



CREATING A LEADER CREDIBILITY CLIMATE AS MODELED IN THE LEADERSHIP OF JESUS

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Recent popular press has been full of articles relating to severe gaps in leader credibility. These issues are trans-organizational including corporate scandals, suspicions of manipulation within national offices, and accusations of sexual misconduct within prominent religious leadership. This paper examines leader credibility in the light of Kouzes and Posner's (1993, 2003, 2011) leader credibility theory. Discussion focuses on the importance of credibility, the ingredients of credibility, and six disciplines of credibility enhancement. These six disciplines described by Kouzes and Posner and modeled in the leadership of Jesus in the Gospel narratives provide significant applicability in training future Christ-centered influencers in a changing cultural context.

I. INTRODUCTION

Events in America continue to have had the writers of the popular press busy and the public aghast. It is as if every time one tunes in to any coverage of national events, the words of contemporary sage (so-called) Yogi Berra are applicable: "It's like déjà vu, all over again." The issues span a variety of organizations including major corporations, high-level government, and religious institutions. Regardless of the situation, the constantly reoccurring issue is that of leader credibility and the apparent ever-increasing lack thereof in the global cultural community.

The phrase "credibility gap" gained much traction during the Vietnam Era¹ and this concept continues to find much fodder for focus in contexts of power and influence. From the scandals of televangelists in the last part of the 20th century,² continuing with

¹ Kathleen J. Turner, *Lyndon Johnson's Dual War: Vietnam and the Press* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

² Michael W. Hughey, "Internal Contradictions of Televangelism: Ethical Quandaries of That Old Time Religion in a Brave New World," *International Journal of Politics, Culture & Society* 4:1 (1990): 31-47.

corporate debacles of Enron and WorldCom at the turn of the millennium,³ exasperated by sexual abuse cases by religious leadership,⁴ and now accentuated by accusations on multiple fronts in the political arena⁵, genuine credibility among leaders is a challenging and apparently rare commodity.⁶ This consideration is particularly relevant and concerning when realizing the relationship between credibility, trust, and productivity. As explained by represented researchers in the field, credibility is critical in creating a climate of trust between leaders and followers⁷ while the presence of trust within the leadership/constituent context is essential for effectiveness and consistent productivity.⁸ Beyond the issue of productivity, Covey and Gullledge write from the perspective of Covey's popular *Principle-Centered Leadership* with insight on the importance of credibility and trusting relationships in creating emotional empowerment and efficiency. They explain, "How can we expect to continuously improve interdependent systems and processes unless we progressively perfect interdependent, interpersonal relationships... We perfect relationships by making and receiving deposits to emotional bank accounts- by building trust."⁹ When the foundational pillars of character, integrity, trust, and credibility are crumbling, skepticism will engulf an organization climate and create numerous difficulties that may often result in irreparable damage, personal heartache, and the mournful regret of wasted assets.¹⁰ With this brief but poignant reminder of deep-seated leadership credibility problems and the resulting negative personal and organizational effects, a very important question arises when considering the preparation of future Christ-centered leaders. How can training efforts provided by various institutions including Christ-centered colleges and universities, local churches and parachurch entities more effectively enhance credibility of future influencers postured to lead their various spheres of personal and professional influence? This paper offers some basic considerations necessary when addressing address this question. Through the lens of Kouzes and Posner's¹¹ leader credibility

³ Robert A. Bennett, "We've Learned Nothing," *US Banker* 112:4 (April 2002): 6-7.

⁴ Pam Belluck, "U.S. Cardinals Helped Lead Response to Abuse Scandal," *New York Times*, February 23, 2006 accessed June 8, 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/02/23/us/us-cardinals-helped-lead-response-to-abuse-scandal.html>

⁵ Doyle McManus, "Trump's Dangerous Credibility Gap," *Los Angeles Times*, May 14, 2017, accessed May 30, 2017, <http://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-mcmanus-comey-credibility-20170514-story.html>.

