Leadership Credibility: A Holistic Exploration on the Making of Credible Leaders

Gilbert A. Ang'ana

Leadership Department, Pan Africa Christian University, Nairobi, Kenya

Abstract: "What makes credible leaders?" While there is extant literature on credible leadership, there is insufficient literature that addresses the holistic exploration on the making of credible leaders to understand how everyday perceived effective credible leaders engage, interact and act to sustain their credibility. This study aimed to explore the experiences of perceived credible leaders to holistically understand their perceptions and experiences. The study employed a qualitative group interview method ($n = 3$; 1 woman). Data were analyzed using the constructivist grounded theory. Findings indicated that credible leadership development is an extension of the moral self of the leader. Other critical elements highlighted that form the dimensions of the making of credible leaders entail having resilience, competence, and building others. This study gives a new perspective of moral self as an antecedent to credible leadership. Further confirmatory empirical research should be conducted to deepen the understanding of the perspective of the moral self as an antecedent to credible leadership.

Keywords: credible leadership, moral self, resilience, authentic leadership, credibility, qualitative

1. Introduction

This paper begins with a view of global perspective and what effective leadership means and how it surmounts leadership credibility or credible leadership. For a leader to succeed in today's world, they must be good influencers. With the current demographic shifts if a leader imposes their methods, or are insensitive of the view and input of the other, two critical barriers are likely to occur: (i) the leader may either not be able to make effective decisions, or, (ii) they may not get support and buy-in from their constituents and followers (Hewlett, 2016). Four critical competencies of effective global leaders that have been commonly identified by many scholars are highlighted as, first, credibility. Leaders project credibility by demonstrating connection both horizontal and vertical to win the trust and respect of teams (Hernez-Broome & Hughes, 2004). Second, inclusive (Mendenhall et al., 2013). Leaders do this by allowing open sharing of ideas, enhancing collaboration, and conflict management. The leader applies this through active listening, asking questions, providing and receiving constructive feedback which then facilitates the shift from command-and-control to accommodative and inclusive (Petrie, 2014). The third is effective communication (House et al., 2014). Leaders should not only set the tone right across all levels but, also should command the house by delivering compelling information and vision. Finally, supportive. It's critical to note that to attract support leaders must also support others (Holt & Seki, 2012). The competencies mentioned closely relate to competencies of credible leaders as alluded by Kouzes and Posner (2011), role modeling, leaders doing what they say they would do and demonstrating to their constituents the same; foresight, leaders having a clear purpose and vision and communicate with intentions and clarity; empathy, take time to listen, allow for open feedback and understanding their constituents; and competent, not only awareness of own strengths and challenges but also aware of constituents abilities and capacity. Thus, there is increasing evidence that credibility may be a key contributor to a leaders' success.

According to a report by the University of Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership, CISL (2017), there is a growing need for a Leadership that aims at delivering value for society, organization, and the environment. This leadership is driven and guided by a sense of purpose and aligns organization delivery of impactful outcomes for the environment and society from corporate citizenship to business success (Clarke, 2018; Healthfield, 2018). Additionally, the growing need for purpose in leadership is reflected in value-based leadership. The key competence for value-based leaders entails, inspirational, visionary, high integrity, and self-sacrificing with high-performance orientation for self and others (Daskal, 2016; Reese, 2017). For leaders to be assumed as credible they must understand what they stand for and exhibit what they value through their leadership actions. Credible leadership values should be visible through the leader's actions. If a leader's purpose and values are not identified

and shared with their constituent, it's a recipe for misunderstanding and mistrust since the constituents will not be aware of the leader's expectation (Hemby, 2017; Kouzes & Posner, 2017). Thus, leadership purpose and values can be argued as the ingredients of leadership credibility and critical for any leader's success (Kouzes & Posner, 2011).

One contemporary view of leadership according to Northouse (2016) is that leadership is relational and constitutes mutual engagements between the leader and constituents or followers. Effective leaders are argued to be those who can build and sustain trust through collaborations and also inspires others through the development of a shared vision. Relational leaders continuously encourage and intentionally develop connections with their followers and constituents (Branson, Marra, Franken & Penney, 2018). Authenticity is said to be at the center of the development of healthy relationships that then builds trust and credibility. Relational leaders are aware of the significance of investing in authenticity in presenting themselves in their network to develop building blocks on trust and mutual commitment (Gardner, 2017). When leaders foster relational mastery, they facilitate an environment of collegial dependency, mutual understanding, and collaboration among constituents which is foundational in building credibility. Credibility as argued by Hemby (2017); Kouzes & Posner (2011) entails the belief that in a relational context people will do what they agreed to do. Mutual interaction, problem-solving, and conflict management are some of the key benefits of leadership credibility in a relational context. Branson and Marra (2019) argue that relational leaders recognize the significance of building trust through open sharing of their decisions and strategies, facilitating open feedback mechanism which then develops their influence and constituent's commitment. This influence is the foundation of credibility. Without credibility, visions do not mature to reality and relationships are destroyed (Kouzes & Posner, 2011). Thus, leadership credibility is critical in determining the followership of leaders. Leaders must be able to create authentic relationships, build trust, and foster commitment within their constituents through their relational mastery. This is a critical aspect in developing leadership credibility.

