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# Practical Implications of Credible and Authentic Leadership in Organizations

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**Abstract:** Credibility and authenticity have gained much interest in today's world which is full of many challenges, opportunities as well as chaos. This study was conducted in two non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Mwanza, Tanzania to understand authentic and credible leadership, its impact in organizations as well as explore contextual factors that influence it. A qualitative study was conducted where thematic analysis was used to analyze the findings. The findings revealed the subjective nature of authentic leadership. Authenticity was found to be difficult to measure because it was hidden within the person. It was also revealed that employees who perceived their leaders to have credibility and authenticity tend to have a high level of organizational commitment, motivation and trust. Also, it was found out that culture, societal demands, as well as life experiences were contextual factors which influenced authenticity and credibility of leaders. The study was not without limitations. Snowball sampling was applied and hence elements of the population did not have an equal chance of being in the sample. Another limitation is the fact that interviews were conducted through telephone and hence some important gestures and expressions were not captured in the responses. The author invites other scholars to conduct similar studies using representative samples, face to face interviews and other methods such as quantitative or mixed methods to obtain comparable findings.

**Keywords:** Leadership, Credible Leadership, Authentic Leadership

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## 1. Introduction

Even though the concept of leadership remains to be elusive, the significance of leadership cannot be overemphasized. [19], "everything rises and falls on leadership" (p. 267) and leadership cannot be identified without influence [23]. Leadership is crucial for the success of organization and economies [28]. Credible and authentic leadership have gained much interest among leadership scholars of today. Shahzad et al. [30] conducted a study and found a positive impact of authentic leadership to organizations, groups, and individuals. Since this study aims at exploring credible and authentic leadership in organizations, credibility, authenticity, credible leadership, and authentic leadership will be used frequently and therefore it is good to have a clear understanding of what they will mean in this discussion. An authentic leader is one that has a high level of self-awareness and hence, cannot be fake and does not display an image which is contrary to self [17]. On the other hand, an authentic leader needs to have other people to be able practice authentic

leadership and exert influence through its deployment. Credibility is about gaining the trust and confidence of the constituents and hence credible leaders are trusted [15]. Hence in this study, credible and authentic leadership are viewed from a similar perspective of believability such that an authentic leader leads by example, is not fake, is true to self and still maintains credibility in the eyes of the constituents by gaining their trust and confidence. The terms will be used together in most cases of this study.

### 1.1. Problem Statement

We are surrounded by people considered to be leaders starting from the family level to the national level. Looking at it from the national perspective, Africa is one continent that has leaders that serve the longest. It is in Africa where people feel that they lost an election due to stolen votes. Africa is the richest continent in the world but still poor despite the presence of leaders. Worldwide, media exposes scandals such as corruption and sexual harassment which tend to be associated with prominent leaders [2]. Africans are crying for

leaders who will liberate them from exploitation and help the continent properly utilize its resources for the benefit of its people [21]. This brings the question of credibility and authenticity.

### **1.2. Objectives**

- 1) To explore the conceptualization of credible and authentic leadership.
- 2) To explore the contextual factors that influence credible and authentic leadership.
- 3) To explore the impact of credible and authentic leadership to leader-follower relationship.

### **1.3. Research Questions**

- 1) How is credible and authentic leadership conceptualized?
- 2) What are the contextual factors that influence credible and authentic leadership?
- 3) What is the impact of credible and authentic leadership to the leader-follower relationship?

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Leadership Background**

There has been an evolution of leadership theories and practices. Even though the various theories have played a significant role to the scholarship of leadership, the relevance of some might be thought to be diminishing especially based on the current dynamic business environment [22]. For instance, the trait-based theories of leadership hold that some individuals are naturally great leaders and hence leadership is only for some few gifted people [23]. Similarly, behavior-based theories emphasize on the behaviors that leaders need to exhibit to be effective in their leadership [23]. These are just a few among the traditional theories of leadership which are deemed inadequate in today's world. The inadequacy is because they just provide a list of traits and behaviors which are thought to be important in enhancing leadership effectiveness while forgetting to put into perspective the context in which the leaders operate [22]. Context has a significant role in determining the effectiveness of a leader [22]. Organizations which operated in the 1980s were in a context that was quite different from that of today. Credibility and authenticity are crucial in today's dynamic world where things are changing at a high pace. Today's leaders need to help people adapt to change. Without credibility, it is not easy to earn the trust of followers and it is unlikely to succeed in initiating change or responding to change [15].

