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Sustaining Credible Leadership in Organizations

Gilbert Atuto Angana

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Gilbert Atuto Angana

Pan-Africa Christian University, Nairobi, Kenya

Email: anganagilbert@gmail.com

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Abstract

The mainstream media in Kenya, Africa, and the world is full of scandalous information that questions the credibility of leaders who were thought to be effective. This is observable across all organization sectors from the religious, public sector, political and even the private sector and includes such practices as corruption, manipulation of data and financial information, leadership wrangles, sexual harassment, among other such accusations of sexual misconduct which touches on prominent and perceived effective leaders. This has brought about severe gaps in leadership credibility. This literature review study examines the construct leader's credibility in the context of credible leadership. Discussions focus on the development of credible leadership and the practices that are critical for leaders to build and sustain credibility and authenticity based on literature from the last two decades. The two perspectives of practices described are trustworthiness and competence which provide significant applications for leaders in the current dynamic organization context.

Keywords: *Leadership, Credibility, Authenticity, Credible leadership, Authentic leadership, Organizational Context*

1.1 Introduction

Leadership involves influence and relationship between the leader and the people who have chosen to be followers (Kouzes *et al.*, 2017). Silva (2016) argues in support of leadership involving influence but one that is more relational and entails followers' acceptance of their leader and their common focus towards the shared goals. This relational dimension and the choice by followers is hinged on the leader's authenticity and credibility (Kouzes *et al.*, 2017). To lead successful organizations especially in this season of the covid-19 pandemic, leaders will be required to have clarity of values that amalgamates with institutional values and followers values (Silva, 2016). It requires a different kind of leadership that is more open, understanding, allows for team members' contributions and critiques. Leadership that demonstrates trust, frequent engagements, and communication in the teams and organization (Quist, 2009). A leadership that can demonstrate

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confidence, maintain integrity amid tough business decisions (Gardner, 2011). Honest leadership, and have unwavering character and authenticity (Klenke, 2007). This kind of leadership is credible. This is the mark of effective leadership required to drive today's organizations amidst the chaos and governance issues experienced in this era.

Sustaining genuine authenticity and credibility seems to be a huge task among many leaders, let alone organization leaders. This is because it involves continuous self-sacrificing behaviors to maintain the character, competence, and composure as a credible leader (Klenke, 2007). Some of the scandalous headlines involving perceived credible leaders we have seen in mainstream media in Kenya over the last five years have alluded to this sentiment (Amadala, 2019; Igunza, 2020; Ndungu, 2016; Ogemba, 2016). The case is the same globally where we have also seen various global leaders engaged in activities that have questioned their credibility (The Editorial Board, 2017). The sustainability of character, competence, composure and values by leaders forms the heart of authenticity and credibility and determines if followers will build a trust bank in their leaders.

This study, therefore, has two parts. First, the study reviews the literature on credible leadership and its development to date, highlighting the elements and perspectives of credible and authentic leadership based on scholarly texts and extracts from the Bible the book of Galatians with a view of understanding some key principles that can be related to the construct of credibility and authenticity. Second, the study proposes the practices that leaders can employ if they are to continuously sustain their credibility and authenticity both from their point of view and from the point of view of their constituents.

1.2 Problem Statement

There is vast research both theoretical and empirical in the field of credible and authentic leadership that has tried to address various topical issues regarding credible and authentic leadership in an organizational context. Oginde (2011) study addressed the followers' expectation of their leaders, Avolio et al. (2006) study showcased how leaders can accelerate authenticity to increase their impact, Datta (2015) assessed the effectiveness of authentic leadership, Gardner et al. (2005) reviewed a self-based model of authentic leadership and followers, Oginde (2011) addressed the aspect of spirituality as a predictor of organizational citizenship behavior, Ilies et al. (2005) addressed the understanding of leader-follower outcomes, Klenke (2005) reviewed the effects of personal meaning and calling on organizational commitment and Hemby (2017) reviewed credibility through the model of Jesus. Other researchers incredible and authentic leadership (Klenke, 2007; Novicevic et al., 2006; Quist, 2009; Copeland, 2017; Kouzes et al., 2011; Oginde, 2011; Gardner, 2011) who have addressed various critical dimensions and pillars of credible and authentic leadership ranging from trust, character, integrity competence, followership among other.

Despite all these vast theoretical and empirical research on this subject, less research has examined the sustainability of credible and authentic leadership and even lesser research on the actions that leaders must continuously undertake to sustain their credibility and authenticity with their followers within an organization. With the many emerging scandals that have damaged the

reputations of some of the perceived credible and authentic leaders, the question that arises is what it takes to make credible leadership a success especially in an organizational context. And if it is an effective leadership style what needs to be done to bridge this credibility gap being experienced? This is the question that this paper aims to address. The purpose of this paper is to extend existing theoretical and empirical studies and contribute to the emergent formulations of credible and authentic leadership by exploring how leaders can sustain credibility within an organizational context. Despite this review study building on research on credible and authentic leadership, it represents a slight departure since it establishes practices that can be avoided by leaders to sustain credibility in their organizations.