Literature on authentic leadership identifies three perspectives of authentic leadership (i) intrapersonal perspective which focuses on the leader-follower relationship and interaction, (ii) interpersonal perspective which focuses on the leader experiences on their self-knowledge, self-regulation, and self-concept, (iii) developmental perspective which embraces leadership as dynamic and can be nurtured (Gardner et al., 2005; Gardner & Claudia et al., 2011). George (2004) study identified two major critical traits of authentic leadership which are, understanding their inner self and being present. George highlights them as primary traits which are purpose, values, relationships, self-discipline, and heart; and secondary traits which are passion, compassion, consistency, connectedness, and behavior. Both primary and secondary traits applied together are what make an effective moral leader (George, 2004). Additionally, Kelley (2018) distilled a model of authentic leadership that identified a learning mindset or what he termed as crucible at the heart of authentic leaders. When leaders embrace the aspect of the crucible, they become more self-aware, strengthen their compassion, their integrity grows, and their desire to develop a relational culture increases. The bottom line is the leader's learning mindset, without a leader's drive to discover, develop, and embrace failure, they struggle to evolve their leadership style (Kelley, 2018). The commonality of George's (2004) and Kelley's (2018) reflections on authentic leadership is the development of the components on self-awareness, internalized moral perspective, balanced processing which is self-regulatory behavior, and relational transparency or sometimes called honesty which is necessary for authentic leadership development. These authentic leadership components are comparable to credible leadership components which begin with trust, respect, and affinity with people and grow into being forward-looking, dynamic, inspiring, enthusiastic, optimistic, uplifting, and positive (Kouzes & Posner, 2011). Thus, credibility and authenticity are integrated (Ogochi, 2018). You cannot be a credible leader if you are not an authentic leader and vice versa, you cannot be authentic and not credible (Kouzes & Posner, 2011).

In the current era marred by the Covid-19 pandemic, many organizations and workplaces have adopted virtual teams or work from home or a balance of both for posterity. There has been a critical need for a different or rather enhanced leadership to sustain organizations and workplaces (Ruff &Schowenwald, 2020). Technology alone as has been experienced so far is not the main solution. There is a growing demand for a different approach to leadership to foster and maintain high standards of productivity and staff wellbeing even in the wake of virtual teams. Trust is at the center of the success of any virtual team leadership and relationship and is developed through open and honest communications, mutual respect, and reliability in productivity (Norman, 2020). Effective leadership of virtual teams required flexibility from the leader. For as long as assignments get done and deadlines are met, it should not matter how it gets done even in unusual hours. When leaders adopt such a

dynamic approach they help their teams manage stress and integrate their work with personal demands. Successful leadership in virtual teams requires effective communications from the leader which will ensure everyone stays focused on the shared purpose (Ruff &Schowenwald, 2020). Effective virtual leadership entails adopting a more devolved leadership style, by empowering constitutes to make decisions since the leader cannot be everywhere at once. Reliability and integrity in leading virtual teams will foster trust and respect; while open feedback culture will enable creativity, adaptability, and continuous learning. Thus, looking at the emergent leadership demands, we see the need for a credible and authentic approach to leadership. This kind of leadership will drive key purpose, a sense of belonging, and shared values for such virtual leadership to be a success. (Hemby, 2017; Ruff &Schowenwald, 2020).

However, with all this information and understanding of the nature of effective leadership and how it amalgamates with credible leadership, there is still no clarity on why we still have credibility issues affecting leaders across all organization orientations across the world. We see in private organizations where leaders indicate in their corporate values on their focus on customer "customer first" yet we still have the same organizations involved in practices that question their integrity and authenticity on how they engage with their customers (Angana, 2021; Casse&Banahan, 2013). Such organizational behaviors show the gap in purpose alignment between the organization leaders and their teams which is a credibility concern. In many countries today we see a disconnect between what the political leader says and does. Does this pose the credibility concern on what really can be done for such leaders to be authentic and develop leadership credibility? How is the life of a credible private and public leader? What does it take to be a credible leader or rather to maintain leadership credibility? Followers and constituents have reached a level where they have lost all trust in those who act as leaders and have resided to leave by the day until a possible exit of the leaders. Angana (2021); Casse and Banahan (2013); Hemby (2017); Kouzes and Posner (2011) alludes that credibility is dynamic and an ongoing process where a leader needs to carefully self-management and assesses themselves from time to time.

Despite the rapid growth of literature on credible and authentic leadership, there is limited holistic information on what makes credible leaders based on their daily life experiences. This could also be the reason why the practicality of credible leaders is still a challenge with many scandalous incidences globally affecting perceived credible leaders (Angana, 2021). Although recent researchers have reviewed various components and perspectives on authentic and credible leadership: the Importance of trust in Leadership (Mineo, 2014); the impact of authentic leadership on leader effectiveness (Copeland, 2016; Datta, 2015); effects of authentic leadership and organizational commitment (Gatling et al., 2016); creating a leader credibility climate (Hemby, 2017); authentic leadership influences on team performance (Joanna et al., 2017); where credibility and authenticity integrate (Ogochi, 2018); and sustaining credible leadership in organizations (Angana, 2021), It is critical to reflect on the overarching personal experiences that perceived credible leaders underwent to develop their credibility and what they currently do to maintain their credibility. If leaders perceive credibility as beneficial for their leadership, they may consistently put efforts, focus, and drive to develop and maintain leadership credibility despite the difficulty in the journey to sustain their leadership credibility.

