviours that reinforce leadership credibility over time (Walumbwa et al., 2010).

The application of Authentic Leadership Theory to understanding leadership credibility provides valuable insights into how leaders maintain effectiveness while navigating complex organizational challenges (Hannah & Avolio, 2011). The theory suggests that authentic leaders build credibility by consistently demonstrating both technical competence and moral character while maintaining transparent relationships with followers (George, 2003). Research examining authentic leadership in various organizational contexts has shown that leaders who maintain authenticity while adapting to changing circumstances are more likely to sustain their credibility and effectiveness over time (Northouse, 2021). The theoretical framework emphasizes the importance of continuous personal development and ethical reflection in maintaining leadership authenticity and credibility (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Studies have demonstrated that authentic leaders who successfully integrate their personal values with organizational requirements while maintaining transparent relationships with followers create sustainable patterns of trust and commitment that enhance their overall effectiveness (Luthans & Avolio, 2003).

## **2.2 Competence as a Credibility Antecedent**

Leadership credibility is strongly based on a leader's demonstrated competence, which includes technical expertise, strategic capabilities, and operational effectiveness across organisational contexts (Williams et al., 2023). Research on leadership effectiveness in various sectors shows that competence goes beyond basic professional qualifications to include the ability to leverage expertise to drive organisational success and innovation while maintaining stakeholder trust (Gardner et al., 2021). Studies conducted in a variety of organisational settings show that leaders who consistently demonstrate strong technical abilities while effectively applying their expertise to solve complex problems are more likely to maintain credibility with both followers and stakeholders (Clark et al., 2023). The multifaceted nature of leadership competence includes not only specific industry knowledge, but also the ability to learn and adapt to new

challenges in rapidly changing business environments (Ramnund-Mansingh & Naidoo, 2023). Empirical research has consistently shown that leaders who maintain high levels of technical proficiency while successfully translating this expertise into practical solutions establish stronger credibility with their teams and organisational stakeholders (Hannah & Avolio, 2011). The relationship between competence and leadership credibility is demonstrated by the successful implementation of strategic initiatives, achievement of measurable outcomes, and long-term improvement of organisational processes in a variety of operational contexts (Seijts et al. 2015).

According to Kamau and Oginde's (2022) research, competence in leadership manifests itself in a variety of key behaviours, including successful planning, continuous learning, and effective goal setting. Their research found that credible leaders use daily habits of evaluation, knowledge acquisition, and strategic planning to improve their leadership effectiveness. They discovered that competent leaders regularly engage in personal development activities, recognising that "increasing their knowledge kept them informed and relevant in their leadership journey" (Kamau & Oginde, 2022).

Strategic thinking and effective decision-making abilities have emerged as critical dimensions of leadership competence, particularly in complex organisational settings where stakeholder trust is heavily reliant on leader judgement and foresight (Kouzes & Posner, 2021). According to research on leadership effectiveness, credible leaders consistently demonstrate the ability to formulate and articulate clear strategic visions while making informed decisions that are consistent with organisational objectives and stakeholder expectations (Eva et al. 2019). According to Brown and Treviño's 2020 study on strategic leadership competencies, leaders who balance short-term operational needs with long-term strategic goals and maintain transparent decision-making processes increase credibility across organisational levels. The ability to navigate uncertainty and make sound decisions under pressure has become increasingly important in rapidly changing business environments, where leadership credibility is closely linked to demonstrating both technical expertise and strategic acumen (Kirkman & Stoverink, 2021). According to recent research, effective leaders must be able to analyse complex situations, anticipate future challenges, and develop comprehensive strategies that address both immediate needs and long-term organisational goals (Walumbwa et al., 2020). The integration of strategic thinking and operational excellence has emerged as a critical requirement for establishing and maintaining leadership credibility in modern organisational contexts (Adler, 2021).

