

Why Does Leader Integrity Matter to Followers? An Uncertainty Management-Based Explanation

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We seek a theoretical answer to the question of why leader integrity matters to followers. We begin by defining leader integrity to include both the leader's word/deed consistency and the consistency between the leader's values and the follower's values. Drawing on Fairness Heuristic Theory and the Uncertainty Management Model, we suggest that followers use attributions of leader integrity as a heuristic for how the leader will behave in the future. Leader integrity attributions act as a proxy for necessarily missing information about leadership outcomes and offer followers needed confidence that their decision to follow is correct. Based on this uncertainty management model for leader integrity, we conclude with research propositions that may direct future studies.

Business practitioners have a long history of advising leadership students and scholars that integrity is of central importance to effective leadership (Gostick & Telford, 2003). For example, George's (2003) book *Authentic Leadership* calls for business to elevate leaders who are "authentic leaders, people of the highest integrity, committed to building enduring organizations. . .[w]e need leaders who have a deep sense of purpose and are true to their core values" (p. 5). In his more recent book, *True North*, George (2006) similarly elevated the importance of leader integrity by calling it the foundation of all efforts of leaders to lead in the best fashions.

In *The Leadership Challenge*, Kouzes and Posner (2007) reported on surveys of over 75,000 people around the globe that asked the question: What do you most look for and admire in a leader? Leader honesty, which aligns with integrity, was selected more often than any other leadership characteristic. Lennick and Kiel (2008) cited integrity as "the hallmark of the morally intelligent person" and one of "four principles that are vital for sustained personal and organizational success" (p. 7). Simons (2008) in *The Integrity Dividend* argued that integrity is the predominant characteristic that "touches every aspect of your business" (p. 20) and, when practiced properly, enhances both the value of the business and yields a significant financial

dividend. Indeed, the well-accepted importance of leader integrity even shaped voter decisions in the 2008 US presidential race: “A new Associated Press – Ipsos poll says that 55 percent of those surveyed consider honesty, integrity and other values of character the most important qualities they look for in a presidential candidate” (Fournier & Thompson, 2007, p. 3A).

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Many of these prescriptions regarding the importance of integrity, however, appear to accept the value of integrity without discussing *why* it and its correlates, such as trust and honesty, are so important to followers. Laypeople and leadership theorists alike seem to agree that integrity matters, but lacking is a clear exploration of why leader integrity is apparently fundamental in affecting follower decisions to engage as followers. Integrity is instead asserted to be important to leadership simply because its value appears obvious and intuitive (Palanski & Yammarino, 2007; Simons, 2008). Missing are discussions and explanations of why leader integrity is so important to followers or, in our terms, why leader integrity “matters.” While we would serve little purpose in advising scholars and practitioners that leader integrity *does* matter, this paper examines the process of how leaders come to affect followers to determine *why* leader integrity matters to them.

The intent of this paper is to explore the process through which followers attribute integrity and decide to engage. Our premise is that integrity matters because an attribution of integrity offers a great deal of useful information that makes a follower’s decision to follow much less risky. The decision to follow is a decision made in conditions of uncertainty where followers must decide, based on a belief about future outcomes, whether to commit to a leader and engage in his or her leadership efforts. The decision to follow is a prediction, based on the best available information, that following will result in what the leader promises and what the followers want (Janson, Levy, Sitkin, & Lind, 2008). This prediction is made more complicated by the fact that followers rarely have information beyond the plans and promises provided by the leader.

We suggest that because followers rarely have clear and direct rationales for following or direct information about the leader, followers will seek suitable and available information to fill the void and help them make the most informed decision possible (van den Bos, Wilke, & Lind, 1998). It is a long established part of social cognitive psychology that people use heuristics, or cognitive “shortcuts,” to create impressions or judgments of other people (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). In the likely occurrence that followers must make decisions about leaders lacking the specific and omniscient information needed to predict leadership success, we believe attributions of leader integrity stand as a primary proxy and provide a) useful information on the likely link between the leaders’ words and their subsequent actions and b) useful information on whether what leaders may come to ask followers to do will be consistent with the followers’ values and moral frameworks.