1.3 Objectives

The objective of this study was to explore and understand credible leadership in an organizational context. Specifically, the study sought:

- i. To review extant theoretical, and empirical literature on credible and authentic leadership,
- ii. To identify emerging knowledge gaps from the review on credible and authentic leadership
- iii. To propose a suitable theoretical model for advancing research in sustaining credible leadership.

Based on the research objectives, this review study literature was undertaken using keywords: authentic leadership and credible leadership that appeared in either the title, abstract, list of keywords. The study was also limited to peer-reviewed academic journals and scholarly journals and books from online databases. The initial search yielded 243 papers, this was then sieved further based on publication dates between 2001 and 2021. The final search list of 31 articles was selected. This literature was then examined and used to summarize and explain each of the credible leadership perspectives summarized in the next sections. The paper draws a conclusion and recommendations for future empirical research based on the review.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Credible leadership developments

Leadership effectiveness has its foundation on credibility and authenticity as it underpins trust between the leaders and their followers and is based also on the belief of the followers towards their leaders' capability and authenticity (Copeland, 2016). Leadership as a practice has always been challenging. If coupled with a focus on authenticity and credibility makes it even much of a challenge since the sacrifice required to build and sustain this is much higher and very important (Avolio et al., 2005). Walumbwa et al. (2008) defined authentic leadership to involve leaders' self-awareness and openness of what they represent and consistency of their actions based on their values, and beliefs. Based on this view Kouzes et al. (2011) came up with four components of credible leadership as inspiring, honesty, competence, and forward-looking. These components have some relations with the components in authentic leadership as self-awareness, individual moral standing, relational mastery, and objectivity (Walumbwa et al., 2008).

Aviola et al. (2006) share authenticity to involve leaders' self-awareness of their thoughts and actions that are hinged on values that are universally accepted by their followers. The bar has been raised higher for leaders in contemporary times to beyond self-awareness and honesty, with the current crop of followers demanding much more accountability from their leaders. Klenke (2007) sentiments that "authentic leaders and followers engage in self-sacrificing behaviors in situations that challenge and test their deep sense of self and require them to be true to it at all costs without compulsion or conflict" seems to be the reality neglected. This gives a challenge to the leaders to continuously analyze their actions and behaviors to ensure they maintain impeccable integrity in the eyes of their followers (Quist, 2009). On the other hand, it's also worth having an understanding of traits of followers who are led by credible and authentic leaders for appreciation of the impact of this leadership style. Kouzes et al. (2011) allude to followers' pride in their leaders, sense of belonging, increased commitment, and congruence in personal values with that of their leaders as critical traits formed by followers. However, Harvey (2006); Datta (2015) alludes that behaviors alone do not increase the credibility of the leaders. In fact, in most cases, behaviors may decrease the leaders' credibility and authenticity based on the discussions we had in the introduction section of this paper. Therefore, not much has been researched about what leaders and followers need to do to sustain authenticity and credibility.

According to Galatians 2:11-13 (NIV), Peter's inconsistency and hypocrisy as a leader are results in misleading his followers. This action is not attuned to the arguments on credibility and authenticity and we see in this particular case Peter losing his credibility as a leader. Galatians 2:14-21 (NIV) demonstrates Paul's confrontation with Peter in the open for not living up to the required level of character and integrity. This is in line with Avolio et al. (2005); Kouzes et al., (2011); Walumbwa et al. (2008) in that authentic and credible leadership involves having personal moral standing as well as awareness of individual actions and how they impact others. The actions of Paul are also supported by Avolio et al. (2005) where they emphasized the importance of transparency in decision making, courage to openly confront unethical issues, and resilience to sustain moral standards.

What is emerging and critical that may help bridge the credibility gap is how leaders and followers intentionally and continuously engage and act to build authenticity and credibility. This calls for leaders to be strategic in the demonstration of their behaviors in tune with their followers while creating interactive opportunities with them. Such strategic actions could be in the form of coaching, continuous follower-ups, and genuinely checking up their followers as a way to build effective commitment in their followers. This is the mark of not only intentionality but also being overly aware and exceeding the expectations of their followers, and continuously modifying their actions based on their followers' expectations (Oginde, 2011; Kouzes et al., 2011; Wherry, 2012; Wilson, 2013). The next section highlights and summarizes the critical practices that can be employed by both leaders and followers not only to build but also to sustain their credibility and authenticity in an organizational context.

