



Leadership Integrity: A Strategic Pillar for Ethical Decision Making and Organizational Excellence

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Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration among all authors. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines integrity as a foundational element of leadership and its impact on moral decision-making, organizational trust, and sustained success. A thorough analysis of interdisciplinary literature highlights the need to develop integrity-driven leadership cultures and stresses the incorporation of ethical frameworks into healthcare leadership education. The results offer doable tactics for promoting accountability, openness, and moral coherence in a variety of organizational settings.

Effective and long-lasting leadership is built on integrity. Between leaders and their staff, it creates an unbreakable bond of trust that promotes credibility, inspiration, moral decision-making, and a robust corporate culture. Integrity in leadership has the power to leave a lasting impression on a company's clients, staff members, and prospective customers. They contribute to a happy

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workplace by keeping the company's values. It is the pillar of leadership, serving as a beacon of trust and credibility for followers. Leaders who maintain high decent standards and demonstrate consistency between their words and actions inspire confidence and loyalty among their teams. When leaders act with integrity, they create clear evidence for others to follow, fostering a culture of honesty, transparency, and accountability within the organization. It is on the basis above that this article reviewed literature bringing to light the role of integrity in leadership.

The article presents that integrity impacts an organization's success and that leaders who embody integrity are better equipped to navigate challenges and crises effectively. It also presents creating an organizational culture to nurture Integrity Leadership. Finally, it touches on the integrity in the training of healthcare professionals.

The article concludes that as a pillar of leadership, integrity is not just a nice to have; it is essential for long-term success. By embodying integrity in all that they do, leaders can inspire greatness in themselves and in those they lead.

Keywords: Leadership integrity; transparency; accountability; trust; credibility.

1. INTRODUCTION

The supreme quality of leadership is unquestionably integrity. Without it, no real success is possible, whether it is on a section gang, on a football field, in an army, or in an office. Leadership according to Stogdil, (1974), is "the ability to guide, influence, and inspire individuals or groups towards achieving common goals". It is the leader's responsibility to cast the right vision, make strategic decisions that will facilitate the attainment of the vision, and create an environment that encourages collaboration, innovation, and growth of the organization (Tahir, 2020). Leadership integrity refers to the adherence of leaders to moral and ethical principles in all their actions and decisions. It encompasses qualities such as honesty, transparency, and accountability (Zarghamifard & Danaeefard, 2020). Leaders with integrity consistently act in tandem with their values and principles. Such leaders are reliable, practice what they preach, and avoid any actions that might compromise their ethical standards (Othman & Abdul Rahman, 2014; Parry & Proctor-Thomson, 2002).

Doctor Sunny Giles, an organizational scientist, and executive coach, polled 195 leaders in 15 countries across 30 worldwide organizations, according to a study published in Harvard Business Review, to find out what leaders thought were the most crucial leadership capabilities (Baker, 2003; González & Guillén, 2002). According to the percentage of responders, high ethics and safety ranked as the top category. This group included the most highly rated attributes, high ethical and moral standards and communicating clear expectations (Giles,

2016). This suggests that even, leaders themselves value integrity.

Leadership integrity inspires confidence and loyalty, which are crucial for effective collaboration and achieving organizational goals (Kisling, 2007). Additionally, integrity in leadership ensures that decisions are made with a clear moral compass, preventing unethical practices that could lead to scandals or damage the organization's reputation (Sharma et al., 2019). According to Bolin, (2019), integrative leadership starts by fostering a culture characterized by an open atmosphere and transparent dialogues. Ultimately, integrity enhances a leader's credibility and sets a positive example that encourages others to uphold similar ethical standards (Fehr et al., 2015; Block & Manning, 2007).

Given that integrity has been variously described by management experts and leadership researchers as the leader's "currency" (Michael, 2024; Ponomarenko, 2016; Giles, 2016), it is clear that it is an indispensable tool for leadership success, as it is foundational in building trust with followers and upholding ethical standards (Bauman, 2013). To secure an organization's growth, the study examines the importance of leadership integrity and how it might be institutionalized.