Another critical dimension of leadership competence is the demonstration of interpersonal effectiveness and relationship management capabilities, which has a significant impact on credibility across multiple stakeholder groups (Gotsis & Grimani, 2016). According to research on leadership success factors, the ability to build and maintain effective relationships while navigating complex social dynamics is critical for establishing and maintaining leadership credibility (Larson & Murtadha, 2002). Studies on emotional intelligence and leadership effectiveness show that leaders who excel at interpersonal communication, conflict resolution, and team building consistently have higher levels of credibility and organisational impact (Athota & Malik, 2019). Strong interpersonal competencies allow leaders to create inclusive environments, foster collaboration, and build trust across diverse organisational contexts while remaining focused on achieving strategic goals (Jenkins & Credle Jr, 2021). Contemporary leadership research emphasises the critical importance of developing and maintaining strong interpersonal skills in addition to technical expertise, especially in increasingly diverse and globally connected organisational settings (Chen & Sriphon, 2022).

Change management skills and adaptability have emerged as critical components of leadership competence in dynamic organisational environments marked by rapid technological advancement and shifting stakeholder expectations (Thakadipuram, 2024). Research on leadership effectiveness during significant organisational transformation emphasises the critical importance of change management competencies in maintaining stakeholder trust and credibility during complex transition processes (Rotberg, 2012). According to research on organisational resilience, leaders who successfully guide their organisations through transformative changes while maintaining operational effectiveness and stakeholder engagement increase their credibility and influence significantly (Bongomin et al., 2020). The ability to anticipate, plan for, and successfully implement organisational changes while maintaining team cohesion and performance standards has become increasingly important for establishing and maintaining leadership credibility in today's business environments (Kolzow 2014).

Digital competence and technological literacy are becoming increasingly important dimensions of leadership credibility in modern organisational contexts, especially as businesses navigate digital transformation and technological innovation (Kirkman & Stoverink, 2021). Research on leadership effectiveness in digital environments shows that leaders must have both technical knowledge and the ability to use technology for organisational advantage while maintaining human connection and engagement (Roux & Härtel, 2018). According to research on digital leadership capabilities, successful leaders combine technological competence, strategic vision, and interpersonal effectiveness to drive organisational transformation and innovation (Kelly, 2023). The integration of digital capabilities with traditional leadership competencies has emerged as a critical factor in establishing and maintaining credibility in technologically driven organisational environments (Feltman, 2024). According to recent research, developing digital literacy alongside other leadership competencies is critical for effectively guiding organisations through technological change while maintaining stakeholder trust and engagement (Avolio et al., 2020).

Cross-cultural competence and global leadership capabilities have emerged as critical components of leadership credibility in increasingly interconnected and diverse organisational settings (Mburu, 2020). Research on leadership effectiveness across cultural boundaries shows that successful leaders must be able to navigate diverse cultural contexts while upholding consistent standards of professional excellence and ethical behaviour (Avelino et al., 2022). According to studies on global leadership development, leaders who demonstrate cultural intelligence in addition to technical expertise and strategic capabilities are more likely to establish and maintain credibility with diverse stakeholder groups (Bongomin et al., 2020). Integrating cultural awareness with other leadership competencies has become increasingly important for establishing and maintaining credibility in multinational corporations and diverse organisational settings (Rotberg, 2012). Current leadership research emphasises the critical importance of developing cross-cultural competencies to effectively lead diverse teams and organisations while maintaining credibility across different cultural contexts (Kolzow, 2014).

### **3.0 Methodology**

This study employed a qualitative research methodology using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to explore leadership effectiveness through dimensions of competence and character, supported by semi-structured interviews with three purposively selected leaders: a Member of County Assembly, a local Chief, and a prominent Pastor, each serving over ten years in their respective positions. The participants were selected based on their demonstrated track record of organizational success, ethical leadership practices, and significant community impact. Data collection involved 90-minute in-depth interviews

conducted in participant-chosen settings, exploring five key areas: personal leadership journey, critical incidents, credibility-building strategies, leadership challenges, and perspectives on competence and character in leadership. The interview protocol progressed from broad, open-ended questions to specific inquiries about credibility development, with sessions being audio-recorded and supplemented by field notes. Data analysis followed a systematic approach combining thematic analysis with constant comparative methods, involving professional transcription of interviews, line-by-line examination for key concepts, focused coding for broader themes, and synthesis into a coherent framework. The research design incorporated validation strategies including member checking, peer debriefing, and triangulation of data sources to ensure methodological rigor, while interview protocols were developed based on extensive literature review and refined through pilot testing with experienced leaders and academic experts. This comprehensive approach to research design, participant selection, data collection, and analysis ensured meaningful insights into leadership credibility while maintaining high standards of methodological quality and academic rigor.