Thus, to gain a holistic understanding of the making of credible leaders, we must understand the everyday experiences of perceived credible leaders and examine how the journey to their leadership credibility has been their interactions, decisions, judgments, and all pertinent contexts. The purely psychometric approach to the understanding of credible leadership literature may overlook the holistic understanding of what makes credible leaders and how the leaders develop leadership credibility. This will therefore call for close interaction with the participants who are credible leaders. Accordingly, to answer the research questions, this qualitative study explores perceived credible leaders' experiences and their understanding of credible leadership, and what it takes to develop credibility in leadership.

2. Methods and Methodology

Research Design

Since we want to understand the circumstances leading to the making of credible leaders, this qualitative group interview study was guided by the constructivist grounded theory. This is because we wanted to have an in-depth insight into the experiences leading to the making of credible leaders which we feel is underexplored (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Due to the need to have varied concurrence or divergence debates on the construct under study,

and to allow perspectives of the participants to be exhaustively debated, and conceptualized and argued by each participant, group interview was chosen as a more time-efficient method and one that would encourage participants to elaborate their thoughts, elicit detailed insights into the study phenomenon and understanding into their personal experiences (Charmaz, 2014). The study also employed constructivist grounded theory analysis. This method as alluded by Bryant and Charmaz (2007) to allows for an analytical understanding of how shared meaning concerning the making of a credible leader is constructed by the leaders and within the group interview.

Participants

We shared invitations to three participants to participate in the group interview via email. The three participants were purposively selected based on Brooks's (2015) 3Cs of credibility criteria and their availability to attend group interviews which the researcher felt was simple and sufficient and enough as a selection criterion. The participants selected were perceived to be competent and well versed in their areas of expertise; have composure in their ability to maintain self-control; are people of character, and have proven to have authentic sincerity with no selfish intent over time and were available to attend the focus group in person. The main reason for the choice of three participants was due to the depth of case-oriented analysis required that is fundamental to the mode of inquiry in the study (Baker & Edwards, 2012; Saunders et al., 2017). Additionally, the participant was purposively selected due to their capacity to provide richly-textured information, relevant to the concept under investigation (Robinson, 2014) and also noting this is a grounded theory study.

There was only one group interview attended by a total of three individuals (Group: $n = 3$) with the session lasting an average of 35 min (range = 33–36). The average participant age was 48 years (range = 40–55). The participants' education levels were all above masters level and cisgender men ($n = 2$) and women ($n = 1$) were highlighted in table 1. The participants were cutting across various orientations from political, church, and entrepreneurs, running various businesses, 1 participant is a political strategist, 1 participant is a Bishop a church movement in Kenya, and 1 participant is running the Chief Executive Officer of a key organization in Kenya. To ensure the confidentiality of the participants their identities have been tagged as P1, P2, and P3 in this study.

Table 1 Demographic Information for Group Interview Participants

DEMOGRAPHICCHARACTERISTIC	1 ($n = 3$)
Gender	
Male	2
Female	1
Prefer nottosay	0
Employment status	
Entrepreneur/self-employed	3
Employed	1
Highest education	
Highereducation	0
Postgraduatedegree	3

Source: Author, 2021

Procedure

We held one virtual group interview via zoom video conferencing and the session was recorded using zoom recordings. The group interview was conducted on 24th November 2021 and analysis of the group interview data between 25th–27th November 2021 per theoretical sampling principles. The author as an experienced qualitative researcher facilitated the group interview. The group interview lasted an average of 35 minutes and was semi-structured to elicit discussion. The session was well organized with ice breakers where participants shared their understanding of credible leadership. Then we encouraged the participants to share their personal experiences and perspectives of credible leadership. The researcher then highlighted some recent issues of leadership credibility

both in Kenya and globally of leaders who were perceived as effective and credible but now facing character allegations. This was contextualized to the participants to understand their views on the focused topic to gain an in-depth coherent understanding of the making of credible leaders. The prompts used included "What is your view of what it takes to be a credible leader?" and "What do you feel would be possible ways for the leaders to avoid the status they find themselves in?" details in table 2.

Table 2 Group Interview Schedule

Discussion topic	Questions	Prompt
Introductions	Tell us your name, and your most admired leader. What patterns do you see in your most admired leader? How is your leadership behavior influenced by your most admired leader?	None
Building Credibility	What is credible leadership and what do you think it takes to be a credible leader?	None
Regaining Credibility	How can perceived credible leaders regain their credibility after a fall amidst external pressures?	Media information on perceived credible leaders which character issues- allegations
Summary	How would you summarize the factors driving your leadership credibility as a person?	None

Source: Author, 2021

Ethics

The researcher obtained informed consent from the three participants. All information that would have breached the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants was removed from the transcripts. Participants were referred according to identification codes which were labeled as P1, P2, and P3 and are used in the Findings section to identify the source of quotations. Since the participants were independent leaders and were engaged willingly, there was no further approval required.