1.1 Importance of Leadership as Integrity

Leadership integrity fosters trust, credibility, and a positive organizational culture. It enhances performance, transparency, and accountability, and prevents unethical practices, ensuring long-term success and reputation (Simons, 2002).

1.2 Importance of this Manuscript for the Scientific Community

A rigorous approach to comprehending leadership integrity was highlighted by the article's methodology, which comprised a comprehensive literature evaluation of 50 articles. This empirical basis gives its findings more legitimacy and serves as a platform for next studies in organizational behavior and leadership ethics.

2. METHODOLOGY

This article was produced by utilizing published data on the topic. Thorough literature was done in popular databases including PubMed, Research Gate, and Google Scholar. A total of 50 articles were downloaded from PubMed, Research Gate, and Google Scholar and 28 articles were used after thorough reading was done and relevant information was picked for this manuscript. Full text and abstracts that were relevant, peer-reviewed, and also published in English were included. Some of the keywords that guided the search include integrity, leadership, ethical leadership, organizational success, organizational culture, and integrity leadership.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Overview of Integrity in Leadership

According to Zweifel, (2019), integrity is the entirety, consistency, and coherence of principles and ideals per the Latin word *integras*, which means intact, whole, and harmonious. For some authors, integrity is more or less the same as professional wholeness or responsibility. This can be summarized as adhering to professional standards and promoting those practices. Integrity is also regarded as the honesty, truthfulness, and accuracy of one's actions. For organizations today, integrity in leaders has become an important element. Leadership integrity ensures trust orientation from the employees and stakeholders (Putra & Kurniawati, 2017).

Effective and long-lasting leadership is built on integrity. Leaders and their staff create an unbreakable bond of trust that promotes credibility, inspiration, ethical decision-making, in addition to a robust corporate culture. Although there are obstacles in the way of integrity in

leadership, leaders who put ethics first and continuously show that they are willing to do the right thing eventually gain the respect and trust of their followers as well as long-term success (Goti, 2024).

Integrity in leadership has the power to leave a lasting impression on a company's clients, staff members, and prospective customers. They similarly commit to a positive work environment by upholding the company's principles. Learning the characteristics of integrity and how to put them into practice will help one establish a solid reputation and gain the respect of other employees if one holds a managerial position (Harun & Ahmad, 2024).

Integrity is a crucial organizational psychology term and a characteristic of effective leaders. According to corporate experts, business leadership studies should emphasize the relationship between psychological empowerment and the integrity of leaders.

3.1.1 The role of integrity in leadership

Integrity is the pillar of leadership, serving as a beacon of trust and credibility for followers. Leaders who support high decent standards and demonstrate consistency between their words and actions inspire confidence and loyalty among their teams. When leaders act with integrity, they convey constructive examples for others to follow, fostering a culture of honesty, transparency, and accountability within the organization.

Integrity also plays a vital role in decision-making processes. Leaders who prioritize integrity are guided by their moral compass rather than external pressures or personal interests. They may make moral decisions that benefit their group, company, and stakeholders making use of this ethical framework. By staying true to their values and principles, leaders build credibility and earn the respect of those they lead.

Integrity and trust are essential components of a relationship between a leader and their team. As a result of enhanced trust and respect, motivated workers are more engaged and productive. This is especially true when they witness their leader performing honorably. Conversely, an insincere leader has the potential to undermine confidence and impair bonds with staff members, which can result in a bad work environment and low morale.

When it comes to choosing who to follow, who to trust, who to be faithful and devoted to, and finally, who to perform for, followers rely heavily on the integrity of their leaders. A leader with integrity may be valued for the good impacts they have on the leadership process and the good results they generate for the company (Harun & Ahmad, 2024). Integrity in leadership enhances a business's reputation. An enterprise with a management team dedicated to upholding ethical standards establishes the norm for how business functions and interacts with clients. This may bring in devoted clients, which could boost revenue (Sisnuhadi, 2014). A company's reputation can have a good impact on the community it serves if it is linked to moral leadership (Putra & Kurniawati, 2017).