⁶ Helpful to the reader is noting that the numerous references throughout this paper derived from well-respected sources written in anticipation of and directly following the turn of the century/millennium (a. 1990-2002) are not overlooked, outdated sources. These references are an important foundational inclusion to allow proper perspective for those otherwise unfamiliar with the organizational turmoil present in those transitional years as well as a reminder for those who actively navigated the difficult waters of those particularly white-water years. It is the author's hope that providing insight from that timeframe will highlight the renewed emphasis and nexus these sample writings provide to present concerns for credibility issues in various organizational context.

⁷ James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, "Credible Leaders," *Executive Excellence* 8:4 (April 1991): 9-12.

⁸ Stephen M.R. Covey and Greg Link, *Smart Trust* (New York: Free Press, 2013).

⁹ Stephen R. Covey and Keith A. Gullledge, "Principle-Centered Leadership," *The Journal for Quality and Participation* 15:4 (July/August 1992): 70-76.

¹⁰ Andrew Leigh, "What Creates Leader Credibility? - Bridging the Gap," *Ethical Leadership*, May 26, 2015, accessed May 30, 2017, <http://www.ethical-leadership.co.uk/leader-credibility/>.

¹¹ James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, *Credibility: How Leaders Gain and Lose It, Why People Demand It* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993).

theory,¹² the importance and ingredients of credibility provide the foundation for discussion of six disciplines for credibility enhancement modeled by the leadership of Jesus and thus provide some elements to a training-friendly construct. A glance at future research possibilities particularly focused on ministry trainees offers the basis for concluding thoughts.

II. IMPORTANCE OF CREDIBILITY

Credibility is foundational to effectiveness in leadership and essentially deals with “how leaders gain the trust and confidence of their constituents.”¹³ The emphasis on credibility and the energy required to gain and maintain it is vital to corporate and leadership longevity in uncertain environmental surroundings. Aronson is correct when declaring, “In order to maintain the long-term success of the firm and ultimately of capitalism and democracy, it is incumbent upon corporate leaders to earn the confidence and loyalty of their followers and the esteem of society at large.”¹⁴ The changing climate of the business and other organizational environments causes leaders to be increasingly valued for judgment and influence going “far beyond their hierarchal position”¹⁵ and requiring behaviors that allow others to view them as people of “unimpeachable integrity.”¹⁶ Bennis¹⁷ concurs as he writes of the motivational influence of integrity in a changing climate while Caulkin¹⁸ portrays people as yearning for heroic and noble leadership to exemplify a posture of certainty and assurance in a complicated and commercialized world. As an example, Victor Lipman comments on the importance of perceived credibility in the seemingly strange turn of events in recent 2016 US Presidential election:

Credibility, or lack thereof, accounts for the surprisingly unshakable persistency of what would seem, on the face of it, to be a pretty minor email issue...Perceived credibility can help explain the unexpected popularity at different ends of the political spectrum of Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump. Whether or not one likes or agrees with them...my sense is they're both perceived by their own supporters as credibly standing up for what they believe in. In a land where evasion is commonly the verbal currency of choice, straight talk, no matter its flavor, has powerful popular appeal.¹⁹

¹² The 1993 edition of Kouzes and Posner's book, *Credibility: How Leaders Gain and Lose It, Why People Demand It*, represents the seminal version of the research being discussed and is thus intentionally utilized throughout. A later reprint (Jossey-Bass, 2003) and Second edition (Jossey-Bass, 2011) are acknowledged, appreciated, and represent some additional insights, but do not contain significant information considered germane beyond the seminal edition for this writing and are thus by not referenced for the purpose of this paper.

¹³ Kouzes and Posner. *Credibility*, xvii.

¹⁴ Edward Aronson, “Integrating Leadership Styles and Ethical Perspectives,” *Canadian Journal of Administrative Services* 18:4 (December 2001): 244.

¹⁵ William Oncken III, “Trust or Anxiety?” *Executive Excellence* 14:6 (June 1997): 10.

¹⁶ Michael R. Maude, “On Leadership,” *Fund Raising Management* 28:7 (September 1997): 36.

¹⁷ Warren G. Bennis, “Four Pioneers Reflect on Leadership,” *Training and Development* 52:7 (July 1998): 38-42.

¹⁸ Simon Caulkin, “The Lust for Leadership,” *Management Today* (November 1993): 38-43.