2.2 Credible leadership practices

Based on the understanding of Kouzes et al. (2011); Walumbwa et al. (2008) we can summarize the components into two perspectives to better articulate the factors that leaders need to act to build

their authenticity and credibility. The perspectives highlight the tensions that the leaders undergo and what is required for them to sustain credibility and authenticity. The two perspectives are summarized as: (a) competence, which combines competence and forward-looking elements from Kouzes et al. (2011) and self-awareness and objectivity elements from Walumbwa et al. (2008), and (b) trustworthiness, which combines inspiring and honest elements from Kouzes et al. (2011) and individual moral standing and relational mastery from Walumbwa et al. (2008). This summary has been based on the assumption that forward-looking, self-awareness, and objectivity are competence that shows the leader's skills and ability in handling various activities and can be learned by the leader. Similarly inspiring, honesty, relational mastery, and moral standing are more inclined to show if a leader is dependable based on their beliefs and values. Therefore under the current era, followers are very keen to analyze in all sectors they operate whether their leaders are competent to undertake their role and whether they are trustworthy in advancing their concerns. This is what followers use to build assess the credibility and authenticity of their leaders (Ilies et al., 2005; Klenke, 2005; Oginde, 2011).

Trustworthiness practices: Based on the extant literature review, the consistency of organization leaders is what builds their trustworthiness. Consistency in their communication, action, honesty, beliefs, and moral standing (Aviola et al., 2005; Walumbwa et al., 2008). Leaders, therefore, need to consistently make decisions that are not contracting their belief and moral standing, and their actions should be consistent with the commitment they make to their followers and employees, and other stakeholders in the organization. This is what enables leaders to gain trust and avoid conflicts both with followers and personal moral conflicts. Kouzes et al. (2011) also highlight that when leaders embody their organization's vision and core values and challenge their followers to do as they do, they are likely to increase their level of trustworthiness.

It's also worth noting that behaviors that undermine trustworthiness quickly erode credibility. Behaviors that are unethical and leaders should avoid in an organization set include but are not limited to misappropriation of resources, falsification of reports and data, which are highlighted in many corporate financial scandals, sexual and any other form of harassment, unethical leader-follower relationships, consistent inaccurate information, bending rules to suit themselves, ignore followers opinion and feedback among others (Novicevic et al., 2006; Quist, 2009). It's also critical to note that if leaders permit such behaviors from their followers even if they are not the ones directly engaged in them, they are also at high risk of losing credibility. This calls for leaders to intentionally and continuously uphold ethical, values to protect their followers, themselves, and their organizations if they are to sustain their trust and credibility (Klenke, 2007).

Competence practices: According to Kouzes et al. (2011); Wilson (2013) competence entails placing the employees or followers at the center of the organization's vision and mission. Leaders work with their followers in consistently undertaking future-focused taking action and collaborative initiatives, engage in open and effective communication to improve their shared experiences within the organization context (Walumbwa et al., 2008). For organization leaders to emphasize the future innovative initiatives and forward-looking on the organization's objectives and outcome, they have to understand their strengths and weakness as leaders which forms the bigger framework on understanding the organizational context (Datta, 2015; Copeland, 2016). This is a continuous and dynamic process in an organization and not static. It involves leaders

working with their followers in clearly mapping dynamic initiatives with a focus on the shared organizational goals, understanding the trends and preferences of consumers in their environment to come up with innovative solutions, and forecasting their organization's impact to prepare accordingly. It also entails continuous improvement of organization structures, processes, and operations by eliminating unnecessary and bureaucratic process that hinders organization effectiveness. These are the behaviors of effective credible leaders that demonstrate their strong competence that should be inculcated as a dynamic process.

Further, when leaders struggle to undertake their role and tasks that are part of their job description, where leaders struggle to provide clarity and direction to followers on critical occasions, or when they fail to make decisions that are part of their job, they risk losing credibility. Followers and employees will question the competency of leaders who ignore the cropping problems in the organization by failing to take action (Walumbwa et al., 2008). Based on the already reviewed scandals in the corporate world, we see leaders today handle or are expected to handle information that is sensitive in nature and find a balance of sharing the information with followers without divulging confidentiality (Datta, 2015). This sometimes creates a misrepresentation of facts as a result of leaders trying to bring out a positive tone in difficult conversations. If this is consistently done by leaders it results in confusion and suspicions crop in from followers for such leaders which destroys the leader's credibility.

3.1 Conclusion

This paper has explored issues about credible leadership in an organizational context. The recognition of a widening credibility gap in many organizations should serve as a rallying concern to the organization leaders desiring to be authentic and credible and lead with moral and ethical values. The review study has described two critical perspectives that highlight the practices that can build and erode credibility. This is to enable leaders' assess their intentional practices and consistently align with practices that will accurately build their competence and trustworthiness based on how their followers see them. This review study proposes that leaders can be able to project and consistently improve their competence by engaging in consistent practices such as creating clarity of vision for the organization's future, based on its strategic focus. It's also worth noting that organization leaders can also lose credibility if they are engaged in unethical practices that project them as untrustworthy.

Future empirical research could be undertaken to understand and affirm the behaviors and practices that can help leaders and followers sustain credibility in an organizational context.

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