Data Analysis

The group interview was video-recorded and transcribed by the researcher before conducting data analysis using NVivo software (https://www.qsrinternational.com/nvivo-qualitative-data-analysis-software/about/nvivo/who-its-for/academia). Data analysis was conducted immediately after the group interview session (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) which was informed by the constructivist ground theory principles through a systematic coding strategy (Charmaz, 2014). We started by doing line-by-line open coding of the transcripts closely focusing on the construction of perceptions and reflections on credible leadership based on participants' experiences using NVivo. This enabled production of common codes based on emergent themes. We finally constructed and reviewed a relational chart to ensure the findings were grounded in the data.

3. Findings

The group interview elicited lively discussions about the making of credible leaders and how the participants themselves have integrated their lives to maintain their leadership credibility. Analysis revealed a more pronounced category which is "The Moral Self (TMS)" which represented how credible leaders must live their personal lives to be perceived as credible. The concept of credibility as an extension of the moral self underpinned the other

identified three categories in the data. Therefore, these three categories were considered important in their nature, independent but also complementary categories, which defined different aspects of participants' perception of credible leadership. The structure of the categories is reflected in Figure 1 and is described in the following text.
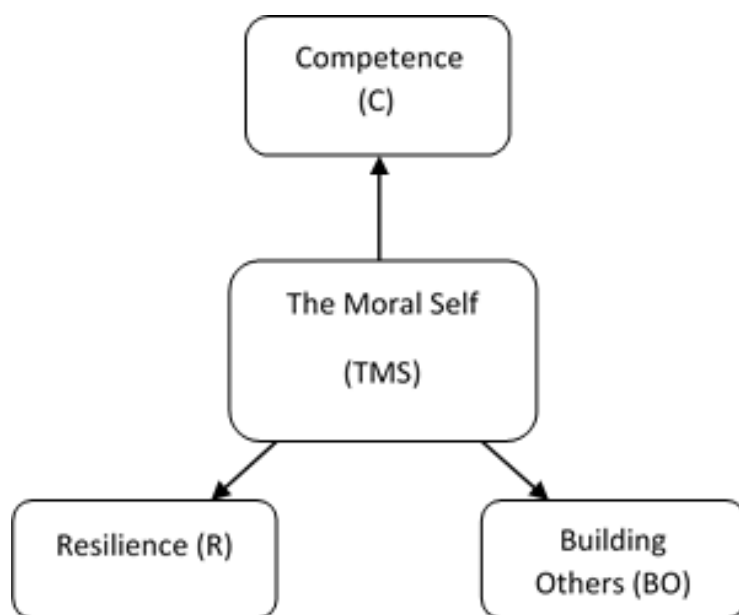
Figure 1. Dimensions of Credible Leadership in the Context of the Moral Self

The Moral Self (TMS)

All the participants considered credibility as integral to their leadership journeys. Credibility entails personal integrity first. The participants concurred that the moral self is what should be at the heart of what it means to be a credible leader. Credibility is concerned with the individual virtues by which a person holds first that define both their leadership identity (in terms of their desires, commitments, and concerns) and their leadership actions based on their thoughts and emotions. The participants believed that credibility is an inside-outside work. A leader is perceived credible to the extent that the moral self (in terms of their moral values, goals, and concerns) are central to their self-identity and that is what drives and motivates their consistent behavior and action in taking responsibility. Credibility was conceptualized as a critical part of the moral self as exemplified by the following quotes.

P3: It is basically like saying what you see in me is what you get. That I am believable in both my speech and my actions. Personal integrity for me is the first thing. I normally like the example of Prophet Samuel in the Bible who when people were needing a King other than him, he challenged them and he said, "Is anybody here who can blame me for being corrupt, taking his property, or whatever bad thing?" that was a bold move to challenge a whole nation and everything he has done. Everybody said there is nothing they have against him. They were more concerned about his sons, not him. That for me is the aspect of personal integrity.

P1: Credibility is about being honest first to yourself before even others. That is where many leaders fault including myself. Keep your word to yourself first before keeping it for others.
At the beginning of the session, each participant had an opportunity to share who their most admired leader was and why.

P1: My most admired leader is Barack Obama, the former US president because of three things, first is his charismatic nature, second his visionary ability and how he was able to pull people to move in one direction not only in presidential elections but, also in his earlier years as a growing politician. However, I am not sure about how his performance in the office can be rated in terms of actual percentage achievements of what he committed

he will do in his campaign trail in both terms in office. So history is yet to judge whether he was a credible leader or not. I realize there is a difference to have the ability to move people in one direction and having them achieve results.

P2: My most admired leader is Chuck Feeney, he used to be a dollar billionaire but spent all his money on causes that impacted society. He transformed the education system in Sweden through philanthropic nature and also mentored most of today's billionaires, the likes of Bill gates and others.

Participants had an alignment that credibility is not just about charisma, or visionary, or getting people to move in one direction, it's about deeper moral cause and not only the cause but also the action part of the cause. Credibility is believing in a cause, championing and facilitating others to follow the cause or move in the direction of the cause, and having the results for the success of the cause. That is what they believe encompasses the moral self-nature of credibility that builds all other areas of the leadership credibility.