¹⁹ Victor Lipman, “The Overarching Importance of Leader Credibility,” *Psychology Today*, October 18, 2015, accessed, May 15, 2017, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/mind-the-manager/201510/the-overarching-importance-leadership-credibility>.

In a similar vein, post-election speculations from popular press writers continue to focus on issues related to campaign promises, credibility, and overall leader trustworthiness. “The sooner the White House understands what a precious commodity credibility is, and how quickly it can be squandered, the better off the president and country will be...Presidential Administrations don’t get many chances to recapture credibility once it is gone.”²⁰

Kinni realistically sets forth a challenge to leaders in fluctuating environments and reminds them that no matter how grandiose the ideas or vision may be, “if people do not believe in the messenger, they will not believe in the message.”²¹ Weaver poignantly adds, “It is not people’s logic and evidence that convinces others to act or believe as they do, and it is not people’s feelings and emotions that convinces others to act or believe as they do either. What it is that convinces others to act or believe is their credibility... credibility convinces.”²²

III. AUTHENTIC LEADERSHIP – A SIMILAR PERSPECTIVE

An overview of the important role credibility plays in organizational leadership brings to light the affective nature of perceived leader credibility on many aspects of organizational effectiveness. So critical is the issue of the “believability” of leaders on organizational life and health that this has even resulted in expanded theories on the topic, not the least of which includes much discussion on what is termed “authentic leadership.”²³ Avolio and Gardner list several benefits derived from authentic leadership including positive psychological capital, leader self-awareness and self-regulation, balanced processing producing a value-rich moral perspective, and interpersonal benefits derived from transparent interactions.²⁴ More specifically, they explain:

Authentic leaders are described as ‘leading by example’ as they demonstrate transparent decision making, confidence, optimism, hope and resilience, and consistency between their words and deed... “When leaders display unbiased processing of self-relevant information, personal integrity, and an authentic relational orientation, leader-follower relationships will be characterized by high levels of respect, positive affect, and trust.”²⁵

Lewis and Harrison discuss the importance of authenticity in leadership longevity while offering a useful delineation between two terms often associated with the concept. They posit: “Authenticity is genuineness, reliability, trustworthiness, and honesty with those around you while transparency is being open, frank, candid, and easily

²⁰ The Editorial Board, “Credibility Gap: Our View,” *USA Today*, January. 24, 2017, accessed May 28, 2017, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2017/01/23/spicer-inauguration-crowds-credibility-editorials-debates/96956320/>.

²¹ Theodore B. Kinni, “The Credible Leader,” *Industry Week* 243:12 (June 20, 1994): 25.

²² Richard L. Weaver II, “Motivating the Motivators,” *Vital Speeches of the Day* 62:15 (May 15, 1996): 466.

²³ William L. Gardner et al. “Authentic Leadership: A Review of the Literature and Research Agenda,” *The Leadership Quarterly* 22 (2011): 1120.

²⁴ Bruce J. Avolio and William L. Gardner, “Authentic Leadership Development: Getting to the Root of Positive Forms of Leadership,” *The Leadership Quarterly* 16 (2005): 315-338.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 326.

recognized or detected by those around you.”²⁶ These characteristics serve purpose not only as related to how one is perceived *by others* but also as essential ingredients in self-leadership through genuinely receiving, growing, and maturing through feedback given *from others*.²⁷ “In contrast to the positive attributes associate with authentic leadership, many leaders feel they must create an image of invulnerability. These leaders draw strict boundaries around themselves and their followers. They go to great lengths to create a façade that cannot be penetrated.”²⁸ It is only within a climate of genuine leadership engagement and accessibility that the identification, nurturing, and utilization of the strengths of others finds traction. Whittington rightly concludes, “Leading with authentic engagement also emphasizes the need to be among those who are being led. Authentic leaders understand that leadership is a process and takes place in the context of a relationship and cannot be conducted at a distance. It is up close and personal.”²⁹