#### 4.0 Findings

The analysis of interview data revealed several significant patterns in how credible leaders develop and maintain their effectiveness through the dimensions of competence and character. Through careful examination of participants' narratives and experiences, five major themes emerged that illuminate the complex nature of leadership credibility in contemporary organizational contexts. These themes encompass: (1) the foundational role of technical expertise combined with ethical decision-making, (2) the importance of consistent alignment between stated values and demonstrated behaviours, (3) the critical impact of transparent communication and authentic relationship building, (4) the necessity of balancing traditional leadership approaches with modern governance requirements, and (5) the significant influence of cultural sensitivity and community engagement in maintaining leadership credibility. Each theme provides unique insights into how leaders navigate the dual requirements of competence and character while maintaining credibility across diverse stakeholder groups.

##### 4.1 Theme 1: The Interplay of Competence and Character

The relationship between competence and character emerged as a central theme across all interviews, with participants consistently emphasizing how these two dimensions interact in their leadership practices. Leaders described this interplay as fundamental to establishing and maintaining credibility, particularly in situations requiring difficult decisions or complex problem-solving. Their responses revealed deep insights into how technical expertise and moral integrity work together to create sustainable leadership effectiveness.

##### Participant Responses:

MCA revealed,

*“In my position, you can't separate what you know from who you are. When I'm making decisions about resource allocation, my technical understanding of community needs must align with ethical considerations. As I always say, 'Knowledge without integrity is like a car without a steering wheel – it might move fast but will eventually crash.’”*

*“There was this time we had to choose between two equally important projects – a water project and a road construction. My engineering background helped me understand the technical aspects, but it was my commitment to transparency and community involvement that helped us reach a decision everyone could accept.’”*

Chief answered,

*“Leadership in our community requires both traditional wisdom and modern administrative skills. I've learned that my effectiveness depends not just on knowing procedures but on being known as someone who upholds moral values. A leader without character is like a tree without roots.”*

*“When handling land disputes, I combine my knowledge of land laws with our traditional conflict resolution approaches. People trust my decisions because they know I understand both systems and will always choose what's right over what's convenient.”*

Pastor retorted,

*“Ministry leadership today demands both spiritual maturity and practical management skills. I've found that people follow not just because of what you preach, but because they see consistency between your words and actions.”*

*“During the COVID-19 crisis, we had to make tough decisions about church gatherings. It wasn't enough to understand health protocols; we needed to demonstrate genuine care for our congregation's wellbeing. One elderly member told me, 'Pastor, we trust you because you protect both our souls and our lives.’”*

Contemporary leadership literature strongly reinforces these findings regarding the essential interplay between competence and character in establishing leadership credibility (Williams et al., 2023; Clark et al., 2023). The participants' experiences align with research demonstrating that effective leaders must demonstrate both technical expertise and moral integrity to maintain sustainable credibility (Kouzes & Posner, 2021). Their narratives particularly echo findings by Brown and Treviño (2020) about the importance of integrating professional capability with ethical decision-making in complex leadership situations. The emphasis participants placed on maintaining consistency between technical knowledge and moral values supports Hannah and Avolio's (2011) assertion that leadership credibility emerges from the successful integration of competence and character. In addition, their experiences validate recent research by Gardner et al. (2021) suggesting that leadership effectiveness in contemporary contexts requires a deliberate balance between professional expertise and ethical behaviour, particularly when navigating challenging situations that test both technical capability and moral courage.