The concept of credible leadership as an extension of the moral self was in alignment with all the participants' perceptions. The moral self is also not just about the belief in values, ideas, concerns, or causes, but also about executing those ideals and causes to their achievement. Participants agreed that it's not just enough to have a good moral self cause, it's not just enough to share and have a following on the causes but the actual achievement of the cause, is paramount to see how the society is transformed as a result. Thus, the other three distinct categories were constructed to explain how this moral-self influences leader's lives and values, representing a holistic view of the making of credible leadership or leadership credibility. These three categories were not considered subordinate categories to the core category but more complimentary. The categories were labeled "resilience," "competence," "building others."

Resilience (R)

All participants agreed that there is a lot of temptations that come with leadership. Temptations that test your morality, integrity, and even normal challenges in leadership. Credible leadership is a journey of overcoming temptations daily. One of the participants shared.

P3: Peoples have expectations and people's expectations may be different from yours and these may cause tension. I see people in leadership who sometimes respond to things not aligned to their moral self or personal integrity but, to satisfy the public. I think that is something as a leader you need to be concerned about.

Participants debated around various examples shared of leaders who have resigned from office, not because they have been personally involved in an issue but, because the areas they lead have had issues that they felt were an embarrassment to their leadership and needed to take responsibility. They debated about the question of whether resigning from office or a position of leadership makes you credible.

P3: I have wrestled with the question of resigning from positions as a way of being credible, I am not always sure because sometimes the reason why things go wrong is not necessarily that you have to be personally responsible for it…because in our culture, you can be considered wrong even when you are not wrong…however, I have resigned not because I wanted to be considered credible, but it was a conflict about my belief and what I see.

P1: I feel some resignations are not necessarily warranted because the people may even need you more in those challenges…However, in instances where there have been serious failures, by serious failure I mean, failure to do the job as a leader and also moral failure which raids from you the ability to correct others, I think in those instances resignation from the leadership position is warranted.

All participants agreed that for a leader to build resilience, they must either avoid situations that put them under temptations or be ready to overcome the temptations when they arise. The leaders must be able to overcome the challenges that come with leadership and resist the temptation where the environment dictates the actions the leaders take the most time. The leader should take responsibility where there is a direct moral failure attributed by themselves that hampers their ability to lead effectively. Otherwise, the leader should hold on and fight back the challenges especially when it's against moral self and society morals, and not quit. This is the mark of resistance in, credible leadership.

Competence (C)

When it comes to competence participants agree that it's majorly about the leader understanding their role. For the leader to enhance their leadership credibility they must not only understand their role but be faithful to it. All participants agreed that being competent doesn't make a leader a jack of all trades, that the leader must know how to do everything, but must be able to know what to do and how to get it done.

P2: shared that leaders must provide direction, however, they can fall and when you fall as a leader credibility entails owning up, apologizing, and making restitution.

All participants concurred that credible Leaders must take time and effort to rally their constituents into understanding the shared goal, they must keep their word demonstrated through their action of various activities and ensure they get done. Competence is not about the knowledge of what the leader has, but a combination of their ability to rally people towards the shared goals and to have the actual achievement of the goals or shared values. Competence is about inspiring others and changing lives. Competence also involves taking a stand when as a leader you realize you are not exercising your leadership credibility but propagating other people's agendas against your moral self.

P1: we can see in one of the leaders who took a stand and stepped down from office because she realized she was just being used as a flower girl in propagating others' agenda in office against her moral judgment and she was not able to use her knowledge and competence…this takes for you to understand your role well and to be faithful to it and that is the essence of what credibility is.

Competency calls for the leader to understand their role and to be committed to doing it to the best of their ability such that if they feel they are unable to do it then you can openly step aside and open the way for somebody else. From the sentiments of all participants, competence is a combination of vision + ability to move people (communicate) + taking action + results (final achievement). This is what makes leadership credible.

Building Others (BO)

Leadership on its own is about influence. All participants agreed that credible leadership is about having a cause, a moral cause for that matter that is driven by the people or that will benefit others.

P1: I now understand that leadership is not just about sharing your goals, it's sharing your goals and making people want to move accordingly to achieve that goal and then moving from wanting to move to achieve it. This is how credible leaders build others around them.

P2: I admired in real life a gentleman called Chuck Feeney…he spend all his money on causes he believed in and just left something manageable for his family…I am inclined to this as a way of building others…creating enterprises that fund ministry work for me. You will find me giving a lot to causes that I believed in and are transformational. This is what I believe marks the aspect of building others and building credible leadership.

All participants agree that building others entails inspiring them, changing lives, lifting people, and transforming lives and the systems to leave others better.

P2: A credible leader is a leader whom others follow without forcing them because the constituents feel they want what the leader has for themselves too. They have to have repute, and their word has to mean something. That is what marks the aspect of building others through the moral self of the leader. Their message is always that of empowering others or building others consistently.

4. Discussion

This study aimed to explore participants' perception of the making of credible leaders and the experiences and activities that are perceived to build and sustain leadership credibility. This holistic insight revealed how leadership credibility is entwined with the moral self. The findings reveal that credibility is founded on the moral self and entails both the visionary part and the action part. The findings also reveal that credibility entails a leader's

resilience, competence and involves the leader's building others. These findings extend previous credible leadership perspectives to incorporate the elements that are more valued by leaders as critical in leadership credibility (Hemby, 2017; Kelley, 2018; Klenke, 2005; Kouzes & Posner, 2011).