Studies have revealed many similarities between earlier discussions on leader credibility and the characteristics of benefits derived from authentic leadership. Research reveals healthy organizational contexts include a high level of trust³⁰ between authentic, credible leaders and constituents created by intentional efforts at transparency and credible communication.³¹ Additionally, the climate created by credible/authentic leaders enhances the synergism of teamwork,³² increases the probability of employee retention,³³ and can be a strong component in predicting overall leadership success.³⁴ Interestingly, similar to the findings of Kouzes and Posner on the effect of credibility trans-geographically,³⁵ studies reveal that, though cultural nuances certainly exist, the application and influence of authentic leadership is cogent in a variety of cross-cultural contexts.³⁶

Most pertinent to the intent of this paper is the affective nature of authentic leadership on those leading in an ecclesial-related organization.³⁷ While the necessity of

²⁶ Phillip V. Lewis and John P. Harrison, *Longevity in Leadership* (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 2016): 63-64.

²⁷ Ram Charan, Steve Drotter and Jim Noel, *The Leadership Pipeline-2nd Edition* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass: 2011).

²⁸ J. Lee. Whittington, *Biblical Perspectives on Leadership and Organizations* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan: 2015): 88.

²⁹ Ibid, 150.

³⁰ Lynelle Coxen et al. “Authentic leadership and Organisational Citizenship Behaviour in the Public Health Care Sector: The Role of Workplace Trust,” *SA Journal of Industrial Psychology, Auckland Park* 42:1 (2016): 1-13.

³¹ Lencioni, Patrick M. *The Advantage: Why Organizational Health Trumps Everything Else in Business* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2012).

³² Joanne Lyubovnikova et al. “How Authentic Leadership Influences Team Performance: The Mediating Role of Team Reflexivity,” *Journal of Business Ethics* 141:1 (March 2017): 59-70

³³ Anthony Gatling et al. “The Effects of Authentic Leadership and Organizational Commitment on Turnover Intention,” *Leadership & Organization Development Journal* 37:2 (2016) 181-199

³⁴ Mary Kay Copeland, “The Impact of Authentic, Ethical, Transformational Leadership on Leader Effectiveness,” *Journal of Leadership, Accountability and Ethics* 13:3 (2016): 79-97.

³⁵ Kouzes and Posner, *Credibility*.

³⁶ Shaista E. Khilji et al. “Self, Follower, Organization and the Context - A Cross Cultural View of Authentic Leadership,” *South Asian Journal of Global Business Research* 4:1 (2015): 2-26.

³⁷ Timothy R. Puls, Laverne L. Ludden, and James Freemyer, “Authentic Leadership and Its Relationship to Ministerial Effectiveness,” *The Journal of Applied Christian Leadership* 8:1 (2014): 55-75.

credibility and authenticity may seem obvious for this situation, as mentioned earlier, the manifestation of these character-based expressions is sometimes in mournfully short supply giving way to outcome-based foci.³⁸

IV. LEADER CREDIBILITY – THE PRODUCT

Kouzes and Posner summarize their research by listing certain characteristics seen in employees who perceive their managers to have high credibility. As we have seen, these findings have applicability trans-organizationally. They explain that highly credible leaders tend to inspire followers to “be proud to tell others they are a part of the organization, feel a strong sense of team spirit, see their own personal values as consistent with those of the organization, feel attached and committed to the organization, and have a sense of ownership for the organization.”³⁹

It is obvious that credibility issues influence employee levels of organizational commitment.⁴⁰ A high level of commitment creates a climate of cooperation whereby leaders and followers benefit from clear communication, empathetic interaction, and synergistic efficiency yielding a true “win-win performance agreement.”⁴¹ In this regard, Covey⁴² speaks metaphorically concerning the ability of credible, principle-centered leaders to transform a “swamp culture” filled with “adversarialism, legalism, protectionism, and politics” into an “oasis culture” wherein the energies of all participants are utilized, and both the organization and its people are able to thrive. It is significant to recognize in this discussion of commitment and loyalty the emphasis on mutual responsibility. The credible leader must realize that their willingness to be trusting is a key element in their being trusted. “Trusting other people encourages them to trust us; distrusting others make them lose confidence in us.”⁴³ Realizing the power of credibility within organizational relationships and culture, the question arises as to the actual ingredients constituting the credibility factor.