3.1.2 The impact of integrity on organizational success

Organizations led by individuals with integrity are more likely to thrive and succeed in the long run. When leaders prioritize honesty, transparency, and ethical behavior, they create a culture of trust and integrity that permeates throughout the entire organization. This tradition stimulates partnership, innovation, and employee engagement, leading to improved performance and productivity.

Moreover, leaders who embody integrity are better equipped to navigate challenges and crises effectively. Their unwavering commitment to ethical conduct enables them to make tough decisions with confidence and integrity, even in the face of adversity. Businesses that engage in ethical leadership can shield themselves from lawsuits and ethical quandaries in the long term. It is also critical to practice ethical leadership since it encourages partnerships with like-minded businesses and ensures client loyalty.

The formal and informal systems must cooperate to promote ethical behavior to establish a consistent ethical culture message. The various official and informal processes must all be communicating to employees consistently in a way that encourages ethical behavior if there is to be a completely unified ethical culture (Trevino & Nelson, 2021).

3.1.3 Creating organisation culture to nurture integrity leadership

1. (Shacklock & Lewis, 2007) proposed some processes for **Achieving a "Leading with Integrity" Organisation:**

- i. **Pre-employment ethics education:** Although he acknowledges that it is not the primary responsibility of employers to be concerned with pre-employment agendas, employers can nevertheless have an indirect influence by lobbying for their criteria when dealing with job applicants. This can affect curricula and ethics content at the secondary and college levels. Organisations can directly advise secondary school educators about what they expect in terms of young people's readiness before they seek employment.
- ii. **Recruiting ethical people:** Organisations must develop recruitment tactics and techniques that may carefully evaluate potential employees in terms of their ethical position and proclivity for ethical (and unethical) behaviour.
- iii. **Training and developing ethical leaders:** The process continues even after the proper individuals have been brought into the business with a focus on ethics during the recruitment and selection phase. An organization's integrity can be significantly increased by implementing a targeted and continuous ethical leadership training programme. Strong ethical content should be a part of this continuing education, from executive development to orientation. People in high-risk professions like finance, contracting, and buying, as well as those in professions with unique challenges and requirements like marketing, nursing, law enforcement, and uniformed services, should receive additional training.
- iv. **Mentoring up-and-coming leaders:** Another beneficial investment in Leading with Integrity is the proactive mentorship of upcoming leaders by pairing them with more experienced leaders who have demonstrated their integrity, ethical characteristics, and abilities.
- v. **Sponsoring business education:** Industry and business schools should significantly increase their contributions to the teaching of ethics.
- vi. **Performance management:** Perhaps organizations should only consider funding persons for additional study in management and leadership if they attend business schools with a strong ethical component to their educational curricula.
- vii. **Rewards, promotion, and advancement:** There is also evidence of 'character' being considered in public sector promotion

decisions. A substantial emphasis on ethics is essential in an organization's promotion selection systems, which truly examines the propensity for ethical (and unethical) activity. While promotion is typically the most sought-after and utilized reward, there is an opportunity for a larger emphasis on other awards for people who exhibit outstanding ethical behavior in businesses.

3.2 Instating Integrity in Managers

A culture of integrity is necessary for any organization to establish strong interactions, uphold moral principles, and develop trust among management members. Speaking about the value of integrity is insufficient; it needs to be actively developed and put into practice. It takes leadership, dedication, and a readiness to hold oneself and others accountable to establish an environment of integrity. Employees who work in an environment of integrity should be free to voice ethical issues without worrying about facing consequences. From a leadership standpoint, this is exhibiting moral behavior yourself, establishing clear guidelines, and offering management members resources to address moral dilemmas.

Instating integrity among managers can be difficult, despite its increasing significance. This is mainly because insufficient commitment from management members, unclear vision, or a lack of managerial knowledge can all be obstacles to organizational change.

3.3 Leadership by Example

Leaders set an example for the entire organization when it comes to ethical behavior. Leaders who exhibit integrity and moral judgment regularly convey to their staff that these principles are non-negotiable. Leaders who exhibit integrity and moral judgment regularly convey to their staff that these principles are unassailable. Setting a good example for your team members also fosters trust in your organization, which is important for developing accountability.

It's wise to practice what you preach to foster ethical decisions, foster accountability, and increase confidence.