Moreover, this study confirms theoretical proposals that competence and building relationships are critical in building and sustaining credible leadership (Ang'ana, 2021; Ogochi, 2018). The study also brings in a new perspective of the moral self which has not been illuminated in previous literature as a critical perspective on credible leadership development. In the following discussion, we consider the making of credible leaders through the lenses of the moral self, which builds correlations with other elements which are, resilience, competence, and how to build others along the journey. We consider the extent to which our findings provide support for the moral self theories and the moral failure perspectives as an antecedent to credible leadership and the potential implications for future research.

First, credibility is built from the participants' moral self. This extends qualitative evidence by Mazur, (2017) on credibility as a moral virtue, and highlighted that credibility is the result of truthfulness, and leaders can skillfully use this truthfulness to become credible. In the present study, the moral self is based on the leader's moral values, goals, and concerns which then define the leader's self-identity and motivate their behavior and action. From the perspective of the moral self-theory, a leader's moral self is their characteristic. It is not just about their thoughts or reasoning but about what the leader believes to be at the heart of their identity that defines their actions in terms of their way of thinking, feeling, and consistent behavior (Narvaez &Lapsley, 2009). On the other hand, from a consequence of the moral self perspective, the moral self helps in regulating a leader's behavior (Aquino et al., 2011). Participants agreed that leaders who want to maintain credibility are consistent with their moral self and align their behavior in all situations with the principles of their moral self (Jennings et al., 2014). Therefore, the moral self inspires the leader to be a credible leader. The leader's moral self strengthens their moral principles and ethical characteristics in all situations.

Second, the findings of this study have illuminated the importance of resilience in the credible leader's journey. Participants agreed that a leader's resilience is one critical characteristic, especially today as it enables leaders to manage both their internal and external stresses and strains. The finding in this study is in line with Illies et al.'s (2013) study on leaders' emotional expressiveness and their behavioral and relational authenticity. Credible leaders are consistent in their delivery, reactions, and decision-making. The findings suggest that to build resilience a leader must be mindful, avoid snap judgments and remain level-headed, and this is what builds their credibility (Kouzes & Posner, 2011). Resilience is a leader's capacity to respond to pressure and the demands of their daily lives. Resilience also affects the leader's ability to bounce back after a fall or a challenge that threatens their credibility which is in line with Hemby (2017); Kouzes & Posner (2017) and Quist, (2009). The findings of this study suggest that resilient leaders are better able to deal with the demands placed upon them, especially in dealing with the constantly changing priorities of their constituents. Developing resilience is a personal leader's journey that entails moral thoughts, behavior, and actions and this is what builds the credibility of the leaders. Leaders with strong moral self are more inclined to be resilient and act ethically (Stets & Carter, 2011).

Third, the present study found that participants agreed that competence is key to the development of their credible leadership. Participants agreed that leaders build credibility through their accomplishments over time. The present study findings, therefore, highlights that competence that is critical in building credibility is not theoretical, or technical competence only, but one that can be seen through the leader's actual accomplishments over time. A deficit in accomplishment as a leader is a sign of a deficit in leadership credibility. The findings in the present study extend the literature by Ang'ana (2021); Kelley (2018), and Kouzes and Posner (2017) that credible leaders need not know everything but, need to know what to do and how to get it done. A leader's competence entails their ability to be open to scrutiny in their decisions and actions. A leader's competence entails the ability of the leader to invite their constituents' participation in decisions and the resolution of issues. The present study findings suggest that leaders build credibility by understanding that they are not the owners of all knowledge. They must seek clarification, admit their ignorance, and lead by asking questions that will help them learn. Leaders must have the humility of admitting to their mistakes and taking responsibility and sharing their learnings out of that. This is what demonstrates their willingness and eagerness to learn and this is what builds credibility.

Finally, the present study findings have highlighted the aspect of building others as key to credible leadership development. The participants agreed that when a leader has a genuine or authentic interest in their constituents, it

means they are concerned about their outcome and in enabling them better their outcome. This finding is in line with Kouzes and Posner's (2011) study in that leaders who truly care about what is best for others and their constituents build trust and encourage open feedback which leads to credibility. The present study suggests that building others not only entails enabling or facilitating others to be better versions of themselves but also entails developing better rapport, enhancing collaboration, and building trust. Leaders must understand it takes time to build credibility with others and therefore they should take time to understand their constituents' opinions and concerns and should always be willing to learn from them and also from their own mistakes (Ang'ana, 2021; Hemby, 2017). The perspective of building others is also central to the moral self dimension as highlighted in this study in that, the moral self influences how a leader socializes, perceives, and accepts others (Doron, Sar-El, &Mikulincer, 2012). The moral self defines how we engage with others, inspire others, and transform lives and society (Hardy et al., 2010).

5. Conclusion

The findings of this study have revealed the key dimensions of what makes credible leaders and especially its centrality on the moral self. Credible leaders are believed to have aware of the moral self which is a critical antecedent to credibility and enables the development of resilience, competence and are caring and building others to be better versions of themselves. In conclusion, we propose that the theoretical understandings of the making of credible leaders or leadership credibility could benefit from holistically accounting for moral self behavior. If leaders can understand how they can enhance their moral self, they will be able to build resilience, competence, care, and build others. This will also strengthen them and limit their moral failures. This is what is critical in their development as credible leaders.