V. INGREDIENTS OF CREDIBILITY

Kouzes and Posner’s theory⁴⁴ posits four fundamental characteristics of a credible leader: honesty, forward-looking, inspiring, and competence. These qualities emerge as essential ingredients regardless of geography or culture; a good thing in that the unfortunate “credibility gap is found around the globe.”⁴⁵

When responding to studies inquiring about leadership qualities, participants regularly include the issues of forward-looking (vision) and inspiring (charismatic/motivational), components that have been well rehearsed in leadership

³⁸ Joseph M. Stowell, *Redefining Leadership: Character-driven Habits of Effective Leaders* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014).

³⁹ Kouzes and Posner, *Credibility*, 31.

⁴⁰ Curtis C. Verschoor, “Can an Ethics Code Change Behavior?” *Strategic Finance* 82:1 (July 2000): 26-28.

⁴¹ Stephen R. Covey, *Principle-Centered Leadership* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 31.

⁴² Stephen R. Covey, “Transforming a Swamp,” *Training and Development* 47:5 (May 1993): 42

⁴³ Kouzes and Posner, *Credibility*, 107.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 14-18.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 34.

literature over many years. The fourth factor, competency, seemingly continues to gain more ground in the 21st century mindset that focuses heavily on efficiency and productivity. For instance, Stone acknowledges the importance of honesty and integrity as trust-related components within organizational efforts but is also careful to explain, “Leaders can build trust only if they have demonstrated that they possess integrity...Credibility isn’t solely a matter of trustworthiness and integrity—your own and those with whom you work. Credibility, which is so important to surviving today’s tough times and thriving in the longer term, demands professional competency as well.”⁴⁶ Carlos Romero Barcelo, while using slightly different terminology, offers similar insights as one who served in various leadership capacities within the Puerto Rican government. His extended quote is particularly timely in that it represents a clarion call issued less than three years before the bankruptcy hearings of that country.⁴⁷ Barcelo warns:

Two of the most important attributes that a chief executive must have, either in private enterprise or government, are credibility and fairness. A president, prime minister, governor, mayor or any leader who loses his credibility will also be driven out of office. If he acts unfairly with the public and loses his credibility, this person will be driven out of office even faster. A leader without credibility and who acts unfairly with those he pretends to lead will definitely lose all his followers. On the other hand, a leader who strives to be properly informed and tell his people the truth, even when it hurts, and who acts with a sense of justice toward all his people, will be trusted and people will be much more likely to follow his lead.⁴⁸

These examples are simply reminders of the wide applications of the import of leader credibility and how elements related to both competence and character are critical in the consideration.

Honesty

The four leader credibility characteristics mentioned above (honesty, forward-looking, inspiring, competent) have consistently been most consistently mentioned when organizational constituents were asked what “qualities that you most look for and admire in a leader; someone whose direction you would willingly follow.”⁴⁹ Of these four, honesty has always risen above the others as the quality considered most important and thus topping the list regardless of the organizational context. Kouzes and Posner state, “No matter where we have conducted our studies – regardless of country, geographical region, or type of organization – the most important leadership attribute since we began our research in 1981 has always been honesty.”⁵⁰ The relative absence of this critical credibility component requires a renewed emphasis on the

⁴⁶ Florence Stone, “Refocusing on Credibility as a Key to Success,” *Employment Relations Today* (Wiley) 35:4 (Winter 2009): 11-12.

⁴⁷ Mary Williams Walsh, “Puerto Rico Declares a Form of Bankruptcy,” *New York Times*, May 3, 2017, accessed May 15, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/03/business/dealbook/puerto-rico-debt.html?_r=0.

⁴⁸ Carlos Romero Barcelo, “Complete Loss of Credibility,” *Caribbean Business*, 42:27 (July 2014): 21.

⁴⁹ Kouzes and Posner, *Credibility*.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 14-15.

understanding and intentionally designed development of this quality among those serving in leadership roles.