### **2.2. Authentic and Credible Leadership**

Authentic leadership cannot be in place if the leaders do not attain authenticity in the first place [3]. As stated at the beginning of this study, authenticity is attained when a leader has a sense of self awareness, is true to self, does not pretend

or present an image that is contrary to the reality. Once authenticity is attained, other individuals can come in the picture to work together with the leader to put in place authentic leadership and feel its impact. Similarly, an authentic leader shows consistency between actions, beliefs and values and hence creates an environment of believability. While other forms of leadership such as charismatic leadership, servant leadership and transformational leadership are focused on follower development, authentic leadership has its focus on the leader development [25]. A study was conducted to compare authentic and transformational leadership and the findings revealed that authentic leadership has the most influence on organizational effectiveness [29]. In addition, authentic leadership is attributed to a wide range of organizational impacts such as work engagement, satisfaction with supervisor, increased team effectiveness, financial performance [30], trust in leadership, organizational commitment [10], working satisfaction and higher performance within the organization [33].

### **2.3. Authentic Leadership Development**

Luthans & Avolio [18] argue that authentic leadership development is influenced by positive psychological capabilities as well as positive organizational context of which the two are parts of a positive organizational behavior. Positive psychological capabilities entail confidence, hope, optimism, and resilience. Positive organizational context entails things like culture and vision of which Bass and Avolio [6] argue that if they are transformational, then the leader and development can be optimized. The culture which is based on transformational leadership dimensions will ultimately provide a conducive environment for leaders and followers development and hence push them to reach their full potential [18]. However, this theoretical model is not without criticism. The fact that authentic leadership development is described from a broad perspective which entails the psychological capabilities as well as organizational context, Ilies et al. [14] propose that the model for authentic leadership development should be narrowed down to only have self-awareness, unbiased processing, authentic behavior, and authentic relational orientation. As a result, Avolio et al. [4] combined the two models to come up with one that has self-awareness and self-regulation as the main components of authentic leadership. On the other hand, Northouse [24] argues that authentic leadership is also influenced by other factors such as critical life events and moral reasoning. The implication of this assertion is that leaders need to ensure that they are aware of their life experiences as well as critical events which happen in their lives so as to be able to develop their authentic leadership capabilities.

### **2.4. Dimensions of Authentic Leadership**

Authentic leadership entails self-awareness and self-regulation [3, 32]. Self-awareness is a continuous process through which leaders can understand their values, beliefs, strengths, talents, and purpose. Through self-awareness, a

leader can cultivate self-regulation [18]. Self-regulation enables a leader to live a balanced life whose actions are in line with the held values [3]. Through self-awareness and self-regulation, a leader can act out of intrinsic motivation and not based on the external pressures or expectations of other people [13]. Authenticity is more about being true to one-self. Authentic leaders do not behave like chameleons such that they have different colors depending on the context that they find themselves in. They know who they are (self-awareness) and they can align their actions which what they know they are (self-regulation).

### **2.5. Perspectives on Authentic and Credible Leadership**

Through the review of extant literature, several perspectives emerge regarding the constructs of authentic and credible leadership as discussed here.

Authentic leaders are self-aware. They are self-aware in terms of personal values, strengths, context in which they operate such that followers can bear witness to this fact [3]. In addition, they are confident, hopeful, optimistic, resilient, and high on moral character [3].

Building and strengthening credibility is an ongoing struggle [15]. Leaders need to understand that credibility is not a one-time event which is earned once. Leaders need to be able to renew and sustain their credibility in the eyes of their followers.