This paper explores the process of how and why people make attributions of leader integrity and why it is important to them. We first examine the definition of leader integrity. We will then describe how integrity can serve followers as an important proxy for needed yet unavailable information about leadership results. We conclude with research propositions that assert testable reasons why leader integrity is perceived as so important by followers.

Leader Integrity Defined

The definition of leader integrity has been the subject of significant disagreement in both the philosophy and leadership literatures (Grover & Moorman, 2007). Palanski and Yammarino (2007) suggested that integrity research suffers from “confusion and disagreement about the term” and that this disagreement has prevented both the development of theoretical models on cause and effect relationships of integrity and the development of empirical tests of those relationships. Palanski and Yammarino suggested further that the central point of disagreement is whether integrity describes more narrow conceptions of wholeness or consistency or whether integrity is better thought of more expansively to include references to authenticity, ethicality, morality, or character (Dunn, 2009).

The root of all integrity judgments is a sense of consistency or congruence between seemingly disparate elements. To have integrity means that things fit together in a coherent form. Reviews of integrity definitions, like Palanski and Yammarino (2007) and Dunn (2009) have found little disagreement on the importance of consistency; however, where things get more interesting is when discussions turn toward just *what* should be consistent to indicate integrity.

For example, Palanski and Yammarino (2007) began their discussion of integrity definitions with the general but vague definition of integrity as “wholeness,” reflecting its Latin root of “integer.” Integrity as wholeness may refer to something like the integrity of the hull of a ship, suggesting that the hull is watertight, or the integrity of a bridge, where the two ends are anchored and the span supported. For leaders, integrity as wholeness speaks to a general consistency among all elements of a person, such as the person’s values, beliefs, words, and actions. Furrow (2005) supported the idea of integrity as wholeness when he noted that integrity is “the extent to which our various commitments form a harmonious, intact whole” (p. 136). This definition suggests that the key for integrity is the alignment of commitments, but it offers little explanation of what those commitments must be.

A more specific definition of leader integrity is the definition and operationalization of behavioral integrity developed by Simons (2002) and adopted, with some adjustment, by Palanski and Yammarino (2007). Simons (2002) defined behavioral integrity as the perceived pattern of alignment between a leader’s words and deeds. Behavioral integrity refers to both a pattern of consistency between leaders’ espoused values and their actions and also the extent to which promises are kept (Simons, Friedman, Liu, & McLean Parks, 2007). Palanski and Yammarino (2007) considered this to be a more restricted definition of integrity because it did not include consideration of the nature of the leader’s actions beyond their consistency with the leader’s words.

Behavioral integrity is related to various employee attitudes and behaviors. For example, Simons and McLean-Parks (2000) found that behavioral integrity was related to trust in managers and organizational commitment. Simons (2008) also found that behavioral integrity directly affects employee trust in leaders and that this trust is a central mechanism for predicting a causal chain from behavioral integrity to trust, commitment, and various discretionary behaviors tied to individual, group, and organizational performance. Dineen, Lewicki, and Tomlinson (2006) reported that levels of behavioral integrity moderated a relationship between supervisory guidance and organizational citizenship behavior and deviant behavior. They found that when behavioral integrity was at a high level, supervisory guidance was more positively related to OCB performance. However, the opposite occurred when behavioral integrity was low: when behavioral integrity was low in the leaders, providing guidance actually increased the deviance.

More expansive definitions of integrity suggest that not only is integrity defined by internal consistencies (such as word/deed consistency), it is also defined by the external consistency of those actions with either individual moral frameworks or community moral frameworks. For example, Becker's (1998) definition of behavioral integrity represents the degree a course of action adheres to or is consistent with a morally justifiable set of ethical principles. This definition was adopted by Parry and Proctor-Thomson (2002) in their study of links between perceived integrity and transformational leadership. Similarly, Brown and his colleagues characterized a leader with integrity as one who behaves according to a set of normative ethics (Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005).

Virtue ethics theory integrates both the internal and external perspectives on leader integrity. Palanski and Yammarino (2007) defined integrity as an adjunctive virtue, which aligns with other virtuous moral constructs like honesty, authenticity, trustworthiness, fairness, and compassion. They defined integrity as "the consistency of an acting entity's words and actions" (p. 178). Their definition therefore includes an indirect admission that perceived integrity may also infer an external consistency between leader deeds and the perceiver's moral framework. While their definition (following Simons, 2002) references only word/deed consistency, their belief that integrity is a virtue indicating good character necessitates that integrity also be thought of as a measure of good moral character.