Honesty deals with considerations and values that are “affairs of the heart,”⁵¹ thus making consideration of character, morality, and ethics vital to any discussion of credibility. While placing significant emphasis on a leader’s competence is commonplace and appropriate, character mixed with competence yields true trustworthiness in leadership.⁵² Ciulla declares, “Good leadership involves both ethics and competence”⁵³ whereas Gini confirms “the quality and worth of leadership can only be measured in terms of what a leader intends, values, believes in, or stands for – in other words, character.”⁵⁴ Noteworthy in this regard is the illuminating distinctions between “little-c” and “Big-C” character as designated by authors Hannah and Jennings. In their construct, little-c character determined by “narrowly defined definitions, largely composed of abstract principles... [and] focuses primarily on the individual attributes of the person...and his unique ethical makeup.”⁵⁵ Big-C character creates a much broader span of application by focusing “less on moral judgments about ‘what’s right to do’ in a particular situation, and puts greater emphasis on value judgments about ‘what’s good to be’ in a particular vocation, career or profession.”⁵⁶ Thus, the necessary honesty required to enhance perceived leader credibility becomes an issue established in the arena of personal values rather than in the constant fluctuations of societal and ethical preferences and expectations.

Worthwhile efforts to legislate and codify ethical behavior can yield some benefit,⁵⁷ but ultimately “the best leaders use an internal set of morals and principles to navigate the often treacherous waters of business and set a course for success.”⁵⁸ Though somewhat lengthy, the following quotation from Warren Bennis offers incredibly significant insight and serves as a good capstone to conclude this section on the interaction of competencies and character issues (honesty) in perceived leader credibility:

The core competency of leadership is character, but character and judgment are the qualities that we know least about when trying to teach them to others. The leader’s character is made up of a tripod of forces: ambition and drive; competence and expertise; integrity and moral fabric. All three are needed, and all three have to be in balance, or the tripod topples. Get a leader with only drive but not competence and integrity, and you get a demagogue. Get someone with competence and absent integrity and drive, and you get a technocrat. Get

⁵¹ Roy L. Edgeman, “Principle-Centered Leadership and Core Value Deployment,” *The TQM Magazine* 10:3 (1998): 192.

⁵² Covey, *Principle-Centered Leadership*.

⁵³ Joanna B. Ciulla, “Leadership Ethics: Mapping the Territory,” *Business Ethics Quarterly* 5:1 (January 1995): 5.

⁵⁴ Al Gini, “Moral Leadership and Business Ethics,” *Leading Organizations: Perspectives for a New Era* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1998): 367.

⁵⁵ Sean T. Hannah and Peter L. Jennings, “Leader Ethos and Big-C Character,” *Organizational Dynamics* 42:1 (January 2013): 8.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁵⁷ Verschoor, “Can an Ethics Code Change Behavior?”

⁵⁸ Stephen R. Covey, “Universal Principles,” *Executive Excellence* 17:5 (May 2000): 107.

seduced by someone who has ambition and competence but lacks integrity, and you get a destructive achiever.⁵⁹

Having focused attention on the issues of honesty and character in the credibility factor, we will now explore how the practical manifestation of this important issue.

Congruence of Words and Deeds

Credibility obtained by leaders from followers is primarily an expression of confidence toward those who show a consistency between their words and their deeds.⁶⁰ In the midst of the smooth talk emanating from executive levels of organizational structures, the regaining of credibility after corporate calamity requires a return to a brutally honest and transparent leadership stance⁶¹, including an undisputed “credibility of action.”⁶² Kaipa is correct when instructing, “Bridging the credibility gap takes time and effort, and it is much easier to lose credibility than to gain it back. You need actions, not just words. The most effective way to start bridging the credibility gap is to be more aware of what you say.”⁶³ The necessity of action accompanying words is highlighted by Kouzes and Posner’s popular prescription to simply “DWYSYWD – do what you say you will do.”⁶⁴ The authors are quick to point out, though, that a credible leader’s action-accompanying-words behavior is not an arbitrary exercise but finds its impetus in a recognized set of both personal and corporately established beliefs and values.

Leaders are only credible when they are willing to stand up for their beliefs and consistently behave in a manner that exemplifies a deeply ingrained personal value system. In order for executives to act on their beliefs, they had “better have beliefs.”⁶⁵ This is a significant issue in the present postmodern climate characterized by the lack of absolute truth and corresponding values. Relativism is a severe challenge for organizational leadership and leaves behind a long trail of victims who rose to prominence because of competence but fell into disrepute because of a lack of character.⁶⁶ In the midst of this erosion of guiding principles, leaders must acknowledge the reality of a universal moral law that allows one to know the difference between right and wrong, and sense when they are doing the right thing.⁶⁷ The often-seen duplicity between the recognized necessity of moral considerations and activities to the contrary causes many to ask if it is actually possible for leaders to exemplify moral character and establish long-term credibility while building a successful organization.