This study has provided in-depth and holistic insight into the making of credible leaders, highlighting perspectives that are perceived and appreciated by leaders and also elements that are understood as borderline credibility challenges. The main limitation of the study is the size of its population due to the qualitative nature of this study. Also, the source of the study sample is based on the applied criteria of 3Cs (Brooks, 2015). Due to the qualitative nature of the study, the results may not be generalizable to other populations, particularly those with a different leadership culture, values, and levels of leadership. The nature of the sample for this study is mainly drawn from leaders with high academic status and leadership levels in both workplace and business settings where credibility may be well understood and appreciated. Therefore, the results of the present study may not represent the leaders in different cultural backgrounds, for whom credibility is not emphasized within their interactions. Thus, we strongly recommend that future research explore the making of credible leaders based on various cultural backgrounds and education levels. We also strongly recommend future empirical studies in the understanding of the moral self as an antecedent to credible leadership.

Acknowledgements

References

1. Angana, G. A. (2021). Sustaining Credible Leadership in Organizations. *Journal of Human Resource & Leadership. Vol 5*(3) pp. 86-95. https://doi.org/10.53819/81018102t2025
2. Aquino, K., McFerran, B., &Laven, M. (2011). Moral identity and the experience of moral elevation in response to acts of uncommon goodness. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 100, 703–718.
3. Ashley, L. (2013, 25 July). 10 Leaders Who Overcame Scandal: A Playbook for Anthony Weiner. *Entrepreneur.* https://www.entrepreneur.com/slideshow/227558
4. Baker, S. E., & Edwards, R. (2012). How many qualitative interviews is enough? Expert voices and early career reflections on sampling and cases in qualitative research. *National Centre for Research Methods Review Paper.* http://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/2273/4/how_many_interviews.pdf
5. Branson, C. M. &Marra, M. (2019). Leadership as a relational phenomenon: What this means in practice. *Research in Educational Administration & Leadership, 4* (1), 81-108. http://10.30828/real/2019.1.4
6. Brooks, D. (2015). *The Road to Character*. Random House. eBook ISBN 9780679645030.
7. Bryant, A., &Charmaz, K. (Eds.). (2007). *The SAGE handbook of grounded theory*. SAGE Publications.

https://doi.org/10.4135/9781848607941

8. Casse, P., &Banahan, E. (2013, 1 April). Leadership Credibility. Training Journal. https://www.trainingjournal.com/articles/feature/credibility

9. Charmaz, K. (2014). *Constructing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications.

10. Crevani, L., Lindgren, M., &Packendorff, J. (2010). Leadership, Not Leaders: On the Study of Leadership as Practices and Interactions. *Scandinavian Journal of Management, 26*(1), 77–86.

11. Deloitte. (2018). The rise of the social enterprise: 2018 Deloitte Global Human Capital Trends. *Deloitte Insights*, 1-101

12. Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.). (2011). *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.

13. Doron, G., Sar-El, D., &Mikulincer, M. (2012). Threats to moral self-perceptions trigger obsessive compulsive contamination related behavioral tendencies. *Journal of Behavior Therapy and Experimental Psychiatry*, 43, 884–890.

14. Gardner, H. K. (2017). Getting your stars to collaborate: How Dana Farber turns rival experts into problem-solving partners. *Harvard Business Review*, January-February, 100-108.

15. Gardner, W. L., Avolio, B. J., Luthans, F., May, D. R., & Walumbwa, F. (2005). Can you see the real me? A self-based model of authentic leader and follower development. *The Leadership Quarterly, 16*, 343–372.

16. Gardner, W. L., Claudia C. C., Kelly M. D., and Matthew P. D. (2011). Authentic Leadership: A Review of the Literature and Research Agenda. *The Leadership Quarterly* 22: 1120–1145.

17. Gardner, W. L., Cogliser, C. C., Davis, K. M., & Dickens, M. P. (2011). Authentic leadership: A review of the literature and research agenda. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 22, 1120–1145.

18. Gatling, A., Kang, H.J.A and Kim J. S. (2016). The Effects of Authentic Leadership and Organizational Commitment on Turnover Intention. *Leadership & Organization Development Journal 37*:2: 181-199.

19. George, B. (2004). *Authentic Leadership: Rediscovering the Secrets to Creating Lasting Value*. Jossey-Bass

20. Hardy, S. A., Bhattacharjee, A., Reed, A., II, & Aquino, K. (2010). Moral identity and psychological distance: The case of adolescent parental socialization. *Journal of Adolescence*, 33, 111–123.

21. Hemby, S. (2017). Creating a leader credibility climate as modeled in the leadership of Jesus. *Journal of biblical perspectives in leadership*, 7(1), 46-64.

22. Hernez-Broome, G. & Hughes, R. L. (2004). Leadership development: Past, present, and future. *Human Resource Planning, 27*(1), 24–32.