Mohandas Gandhi, who taught integrity by personal example, was one of the great integrity teachers. A woman and her small kid are said to

have spent many days traveling to meet the Mahatma at his ashram by train, rickshaw, bus, and foot. The woman pleaded with Gandhi after they had stood before him. Please advise my son to stop eating sugar. For a few moments, Gandhi remained silent. At last, he said. "bring your son back in two weeks," Although the woman was perplexed, she lacked the courage to confront the revered Mahatma. Thanking Gandhi, she promised to comply with his request. Returning to their village, she went with her son. Two weeks later, they made the entire journey again on foot, by bus, by rickshaw, and by train. When the pair stood before him again, Gandhi bent down, looked the child straight in the eye, and said, "Stop eating sugar." Grateful but bewildered, the woman asked, "Why did you tell me to bring him back? You could have told him the same thing two weeks ago." Gandhi replied, "Two weeks ago, I was eating sugar." (Zweifel, 2019) This act is a clear indication of leadership by example. Preach what you do.

3.4 Establishing Clear Policies and Guideline

Employees can be guided in making moral decisions by having clear policies and procedures in place. These regulations ought to address several topics, including bribery, fraud prevention, and conflicts of interest. For example, Siemens, a global corporation, launched an extensive compliance program in the wake of a prominent corruption incident. This program had strict anti-corruption guidelines, employee training requirements, and frequent audits to verify compliance (Goti, 2024).

3.5 Encourage and Reward Ethical Behavior

Being ethical is not just following the rules and laws but also going above and beyond to act in a just and moral manner. Your fundamental principles can be reaffirmed and an integrity-focused culture can be developed by rewarding and promoting ethical behavior. You can also lessen or avoid the possibility of misbehavior, fraud, or corruption, all of which can harm your business's revenue, credibility, and reputation (Zweifel, 2019).

To foster an environment of responsibility, for instance, you can create precise, standardized policies and procedures and hold both you and your staff members responsible for your deeds and results. Along with addressing any problems

or complaints in a timely and equitable manner, you may also honor and reward people who behave ethically (Harun & Ahmad, 2024).

3.6 Avoid Bias in the Workplace

Everyone must actively fight biases and misconceptions to create a culture of ethics and accountability. The term "workplace bias" describes unintentional tendencies stemming from individual experiences, cultural upbringing, or socialization. Either explicit or implicit bias may influence your choices and behaviors; you may be conscious of it or not (Harun & Ahmad, 2024).

The strongest approaches to combat prejudice and stereotypes in the workplace is to promote diversity, claims leadership, ethics, and corporate accountability. In the course, Hsieh asserts that "it's integral to create a sense of belonging within an organization." "Having a broad group of persons in senior management positions guarantees that minority workers have relatable role models. Nevertheless, inspiring meaningful relationships between members of various demographic groups can also be beneficial; this can be done, for instance, through small group collaboration or mentorships (Goti, 2024).

3.7 Establishing a Supportive and Safe Environment

Establishing a safe and encouraging work atmosphere where your management members feel empowered to act morally and to express their ideas and concerns is another way to build an ethical culture. This can be achieved by fostering an environment of transparency, trust, and respect where employees can freely and honestly speak with you and one another as well as feel valued and appreciated for their contributions (Zweifel, 2019).

In addition, you ought to foster a feedback-friendly environment where both you and your staff members provide and accept timely, helpful criticism of your conduct and performance as well as recognize and celebrate your accomplishments. Additionally, you ought to foster a culture of learning in which both you and your staff are prepared to own up to your errors, learn from them, and actively seek out and seize new chances and challenges. Additionally, you ought to foster an inclusive and varied workplace atmosphere where you and your staff value and respect each other's unique qualities as well as

our shared experiences and viewpoints (Zweifel, 2019).