Dunn (2009) rejected the argument that integrity is a virtue and instead expanded the definition of integrity to include a much wider set of both internal and external consistencies. Included in Dunn's definition is not only an internal coherence between moral values, words, and behaviors, but he also asserted that integrity requires this internal coherence to be consistent with a set of social values. He further noted that these consistencies must hold over time and across social contexts.

Consistent with an expanded view including both internal and external consistencies, the present paper believes that perceived leader integrity includes the perceived consistency of a leader's words and deeds as well as the perceived consistency of these deeds with the values shared by the leader and the follower. The first clause is the judgment of whether a leader's actions are consistent with his or her words, and the second clause is the judgment whether those actions are consistent with actions deemed by the follower to be ethical and moral. Our purpose in expanding the definition beyond the more restrictive definitions of word/deed consistency is that adding additional characteristics acknowledges that followers may gain additional information about leaders from more expansive definitions.

Leader Integrity in the Literature

The prevalence of calls for leader integrity in the business literature suggests that leader integrity should be a central theme in more academic business leadership theories (Grover & Moorman, 2007). Surprisingly, the academic business leadership literature has not elevated leader integrity to a similar level of importance or activity. One reason for this may be that leader integrity can be traced to trait theories of leadership (Bass, 1985; Stogdill, 1948) which have been discredited in some quarters (Lord, de Vader, & Alliger, 1986). For example, Judge, Bono, Iles, and Gerhardt (2002) cites ten reviews of the traits associated with leadership and found that six includes mention of leader integrity or honesty (Bass, 1990; Daft, 1999; Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1991; Northouse, 1997; Yukl & Van Fleet, 1992). However, Judge et al. (2002) suggested that these trait results have been devalued in the leadership literature because traits

may only be associated with leader emergence rather than leader effectiveness (Lord et al., 1986). If leader integrity is considered a key trait in explaining effective leadership, it may fail, much like other leader traits, to compete with researcher interest in behavioral theories of leadership.

A second reason could be that leader integrity is central to leadership theory; however, its contribution is referenced by different names. As discussed above, integrity has been cited as a concept in need of clarification (Palanski & Yammarino, 2007), and it might be the case that definitional nuances have nudged the term “integrity” from a central role in leadership theories. For example, transformational leadership theory (Bass, 1960; Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978) includes a set of behaviors defined as idealized influence. Leaders who offer idealized influence are described by Bass (1998) as being “consistent rather than arbitrary... can be counted on to do the right thing, demonstrating high standards of ethical and moral conduct” (p. 5). The consistency of behavior in idealized influence is quite consistent with the core of leader integrity (Palanski & Yammarino).

Similarly, recent work describing authentic leadership may subsume the contributions of leader integrity. Luthans and Avolio (2003), Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May, and Walumbwa (2005), and Avolio and Gardner (2005) have detailed their theoretical perspective on authentic leadership. Luthans and Avolio (2003) described authentic leadership as “the confluence of positive organizational behavior..., transformational/full-range leadership..., and work on ethical and moral perspective-taking capacity and development” (p. 243). Authentic leaders have self-knowledge, understand their own values, and act upon their values transparency (Gardner et al.). Such an emphasis on transparency echoes a central theme of leader integrity—leaders with high integrity act in ways that are consistent with their core values (Simons, 2002).

Leader integrity is included in the “moral leader” approach most notably discussed by Brown and Trevino (Brown & Trevino, 2009; Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005; Treviño, Brown, & Hartman, 2003). They described the moral leader as one who behaves according to the general concept of ethicality and integrity. According to Brown et al. (2005), moral leaders demonstrate “normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making” (p. 120). The moral leader not only behaves in ways that are consistent with his or her espoused values, but the moral leader also behaves in ways that are consistent with the moral and ethical frameworks shared by themselves and their followers.