23. Hewlett, S. A. (2016, 13 Oct.). The Attributes of an Effective Global Leader. *Harvard Business Review*. https://hbr.org/2016/10/the-attributes-of-an-effective-global-leader

24. Holt, K. & Seki, K. (2012). Global leadership: A developmental shift for everyone. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology, 5*(2), 196–215. http://doi:1754-9426/12

25. House, R.J., Dorfman, P.W., Javidan, M., Hanges, P.J. & Sully de Luque, M.F. (2014). *Strategic leadership across cultures: GLOBE study of CEO leadership behavior and effectiveness in 24 countri*es. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage

26. Hsieh, H. F., & Shannon, S. E. (2005). Three approaches to qualitative content analysis. *Qual Health Res;* 15(9):1277–88.

27. Illies, R., Curseu, P., Dimotakis, N., &Spitzmuller, M. (2013). Leaders' emotional expressiveness and their behavioral and relational authenticity: Effects on followers. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology,* 22, 4–14.

28. Jennings, P. L., Mitchell, M. S., & Hannah, S. T. (2014). The moral self: A review and integration of the literature. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*. John Wiley & Sons, Ltd. http://10.1002/job.1919

29. Kelley, J. (2018). *The Crucible's Gift: 5 Lessons from Authentic Leaders Who Thrive in Adversity*. Brave Endurance LLC. ISBN-13:978-0999891513

30. Kim, W. C., & Mauborgne, R. (2014). Blue Ocean Leadership. *Harvard Business Review*, May, 60–72. Available online: https://hbr.org/2014/05/blue-ocean-leadership (accessed 28 June 2017).

31. Klenke, K. (2005). The internal theatre of authentic leader: Integrating cognitive, affective, conative and spiritual facets of authentic leadership. In W. Gardner, B. Avolio, & F. Walumbwa (Eds.), *Authentic Leadership Theory and Practice: Origins, Effects, and Development* (Vol. 3, pp. 155-182). San Diego, CA: Elsevier.

32. Kouzes, J. M., and Posner, B. Z. (2011). *Credibility: How leaders gain and lose it, why people demand it*. Jossey-Bass. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118983867

33. Kouzes, J. M., and Posner, B. Z. (2017). *The leadership challenge: How to Make Extraordinary Things Happen in Organizations,* (6th ed). John Wiley & Sons.

34. Mazur, P. S. (2017). Credibility as a Moral Virtue? *Logos i Ethos:* ISSN 0867-8308, eISSN 2391-6834.

http://dx.doi.org/10.15633/lie.2360

35. Mendenhall, M. E., Osland, J. S., Bird, A., Oddou, G. R., Maznevski, M., Stevens, M. & Stahl, G.K. (2013). *Global leadership: Research, practice, and development* (2nd Ed.). Routledge.

36. Mendenhall, M.E., Reiche, B.S., Bird, A. &Osland, J.S. (2012). Defining the 'global' in global leadership. *Journal of World Business, 47*(4), 493–503.

37. Narvaez, D., &Lapsley, D. (2009). Moral identity, moral functioning, and the development of moral character. In D. Bartels, C. Bauman, L. Skitka, & D. Medin (Eds.), *The psychology of learning and motivation* (Vol. 50, pp. 237–274). Burlington: Academic Press.

38. Norman, F. (2020, 10July). *Managing virtual teams requires devolving leadership.* https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/businessreview/2020/07/10/managing-virtual-teams-requires-devolving-leadership/

39. Northouse, P. (2016). *Leadership: Theory and practice* (7th ed.). Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.

40. Ogochi K., D. (2018). Leadership: Where Credibility and Authenticity Integrate Organization. *Journal of Human Resource & Leadership, Vol 2*(5) pp. 90-100

41. Petrie, N. (2014). *Future trends in leadership development: The Center for Creative Leadership CCL.* http://www.ccl.org/leadership/pdf/research/futuretrends.pdf

42. Quist, A. (2009). A credible leader for turbulent times: Examining the qualities necessary for leading into the future. *Journal of Strategic Leadership*, 2(1), 1-12.

43. Robinson, O.C. (2014). Sampling in interview-based qualitative research: a theoretical and practical guide. *Qual Res Psychol*, 11(1):25–41. https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2013.801543

44. Ruff, S. K., &Schowenwald, L. (2020, 26 May). COVID-19 demands a new era of authentic leadership. Capgemini Research Institute. https://www.capgemini.com/2020/05/covid-19-demands-a-new-era-of-authentic-leadership/

45. Saunders, B., Sim, J., Kingstone, T., Baker, S., Waterfield, J., Bartlam, B., Burroughs, H., &Jinks, C. (2017). Saturation in qualitative research: exploring its conceptualization and operationalization. *Qual Quant* 52:1893–1907. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-017-0574-8.

46. Stets, J. E., & Carter, M. J. (2011). The moral self: Applying identity theory. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 74, 192–215.

47. University of Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership (CISL). (2017, June). A report commissioned by the British Council. *Global Definitions of Leadership and Theories of Leadership Development: Literature Review.* Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership.

48. Wilkinson, S. (2006). Analyzing interaction in focus groups. In P. Drew, G. Raymond, & D. Weinberg (Eds.), *Talk and interaction in social research methods* (pp. 50–62). SAGE Publications. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781849209991