#### **4.2 Theme 2: Building and Maintaining Trust**

The analysis revealed consistent patterns in how leaders approach trust-building and maintenance across different contexts. Participants emphasized that trust development is an ongoing process requiring deliberate strategies, consistent behaviour, and authentic engagement with stakeholders. Their responses highlighted specific approaches to establishing and maintaining trust through both professional competence and personal character.

##### **Participant Responses:**

MCA specified,

*“Trust is like a bank account – you have to make regular deposits through consistent actions before you can make any withdrawals. I've learned that community members watch everything you do, not just what you say.”*

*“During my first term, I instituted regular public forums where we discuss project progress and challenges openly. One resident told me, 'What makes you different is that you admit when things go wrong and explain why.' This transparency has been crucial in maintaining public trust.”*

*“You can't build trust through promises alone. I remember when we faced delays in a water project. Instead of making excuses, I called a community meeting, explained the technical challenges, and worked with them to find solutions. One elder said, 'We trust you because you face problems with us, not hide from them.’”*

Chief replied,

*“In our community, trust is built through both action and presence. People need to see you participating in their joy and sorrow. During the recent drought, I didn't just coordinate relief efforts from my office; I visited affected families personally.”*

*“I maintain an open-door policy. As one village elder commented, 'Our Chief listens first and judges later.' This approach has helped me understand issues deeply before making decisions.”*

*“Trust comes from consistency in both big and small matters. When I say I'll attend a community function, I make sure to be there. One community member noted, 'We trust you because your actions match your words, whether in personal or official matters.’”*

Pastor reiterated,

*“Building trust in spiritual leadership requires authenticity in both teaching and living. My congregation often says they appreciate that I'm honest about my own struggles while maintaining strong spiritual principles.”*

*“During financial hardships in our community, we opened our church books for review. A church elder remarked, 'Your transparency in handling church resources has strengthened our trust in your leadership.’”*

*“We implemented a mentorship program where I regularly meet with different church groups. One youth leader shared, 'What builds our trust is that you're genuinely interested in our growth, not just in maintaining your position.’”*

The strategies and experiences shared by these leaders strongly align with contemporary research on trust development in leadership contexts (Gotsis & Grimani, 2016; Larson & Murtadha, 2002). Their emphasis on transparency and consistent behavior reflects findings by Athota and Malik (2019) regarding the critical role of authentic leadership practices in building sustainable trust. The participants' focus on regular community engagement and open communication supports research by Jenkins and Credle Jr (2021) highlighting the importance of accessible leadership in maintaining stakeholder trust. Their experiences particularly resonate with Thakadipuram's (2024) findings about the role of personal presence and authentic interaction in building leadership trust across diverse community contexts. The leaders' strategic approach to trust-building through both formal and informal channels validates research by Andrews (2017) on the multifaceted nature of trust development in leadership relationships. Furthermore, their emphasis on maintaining consistency between words and actions supports Kouzes and Posner's (2021) assertion that credible leadership requires sustained alignment between stated values and demonstrated behaviours. The participants' narratives also reinforce recent findings by Williams et al. (2023) about the critical importance of transparent decision-making processes in maintaining stakeholder trust, particularly during challenging situations that test leadership credibility.

### **4.3 Theme 3: Navigating Challenges to Credibility**

The analysis revealed significant insights into how leaders navigate various challenges to their credibility, particularly in situations that test both their competence and character. Participants shared experiences of facing complex decisions, managing conflicting stakeholder interests,

and maintaining credibility during periods of significant community pressure. Their responses highlighted the importance of strategic approaches to preserving leadership credibility while addressing difficult situations.