⁵⁹ Marshall Loeb, “Where Leaders Come From,” *Fortune* 130:6 (September 19, 1994): 242.

⁶⁰ Kouzes and Posner, *Credibility*.

⁶¹ Champey, “Building Trust Between Leaders and Capital Markets.”

⁶² James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, “Leadership is Your Business,” *Executive Excellence* 13:4 (April 1996).

⁶³ Prasad Kaipa, “Recover Your Credibility” *Harvard Business Review*, July 02, 2012, accessed May 30, 2017, <https://hbr.org/2012/07/recover-your-credibility>.

⁶⁴ Kouzes and Posner, *Credibility*. 47.

⁶⁵ James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, “Credible Leaders”, *Executive Excellence* 8:4 (April 1991).

⁶⁶ Smith, Warren C. “The Firing of Bill O’Reilly,” *Breakpoint Online*, April 21, 2017, accessed June 4, 2017, <http://www.breakpoint.org/2017/04/firing-bill-oreilly/>.

⁶⁷ Covey, “Universal Principles.”

While there are no simple answers to establishing and maintaining a credibility climate, leaders should be encouraged as to the possibility thereof. Kouzes and Posner's research has provided additional insights into the consideration by suggesting six disciplines leaders can intentionally exercise to build a strong and consistent framework through which credible leadership can be recognized, appreciated, and followed. The remainder of this paper will briefly examine these six disciplines through a brief but sufficiently representative overview of the leadership one many consider to be history's most prominent and effective leader, Jesus of Nazareth.

VI. SIX DISCIPLINES MODELED BY THE LEADERSHIP OF JESUS

"All beginnings are more or less obscure in appearance, but none were ever more obscure than those of Christianity."⁶⁸ When Jesus of Nazareth began calling, training, and leading a small band of insignificant commoners in the first century Roman world, no one would have ever imagined the impact this leader would have over the course of the next two millennia and beyond. This influence extends to governments and nations, multiplied millions of individual lives, and propagates continually through devoted followers in every societal context. The initial twelve men chosen by Jesus to serve in leadership roles came to interact with him in increasing degrees of intimacy and trust developed over a period of time and through observable and intentional activities. Bruce posits three distinguishable stages of their attachment to Jesus and his cause:

1. The first stage involved their simple belief in Jesus as the Christ and their attendance at certain feasts and events where he was present (e.g. John 2:1ff).
2. Second was the assuming of "an uninterrupted attendance on His person, involving entire, or at least habitual abandonment of secular occupations" (e.g. Matt. 4:18-20; 9:9).
3. The third and highest stage involved the separating of the select band of twelve from the multitude of followers to be trained for special leadership roles under the designation of "apostles" (Luke 6:13-16).⁶⁹

Realizing this progression of relational and organizational involvement among Jesus and the Twelve, one must ask the question, "What practices were displayed by Jesus that convinced these men of his credibility and correspondingly solidified them as vital parts of his organizational structure?" Two studies by Kouzes and Posner,⁷⁰ the first involving senior health care administrators and the second professionals and managers from a large public service company, revealed six disciplines most often practiced by leaders in building credibility among organizational participants. These include discovering yourself, appreciating constituents, affirming shared values, developing capacity, serving a purpose, and sustaining hope. All six behaviors are prominent in Jesus' leadership as illustrated by sample passages referenced primarily from the Gospel accounts in the Holy Bible.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Alexander B. Bruce, *The Training of the Twelve* (New Canaan, CT: Keats Publishing, 1979), 1.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁷⁰ Kouzes and Posner, *Credibility*.

⁷¹ All scripture quotations taken from The Holy Bible, New King James Version (NKJV).

Discovering Yourself

In this first discipline, the leader commences on “an exploration of the inner territory” and clarifies their own values and standards by which they choose to live life.⁷² It is evident that Jesus predicated much of His activity upon His self-awareness and a firmly established set of personal and operational standards.