Authentic and credible leaders are trustworthy. Credibility enables a leader to earn the trust as well as confidence of the followers [15]. Followers seem to be willing to follow leaders who exhibit certain actions that give them credibility [15]. From this perspective, it is important for leaders to have good relationships with their followers so as to understand the things that they perceive as credibility adding.

Authentic and credible leaders are ethical leaders. Authentic leadership is critical in today's business environment which is faced by many opportunities as well as challenges. Authentic leadership can be essential in managing chaos as well as promoting ethical practices in organizations [20]. Maxwell [19] goes on to argue that leaders who are authentic can be beneficial in today's business world which full of different chaos because they can provide realistic optimism, subservience to purpose and can find order in chaos. Authentic leaders do not necessarily require the presence of other people to manifest their reality. On the contrary, authentic leadership is self-driven and comes from within [3]. Also in an organization setting, authentic leaders are viewed as being values-based since they have a way of making authentic decisions that build trust and commitment of employees and customers [5].

Authentic and credible leaders are predictable. It is easier for followers to relate with authentic leaders. This is because when leaders are true to themselves, they tend to be easily predictable and hence, the followers do not spend much time trying to figure out how the leader will respond to certain scenarios [3]. As a result, this creates a multiplier effect of leadership. When followers perceive a leader as being authentic, this tends to have the resultant impact of the

leadership multiplied [3] and the followers can relate well with their leaders.

Authentic and credible leaders are good crisis managers. Credible leaders can be essential for the future and for leading in turbulent times [28]. However, to qualify to lead in turbulent times, a credible leader needs to demonstrate competency, honorable intent, commitment to learning, think as a cosmopolitan, look for the future, encourage creativity and innovation and should be able to prepare people for turbulence [27].

Leaders need to build and sustain their credibility [15]. This can only be successful after understanding credibility from the followers' point of view. Followers look for certain behavioral evidence to ascertain a certain leader as being credible. For instance, keeping promises, walking the talk, and the like. Kouzes & Posner [14] also opine that to build and sustain credibility, leaders need to discover themselves, appreciate constituents, affirm shared values, develop capacity, serve a purpose, and sustain hope.

Credible and authentic leaders are impactful. The presence of credible leaders is usually noticed because they tend to make a difference in the lives of people that they interact with [14]. However, the difference can be felt once the leaders have created an environment of trust. Leaders need to understand the people that they lead and leave room for them to be understood as well [14]. This can be a better opportunity of building trust and eventually, credibility.

Authentic and credible leaders develop other leaders. They are interested in ensuring that they develop other new leaders who can do even more than themselves [18]. Credible leaders have the same characteristic of developing more leaders who can lead organizations [27].

Authentic and credible leaders value learning. Mistakes are regarded as being normal and as an opportunity for improvement rather than an avenue for scolding subordinates. They also provide an environment which enhances trust among them and their followers because the followers are given a safe environment to exercise their creativity and learning without being undermined [15].

### **2.6. Theory That Guides the Study**

#### *Self-Determination Theory*

This theory focuses on intrinsic and extrinsic motivation [13]. From this theory, it is presumed that individuals who are self-aware tend to act out of intrinsic motivation. They know themselves and values that they hold and hence their actions are based on their own values from inside. However, if they act out of external demands in order to meet the expectations of the people and society around them, then they act out of extrinsic motivation.

## **3. Methodology**

### **3.1. Researcher's Philosophy**

The epistemological stand of this study is based on the interpretivist philosophy which posits that the world is too

complex to be reduced to law-like generalizations [9]. This philosophy recognizes humans as social actors and not objects hence it is important to understand their world from their own point of view. This philosophy focuses on understanding human behavior rather than explaining it and hence makes it necessary for the researcher to be able to understand the meaning of social action from a subjective angle [9]. On the other hand, the ontological considerations of this paper take the constructionism orientation which seeks to embrace and understand contextual influences on the research issues [9].