### Participant Responses:

MCA said,

*“One of my biggest challenges came during the county budget allocation process. Some influential people wanted me to support projects that would benefit them personally rather than the community. I told them, 'My leadership is accountable to the entire community, not individual interests.’”*

*“When we faced criticism over delayed project implementation, I learned that credibility is maintained through honest communication. As one community member later said, 'Even when things went wrong, you never tried to hide or blame others.’”*

*“During the COVID-19 relief distribution, there was immense pressure to favor certain groups. A resident later told me, 'What made us respect you more was how you stood firm on fair distribution despite the pressure.' These challenges actually strengthened my credibility because people saw consistency in my decisions.’”*

Chief responded,

*“Managing land disputes presents constant challenges to credibility. Once, I had to mediate between two prominent families. One elder commented, 'You earned our respect by showing that justice matters more than social status.’”*

*“There was a time when implementing new security measures faced resistance from youth groups. Instead of forcing compliance, I engaged them in dialogue. A youth leader later shared, 'You showed us respect by listening to our concerns before making decisions.’”*

*“During inter-community conflicts, maintaining neutrality while seeking resolution tests your credibility. One community member noted, 'Your ability to remain fair while understanding both sides made you trustworthy to all parties.’”*

Pastor indicated,

*“Leading during the church building project tested my credibility significantly. Questions arose about financial management. One deacon remarked, 'Your decision to have monthly financial reviews showed us that transparency wasn't just a word for you.’”*

*“Handling doctrinal disagreements while maintaining unity challenged my leadership. A church member observed, 'You never compromised on truth, but you showed love even to those who disagreed.’”*

*“When addressing moral issues in our community, I faced pressure to water down biblical principles. A faithful member said, 'Your consistency in upholding both truth and grace has strengthened our trust in your leadership.’”*

The experiences shared by these leaders in navigating credibility challenges align significantly with contemporary leadership research and theory (Williams et al., 2023; Clark et al., 2023). Their emphasis on maintaining ethical standards while addressing complex situations reflects findings by Brown and Treviño (2020) regarding the importance of moral consistency in preserving leadership credibility. The participants' strategic approaches to managing stakeholder pressure support research by Gardner et al. (2021) highlighting how successful



leaders maintain credibility through balanced decision-making processes. Their experiences particularly resonate with Kouzes and Posner's (2021) findings about the critical role of transparency and consistent ethical behaviour in preserving leadership credibility during challenging situations. The leaders' ability to maintain credibility while navigating complex community dynamics validates research by Ramnund-Mansingh and Naidoo (2023) on the importance of authentic leadership practices in building sustainable trust. Furthermore, their emphasis on balancing various stakeholder interests while maintaining ethical standards supports Johnson's (2020) assertion that credible leadership requires both moral courage and strategic wisdom. The participants' narratives also reinforce recent findings by Eva et al. (2019) about the critical importance of maintaining consistent ethical behaviour while adapting leadership approaches to address emerging challenges.

## 5.0 Conclusion

The examination of credible leadership through the lens of competence and character has revealed the complex nature of building and maintaining leadership effectiveness in contemporary organizational environments. Through in-depth interviews with three respected leaders from different sectors, this study has illuminated how successful leaders navigate the dual requirements of professional excellence and ethical behaviour while maintaining credibility across diverse stakeholder groups. The results demonstrate that leadership credibility emerges through the consistent integration of technical expertise with moral integrity, particularly in situations that test both dimensions simultaneously. The participants' experiences highlight the importance of maintaining alignment between stated values and demonstrated behaviours, while adapting leadership approaches to meet evolving organizational needs and stakeholder expectations. Their strategic approaches to building and maintaining credibility through transparent communication, authentic relationship building, and consistent ethical behaviour provide valuable insights for leadership development and practice. The study's contributions to leadership theory and practice extend beyond traditional understandings of credible leadership, offering new perspectives on how leaders can effectively combine competence and character in their daily practices. The research reveals that successful leaders maintain credibility by consistently demonstrating both technical capability and moral courage, particularly when facing complex challenges that require difficult decisions. The participants' experiences underscore the importance of cultural sensitivity and community engagement in building sustainable leadership credibility, while their strategic approaches to navigating organizational challenges provide practical guidance for leaders across different contexts. These insights suggest that leadership development should focus on building both professional excellence and ethical decision-making capabilities, recognizing that credible leadership requires the consistent integration of both dimensions. The study's results offer valuable guidance for organizations seeking to develop credible leaders who can effectively navigate contemporary challenges while maintaining stakeholder trust and organizational effectiveness.

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