4. CRITICISMS OF LEADERSHIP AS INTEGRITY

- i. Overemphasis on Integrity: Although integrity is vital, some opponents argue that placing too much emphasis on moral behavior can limit one's ability to make flexible decisions. To accomplish organizational objectives or effectively handle crises, leaders occasionally have to make difficult choices that are not entirely consistent with their principles (Zarghamifard & Danaeefard, 2020).
- ii. Subjectivity of Ethical Standards: Detractors may point out that different people and civilizations have quite different ideas about what constitutes integrity and moral behavior. Confusion and conflict among team members may result from this subjectivity, which can cause disparities in how integrity is viewed and applied inside businesses (Putra & Kurniawati, 2017).
- iii. The assumption that honesty in leadership is idealized could lead to leaders having irrational expectations. Leaders may feel they are unable to demonstrate vulnerability or make mistakes, which are crucial components of both professional and personal development, as a result of the pressure to uphold an ideal ethical standard. This can result in stress and burnout (Goti, 2024).

4.1 Integrity in the Training of Healthcare Professionals

Integrity has been variously described by management experts and leadership researchers as the leader's "currency" (Engelbrecht et al., 2015; Michael, 2024; Ponomarenko, 2016) It is a vital component in the training of healthcare professionals, as it prepares them to become carers who are not only competent at their trade but also disciplined professionals who will adhere to the highest standards of ethical practice (Hemberg et al., 2021). Frontline healthcare workers are responsible for the provision of high-quality nursing care. Such high-quality care goes beyond caring parameters easily measured in patient outcomes to include empathy, strong communication, and dignified, non-discriminatory care (Shin & Yoo, 2022). In that light, Markey and colleagues (Markey et al., 2022) describe integrity in nursing practice as values of honesty,

trustworthiness and commitment to upholding the highest standards of quality patient care that should be ingrained in the student nurse before entry into professional practice (Stievano & Tschudin, 2019). A culture of continuous improvement and patient-centered care, as well as the maintenance of high standards of care, depend on this ethical foundation (Hemberg et al., 2021). By instilling values of honesty and accountability during the training of healthcare staff, such training helps cultivate trustworthy and competent professionals who can navigate the complexities of healthcare with a strong moral compass (Lasthuizen, 2008; Markey et al., 2022).

5. CONCLUSION

Integrity is the bedrock of effective leadership. Leaders who demonstrate integrity earn the trust and respect of those around them, promoting a positive work environment, and drive success for their organizations. Decent leadership is a form of management that adopts principles and values that are considered good moral markers, such as honesty, fairness, equality, responsibility, and respect (Ivan Kennedy, 2023). 'Leadership integrity refers to values of transparency, a high level of teamwork, values empowerment, and a responsible and accountable work culture' (Hosseini, 2021). At its core, integrity means acting by an individual's values, beliefs, and principles, even when no one is watching. It involves being honest, ethical, and consistent in both our words and actions. It is also about acting according to established ethical principles. Research has identified five ethical principles of leaders, according to Harperfoxpartners, (2021) as respect, service, honesty, justice, and community. Integrity requires clarity, accountability, and a commitment to doing what is right, even in the face of adversity. Integrity also means owning up to mistakes and taking responsibility for the consequences of our actions. Leaders who show humility and vulnerability in the face of failure demonstrate true integrity and earn the respect of those around them.

For leaders, integrity is non-negotiable. It is non-negotiable in leadership because it is essential for building trust, credibility, accountability, ethical decision-making, and long-term success. Leaders who prioritize integrity are more likely to inspire and motivate others, foster a positive organizational culture, and achieve sustainable results.

It sets the tone for the entire organization and serves as a guiding light in times of uncertainty. When leaders demonstrate integrity, they inspire loyalty and dedication in their teams, creating a culture of trust and collaboration.

Integrity crucial than ever in the hectic and cutthroat corporate world of today. Integrity-driven leaders foster enduring bonds, stimulate creativity, and generate long-term value for their organizations.

As a pillar of leadership, integrity is not just a nice to have; it is essential for long-term success. By embodying integrity in all that they do, leaders can inspire greatness in themselves and in those they lead. 'Through integrity workspace environment is enriched with justice, motivation, respect, trust, and responsibility' (Purnama et al, 2021).

DISCLAIMER (ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE)

Author(s) hereby declare that NO generative AI technologies such as Large Language Models (ChatGPT, COPILOT, etc) and text-to-image generators have been used during writing or editing of this manuscript.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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