The prevalent model of organizational trust centrally includes integrity (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995). While Mayer and colleagues do not present a leadership theory, the elements of trust are so closely related to leader integrity that the models are parallel. Trust in the leader is considered such a central mechanism driving follower engagement that models of the factors that determine trust are merely short steps away from models of effective leadership. In Mayer, Davis and Schoorman’s model of trust, integrity, ability, and benevolence are modeled as factors predicting perceived trustworthiness, which in turn is a condition that leads to trust. Integrity leads to trust due to the fact that people can rely on leaders who behave consistently over time because they have some indication of how the leader will react to situations. This sense of reliability makes it much less risky to make oneself vulnerable to another party (Meyer et al., 1995). Followers who trust make themselves vulnerable because they have some basis for the belief that their leaders will act in their interest and protect them from negative consequences in the future (McAllister, 1995).

Research on the Mayer et al. model supports the importance of integrity in the establishment of trust. For example, Colquitt, Scott, and LePine (2007) found that trustee integrity was related positively with the level of trust in interpersonal relationships. Similarly, Mayer and Gavin (2005) found that people who trusted their leaders were more likely to engage in in-role and extra-role behaviors on behalf of the organization.

A Justification of Leader Integrity

Having given an overview of the ways to examine leader integrity, it is important in this section to return to our central concern: *Why* does integrity matter to followers? Leader integrity matters because it plays a significant role in the decision process used by followers when deciding who they will follow, who they will trust, to whom they will be loyal and committed, and ultimately for whom they will perform. Leader integrity's importance may lie in its positive influence on the leadership process and the positive organizational outcomes it achieves.

Our theoretical focus lies with followers' perceptions of leaders and how such perceptions are crucial to the leadership process. Because our interest lies with understanding how follower perceptions of the leader affect follower engagement, we examine leadership from the employee-centered perspective (Felfe & Schyns, 2006; Lord & Maher, 1991). The employee or follower-centered perspective most often emphasizes "followers' attributions and perceptions as the main source of variance in follower reactions" (Felfe & Schyns, 2006, p. 710). This perspective suggests that the leadership process, while certainly affected by a leader's behavior, is a more complicated process that also includes elements embedded in how followers perceive and react to leader attributes. A definition of leadership that elevates the follower perspective is offered by Lord and Maher (1991) in their discussion of implicit leadership theory. They suggest leadership is based on being perceived by others as a leader and it is the interaction of leader qualities with follower perceptions of those qualities that define the leadership process. Thus, leadership does not reside entirely in the leader, nor does it reside entirely in the follower. Lord and Maher cited Mischel's (1973) implied assertion that traits serve as important summary labels which help perceivers understand and predict a leader's behavior. Leader traits are thus "perceiver constructs" and have value in how their perception affects follower behavior.

The follower-centered approach fits well with the literature on leader integrity. Indeed, Simons (2002) noted that leader traits such as integrity can be thought of as perceiver constructs. In his discussions of behavioral integrity, Simons considered integrity as subjective and as an ascribed trait. He wrote that "behavioral integrity is likely to be influenced by the actor, by the relationship between the actor and the perceiver, and by the attributes, history, and state of mind of the perceiver" (p. 24). Simons (2008) also conceded that for behavioral integrity to affect followers, the followers must first be aware of it in their leaders. He stated, "Like beauty, behavioral integrity is in the eye of the beholder" (p. 6). While the leader's conduct is an important influence on perceptions of integrity, how the perceiver comes to a judgment about a leader's integrity will have an even more direct influence on subsequent perceiver actions and reactions. It is these responses to attributions of integrity that we are most interested in exploring.

Making the Decision to Engage: The Effect of Perfect and Imperfect Information

We find guidance toward understanding reasons *why* leader integrity matters to followers in the uncertainty management model proposed and tested by van den Bos and colleagues. Van

den Bos, Lind, and others first proposed Fairness Heuristic Theory, which they later refer to as the Uncertainty Management Model, in order to answer a question parallel to the question of why leader integrity matters: why do procedural justice judgments matter to people who must follow authorities (Lind, 2001; Lind, Kulik, Ambrose, & de Vera Park, 1993; van den Bos, 2003; van den Bos, Wilke, & Lind, 1998)?