**3.2. Data Collection**

To meet the objectives of this study and answer the research questions, a qualitative research method was used. Five qualitative interviews using open ended semi-structured questionnaires were done among three leaders who are perceived to be highly credible. The leaders were from an NGO setting in Mwanza, Tanzania where two different NGOs were considered. The sample was not randomly selected. Since the researcher intended to interview highly credible leaders, they were selected purposively using snowball sampling. Purposive sampling is one of the non-probability sampling designs whereby the elements in the population do not have an equal chance of being in the sample. Purposive sampling happens when researcher purposefully select a particular group, elements or units for a certain reason or research problem [16]. Snowball sampling was chosen because the target leaders were not easy to reach and hence, where one leader that was interviewed was able to recommend

other leaders of his category and connected the researcher to them.

To answer all questions, qualitative data was collected through interviews. Interviews were selected because they enabled the researcher to enter the participant’s perspectives [26]. The interview questions were flexible and semi-structured and hence the researcher had an upper hand to obtain rich and detailed responses [9]. The three leaders who were interviewed were in different locations and their schedules could not allow for a physical interview. As a result, telephone interviews were used. However, it is important to consider the fact that telephone interviews are not highly preferable in qualitative studies because they may not be useful in groups that have no access to telephones. Also given the nature of qualitative studies such that they have open ended questions and usually take long, interviewees are likely to terminate a telephone interview as compared to when it is conducted face to face [9]. That is why qualitative telephone interviews can be appropriate when the researcher has in place some specific questions in mind and has a formal or semi-structured interview schedule [17]. Based on these arguments, the researcher decided to use semi-structured interviews.

An interview guide with 5 semi-structured questions was prepared and used by the researcher when conducting the telephone interviews. The respondents were given names as P1, P2 and P3 for confidentiality purposes. Also, their organizations were not disclosed. Among the participants, two were male and 1 was female.

*Table 1. Participants’ information.*

Participant	Gender	Age (years)	Nature of Organization	Position
P1	Male	Above 40	NGO1	Director
P2	Female	Below 40	NGO1	Department Manager
P3	Male	Between 30 and 40	NGO2	Department Manager

As indicated, all interviews were conducted through telephone and were recorded at the consent of the respondents. This posed a disadvantage to the researcher because the body language and facial expressions were not seen. However, the date and time for the interviews varied depending on the availability of the respondents.

*Table 2. Interviews information.*

Respondent	Date	Means	Duration
P1	11/11/2021	Telephone	30 minutes
P2	16/11/2021	Telephone	45 minutes
P3	01/12/2021	Telephone	25 minutes

**3.3. Data Analysis**

Since the data was qualitatively gathered, it was then thematically analyzed. Thematic analysis was used whereby qualitative data was organized and analyzed to determine the themes in the responses. Themes entailed both similarities and differences in the responses of the respondents as well as any repetitions that cut across the responses of all the respondents. When using this approach to determine the themes that

emerged, the researcher applied the steps proposed by [8] regarding thematic analysis.

*Table 3. Steps in Thematic Analysis.*

Familiarizing with the data
Generation of initial codes
Searching for themes
Reviewing themes
Defining and naming themes
Producing the report

**3.4. Quality of the Study**

Quality of social research is assessed based on three important criteria which are reliability, replication, and validity [9]. Reliability is concerned with the consistency of the measures used to arrive at the conclusions made by the research. When the measures are consistent, it means that the results cannot fluctuate even when the same tests are done more than once. Reliability and replicability go hand in hand because to assess the reliability of a measure of a concept, it is necessary for the procedures that constitute that measure to be

replicable by someone else. On the other hand, validity is considered the most important criterion of research because deals with the integrity of the conclusions generated from research. This becomes the whole point of the research because if the conclusions are not arrived at with integrity, then the findings may not be meaningful and hence not useful. Regardless of the research approach that is taken, a researcher must think about the general validity of the approach and the likelihood that it will yield accurate, meaningful, and credible results that can potentially address the research problem at hand [16].

The external validity for this study might be low because of how the sample was selected and data was collected. Looking at external validity, it is concerned with the question of whether generalization of research findings or conclusions can be made beyond that research context [9]. External validity is enhanced by having representative samples when conducting research. For this study, the sample consisted of only three

individuals who were selected non-randomly. As a result, this implies that the general findings of this study cannot be generalized beyond this research context.