The uncertainty management model suggests that “because ceding to authority of another person raises the possibility of exploitation and exclusion, people frequently feel uneasy about their relationships with authorities” (van den Bos & Miedema, 2000, p. 356). To ameliorate this uneasiness, van den Bos, et al. (1998) argued that people seek information about whether they can believe that the outcome of a request will indeed be fair. The best decision situation for followers making the decision to cede to authority is when they have “solid outcome information” (van den Bos, 2003, p. 483) upon which to make any judgments. Solid outcome information is information that there is little risk in ceding to authority because the outcome is most assuredly fair and just. Such information may range from the extreme of actually knowing what the outcome will be to the less extreme condition where history has shown that under similar conditions a specific outcome is very likely.

Having such information, however, is a luxury not often available (van den Bos & Lind, 2002). Instead, the uncertainty management model suggests it is much more likely that followers must decide to cede to authority in uncertain situations where “people start using other information – as heuristic substitutes – to assess what is just” (van den Bos, 2003, p. 483). One such heuristic substitute is the perception of procedural justice. When direct information about outcome fairness is not available, people will resolve the question of how they should interpret the decisions of the authority by relying on perceived procedural fairness. Procedural fairness offers indirect evidence that the authorities are trustworthy and that the outcome is likely fair because it emerges from a fair process. Procedural justice acts as a proxy for other more direct information about whether the authority would have the best interests of the follower at heart.

Attributions of leader integrity may, much like procedural justice judgments in the uncertainty management model, serve as useful and available information for followers seeking to decide to follow. In the case of judgments concerning one’s leader, the first question must be whether it is more likely that follower decisions to follow are made in information uncertain situations or are made based on perfect or nearly perfect information about leader outcomes. First, consider the hypothetical situation of a follower having perfect knowledge of what will happen as the result of a leadership effort. In this situation, followers would decide to engage based on an evaluation of the known results of the leadership effort. The results, and the degree those results are deemed valuable and worthy of effort, would predict the degree to which followers would engage. Importantly, information about leader integrity or any other leader characteristics would be inconsequential since it would add no value to the followers’ decision. For example, with perfect information, followers deciding to join a leader in his effort to create a new consumer product would know whether the product would find a market and whether the product would become something that provided benefits in line with the followers’ values. Followers would only need the perfect knowledge of results to decide to follow and engage, and they would have no need for any other information sources. Similarly, a follower deciding on which candidate to vote for would benefit from the ability to know exactly whether the candidate would raise taxes, balance the budget, enact health care reforms, or strengthen national defense. Issues of the candidate’s personality or character would become less important the more the voter knew about guaranteed outcomes.

However, what is clear is that followers will never or nearly never have perfect information about the leadership results they desire. Because the results of a leadership effort only occur in the future, following is based on predictions of what may come true. Followers are thus always in the position of having to decide to engage with less than perfect information about what may happen. The leader/follower relationship is defined by information asymmetry where leaders and followers know different things (Akerlof, 1970). It is often the case that following is a risky decision which requires some degree of faith in the leader and the leader's words, as well as in tenuous predictions about future events.

In the absence of perfect information about results, followers must undergo the very same process described by uncertainty management and rely on proxy sources of information drawn from what they can know. These proxy sources are available, yet imperfect, predictors of leadership results. They may offer important clues to possible results, but nevertheless are imperfect, perhaps even wild, approximations.

Leader Integrity as a Proxy Source of Information

Why may leader integrity attributions serve as a useful proxy for the lack of concrete information about leadership outcomes? Leader integrity matters so much to followers because integrity attributions offer information to support important judgments about leaders' likely behavior and their values and ethical orientations. In our discussion of the definition of integrity above, we defined leader integrity as a characteristic that includes both Simons (2002) definition of word/deed consistency and, more indirectly, the belief that integrity signals that the leader's values are consistent with values held by the follower. Attributions of word/deed consistency may be instrumental in increasing followers' ability to predict leaders' actions from their words. Followers are likely to have heard leaders articulate plans, but they may have little more than the leader's words or promises. Once successful combinations of leaders' statements of intent and follow-up actions occur, attributions of word/deed consistency increase follower confidence in a prediction of the behaviors to follow. Leaders with such integrity "follow through," "practice what they preach," and "walk the talk." The words professed by leaders with integrity therefore become useful predictors of action. In the contrasting situation, leaders who lack integrity provide no basis for followers to infer actions from their words.

In addition to the predictability that follows word/deed consistency, followers may find it easier to follow a leader of integrity because the followers may have increased confidence in the moral basis of the leader's actions and may believe more strongly that the leader's values are consistent with their own. Followers who label a leader as having integrity may believe that the leader's values are moral and that they are consistent with their own moral fabric. With attributions of values consistency, followers would be confident that they would believe in and accept as worthy most anything that the leader would ask them to do. Followers would have increased confidence that not only would the leader act in ways consistent with shared values, but the leader would only ask followers to behave appropriately. There would be less risk that, down the line, leaders would derail the plan because they acted inappropriately or asked the followers to do the same. In essence, we engage with leaders who have similar values because leader integrity mitigates risk about a leader's future behavior. Such mitigation reduces the uncertainty that complicates the leader-follower relationship.

Finally, followers may find it easier to follow a leader of integrity because the leader's communication of the nature of the plan and his or her own competence in enacting that plan

would likely be more believable. Besides the confidence they gain from attributions of leader integrity, followers also a) seek information about the leader's plan and whether the plan itself makes sense and b) seek information about whether the leader is credible as the one to execute the plan. Leader integrity attributions help here because they help followers believe the leader's description of what the plan really entails and help followers believe the leader's credentials as a person with the necessary expertise.

In sum, the result of an attribution of integrity is that followers will believe a) that a leader's words will be indicative of his or her actions and could be used to predict future actions; b) that the leader's actions, now and in the future, will be consistent with values likely shared with the follower; c) that, in the future, the leader may only ask the follower to behave in ways consistent with the values they already share; and d) that the leader's communications of the plan's attributes and his or her competence is credible. These four beliefs coalesce to significantly decrease the perceived risk of following a leader and to significantly increase the belief that good things promised will come true.

Research Propositions

Based on our discussion above about leader integrity and how its significance may be due to how it influences followers' decisions to follow, we propose these research propositions:

Proposition 1: Attributions of leader integrity will be based on follower perceptions of word/deed consistency *and* follower perceptions of whether the leader's values as evidenced by his or her words/deeds align with the moral and ethical frameworks of the follower.

Proposition 2: Perceptions of leader integrity will be important in follower decisions to follow because they provide information that increases follower certainty that the leader will deliver what he or she promises.

Proposition 3: Perceptions of leader integrity will be important in follower decisions to follow because they provide information that increases follower certainty that the leader will act in ways that are consistent with the follower's values and moral frameworks.

Proposition 4: Perceptions of leader integrity will be important in follower decisions to follow because they provide information that increases follower certainty that the leader will ask the follower to act in ways that are consistent with the follower's values and moral frameworks.

Proposition 5: If followers do not perceive the leader to have integrity, information about leader competence will only inform their decision to follow if that information comes from sources other than the leader.

Proposition 6: If followers do not perceive the leader to have integrity, information about plan attributes will only inform their decision to follow if that information comes from sources other than the leader.

Conclusion

Why does leader integrity matter? Leader integrity has long been cited as an important if not the most important leader characteristic. However, we have often simply accepted that integrity is important without articulating why. Our purpose was to describe a process that may

explain why leader integrity has been cited by leadership scholars and practitioners as so central to leader effectiveness.

We believe leader integrity matters to followers because of the information it communicates to followers that may help them deal with the inherent uncertainty of follower decisions. The uncertainty management model for procedural justice suggests that procedural justice is important because it serves as a proxy in place of clear information about the fairness of outcomes. We believe that leader integrity attributions also serve as a useful substitute for elusive information about the results of a leadership effort. When followers must make a prediction about what a leader will do, an attribution of leader integrity will help them feel much more comfortable relying on the leader's words to predict his or her actions and believing that the leader will act appropriately. If follower decisions did not require predictions in the face of uncertainty, or did not require other leaps of faith, integrity would be of much less importance. However, because leaders ask followers to have faith and ask followers to take steps into the unknown, attributions of leader integrity lend confidence that everything will turn out alright.

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