Reliability is all about trustworthiness of the research findings [7]. To enhance the reliability of this study, the researcher called the respondents for them to validate whether their views were captured correctly or not. As a result, reliability of this study is high.

#### 4. Discussion of Findings from Thematic Analysis

From the thematic analysis, themes which were identified include organization culture, societal demands, true to self, self-awareness, life experiences, subjectivity, organizational commitment, and motivation. These themes are discussed as an attempt to answer the research questions.

*Table 4. Qualitative Semi-Structured Interview Questions for respondents and themes identified.*

How do you perceive credible and authentic leadership?	Themes identified from P1, P2 and P3 <i>Organization culture, societal demands, true to self, self-awareness, life-experiences, subjectivity, organizational commitment, motivation, trust</i>
Do you believe that there are authentic and credible leaders?	
In your opinion, how do you think credible and authentic leaders can be identified?	
In your opinion, are there any factors which influence credible and authentic leadership development?	
In your opinion, how can you explain the impact of credible and authentic leadership in organizations?	

##### 4.1. Identifying Credibility and Authenticity in a Leader

An authentic leader is one that has a high level of self-awareness and hence, cannot be fake and does not display an image which is contrary to self [18]. On the other hand, an authentic leader needs to have other people to be able practice authentic leadership and exert influence through its deployment. Credibility is about gaining the trust and confidence of the constituents and hence credible leaders are trusted [15]. P1 describes authenticity as being able to follow the inner voice and acting consistently. P2 and P3 describe authenticity as a subjective process which cannot be easily determined by others apart from the leader. From these responses, P1’s response is in line with the theory that guides this study which is the self-determination theory. From this theory, an authentic leader acts out of intrinsic motivation. They know their values and hence they can follow the inner voice in them which convinces them of what should be done based on their values and beliefs. P2 and P3’s responses are also crucial in the findings of this study because they reveal the subjective nature of authenticity. A person’s values and beliefs are within that person and hence they cannot be displayed out for other to see. Therefore, it may not be easy for followers to determine whether a leader is acting authentically out of intrinsic motivation or is acting out of the external influence and demands. Even though [32] argue that authentic leaders cannot be influenced by external demands, P2 and P3 point out an interesting observation that it is only in the jurisdiction of the leader to understand what informs or directs his actions (whether it is the intrinsic motivation or the external demands). P3 also adds another perspective and says that since authentic

leadership is more about being true to self, it may raise leadership ethical issues especially if the leader holds undesirable values.

These findings are in line with the argument by Alvesson [1] that authenticity is hidden within the person, and this raises the subjective nature of authentic leadership. As a result, it may be difficult to measure the authenticity of a leader. However, the leader is the one who knows whether the actions displayed are out of authenticity or not. On the other hand, the followers can feel a sense of authenticity if they see that the leaders’ actions are consistent and not changing depending on situations. There is a way that a person’s consistent actions communicate to others the values that are held. And as a result, the leaders’ actions can be looked at from the perspective of those values that are displayed.

True to self is another theme which has been identified in this study. The three respondents P1, P2 and P3 argue that authenticity is nearly un-achievable because leaders are surrounded by various demands from their followers and the society in general. Most of the times, leaders act in ways that appeal to their follower’s expectations to gain their trust. From this perspective, it is nearly impossible to be true to self and hence the actions of leaders are guided by extrinsic motivation.

This discussion brings the researcher to the conclusion that credibility and authenticity lie within the leaders. To a large extent, leaders are the ones who can tell of their level of credibility and authenticity. However, through their consistent actions and behaviors, their credible and authentic actions can spill out for their followers to notice and hence build a relationship of trust with their leaders.

#### **4.2. Contextual Factors That Influence Credible and Authentic Leadership**

This question was addressed by some themes which were identified, and these are organization culture, societal demands, as well as life experiences. P1 and P2 stated that the culture of an organization determines the level of credibility and authenticity that the leaders display. The implication of this notion is that leaders' actions vary and hence authenticity and credibility cannot be achieved consistently. It depends on the culture of an organization in which the leaders operate. In this case, an organization culture needs to be set in such a way that it fosters authenticity and credibility. If the top leaders do not behave authentically, then this should not be expected in the followers because the leaders act as the models. On the other hand, P3 states that organization culture has nothing to do with authenticity and credibility. This should be something that comes from within. Therefore, leaders should not find excuses of acting in ways that are not authentic and credible. Once they know their values, what is right and what should be done, then authentic leaders will always tend to align their actions to the values that they hold (self-regulation). The culture is made by people and the leaders can change an organization culture to be that which fosters credibility and authenticity. P3 sees the leaders as the change agents who can bring the credible and authentic cultures to their organizations. They do not act in ways contrary to their values and belief in the name of organizational culture.

P1 and P3 also add on to say life experiences influence credible and authentic leadership. Leaders are born and raised in different places and hence they all have different life experiences. Some leaders might have gone through traumatic experiences and rejection which prohibit them from accepting themselves, believing in themselves and believing in their values. As a result, they may tend to be willing to act based on people's expectations to gain acceptance. This means that their actions will not be aligned to their values but rather, to the expectations and wishes of other people.

#### **4.3. Impact of Credible and Authentic Leadership in Organizations**

Regardless of the cultural background or geographical barriers, the characteristics of credible leaders entail honesty, forward-looking, inspiring, and competence [15] in spite of the evident credibility gap around the world [11]. Kouzes & Posner [15] summarize their research by providing some of the implications in an organization context whose employees believe that their leaders are authentic and credible. The employees tend to have a high level of organizational commitment which ultimately yields to good relationships and interactions between leaders and subordinates. Subordinates of such an organization tend to want to identify themselves with the organization and hence they feel proud to tell others that they work in that organization. This is as result of the commitment and attachment that has been developed thereof. This is in line with the feedback from the three respondents (P1, P2 and P3) where P1 and P3 emphasized the fact that

credible and authentic leadership facilitates employee commitment to the organization. On the other hand, P2 opined that credible and authentic leadership enhances employee motivation because employees are sure that their leaders' actions are consistent and for the good of the entire organization. In addition, P2 also posited that credible and authentic leadership enhances a relationship that is based on trust between the leaders and followers.

#### **4.4. Ethical Consideration**

Research is not intended to cause any physical or psychological harm to the participants [31] and this makes it necessary to have ethical considerations when carrying out research. Any ethical issues that were likely to arise were addressed in this study [12]. The participants were given the liberty to take part in the study, they were not forced. Also, they were assured of confidentiality such that the researcher reported their responses in a way that does not expose the participants so that they are safe and that their responses may not backfire on them [12]. They felt free to provide responses without any fear of them being disclosed based on their responses. Also, the researcher was not biased by inclining to certain participants. On the contrary, all kinds of reports that were obtained were recorded whether positive or negative.

### **5. Limitations, Conclusion and Recommendations**

As observed, the sampling technique that was used for this study was not random. Snowball sampling which is a type of purposive sampling was used whereby the elements in the population did not have an equal chance of being in the sample. Also, the sample selected was not enough because it entailed only three people.

Since the interviews were conducted by telephone, this acts as a limiting factor to the study because there is a likelihood of some important gestures and expressions which were not captured in the responses. It would not have been the case if the interviews were conducted face to face.

From this study, it is evident that leaders are aware of credible and authentic leadership. However, different perspectives arise regarding the applicability of the same. Due to various factors that arise, credibility and authenticity remain to be subjective constructs which can be known by the leaders and then the results can be felt by the followers.

The gap that arises is lack of representative samples and hence other comparable studies can be done by using high representative samples to justify the generalizability of the findings. The sample can include a wide range of leaders from various organization settings. Also, other researchers can conduct a similar study using face to face interviews or by using mixed method approach which will enable them to get rich information. The qualitative and quantitative data will complement each other to provide more concrete and generalizable findings of the study.

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