The water baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist (Mark 1:4-11), commonly considered the official beginning of His ministry, is accompanied by a powerfully significant event. Upon surfacing from the water, Jesus saw an image like a dove descending upon Him and heard a voice from heaven declaring, “You are my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased” (vs. 11). This was not only an announcement to others of the uniqueness of Jesus but also served to confirm that position and mission to the Lord Himself.

In John 5:16, certain religiously zealous Jews confront Jesus because of a healing performed on the Sabbath. Additionally, adding insult to injury to this religious system, Jesus is distinctly identifying Himself in His divineness as He speaks of God as Father. In response to the accusations of self-exaltation, the Lord succinctly declares His motivation, mission, and value scale. He proclaimed, “I can of myself do nothing. As I hear, I judge; and My judgment is righteous, because I do not seek My own will but the will of the Father who sent me” (John 5: 30).

A final incident to accentuate this discipline finds illumination in John 13:1-10. In an incredible demonstration of servanthood, Jesus proceeds to wash the feet of the disciples, much to the dismay of and rebuke from Simon Peter. However, the writer indicates the reason the Son of God would be joyfully willing to engage in such a menial task:

When Jesus knew the His hour had come that He should depart from this world to the Father...Jesus knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come from God and was going to God, rose from supper and laid aside His garments, took a towel and girded himself. After that, He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet (vss. 1,3-5a).

This incident assures the reader of Jesus’ intrapersonal insight and security allowing for this type of activity.

Appreciating constituents

The second discipline entails the acquisition of trust from constituents who perceive “that the leaders have their best interest at heart”.⁷³ Two major activities tend to help in accomplishing this: a) appreciation of diversity, and b) communicating a sense of significance.

A very diverse group of followers constituted the original twelve apostles and the early church in general. In the Twelve we see a mixture of tax collectors (Matt. 9:9), fishermen (Mark. 1:16-20) and others whose occupational or social status was obviously not deemed an important issue. Later, other unlikely candidates would join the ranks of follower/leaders in the group, not the least of which was the miraculously

⁷² Kouzes and Posner, *Credibility*, 52.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 53.

converted and intense firebrand from the ranks of the Pharisees, Saul of Tarsus (Acts 9:1-20).

Accompanying Jesus' appreciation of diversity was His ability to communicate to His followers a sense of significance. When calling to Himself members of the inner circle of His leadership team, He announced to these fishermen a great opportunity. Jesus explained that becoming a part of His operation and plan would allow them to do more than simply provide another meal and payday; they would be privileged now to "become fishers of men" (Mark 1:17). It is little wonder that these men "immediately left their nets and followed Him" (vs. 18).

Affirming shared values

The third discipline proposed by Kouzes and Posner⁷⁴ involves the unifying of a diverse constituency around a common cause. Credible leaders establish and emphasize "a common ground of agreement on which everyone can stand" and "build a strong sense of community."⁷⁵ Jesus was masterful in motivating constituents to abandon destructive individual preferences to accomplish organizational goals. A very poignant example of this ability appears in the inclusion and interaction of two of the members of the Twelve. Prior to their conversion and acceptance of the call of Christ, to have had Simon the Zealot and Matthew the publican in the same city would have been pandemonium, much less to have them on the same team and sitting around the same table (Luke 6:12-16)! These men were willing to put aside their previously held personal agendas to cooperate with the plan of God.

One of the keys to Jesus' success in affirming shared values was His structured prioritization of the activities of His followers. Mark 3:14b-15 explains that when He called His leaders for the task ahead that He appointed them to "be with Him...to preach...to have power to heal diseases and cast out demons." To stay focused and remain unified, the cohesive relational element of being with Him (and with each other) must continually receive priority in their ministerial activities.

Another important element in this third discipline is the projection of goals and challenges that far exceed the ability of any individual to accomplish. Jesus had called these apostles and those who succeeded them to go forth and proclaim a kingdom far greater than one of human origin and to do so to the whole world. They were to propagate the "kingdom of God" (Matt. 10:7) not their own kingdom and to do so with the power of God not their own ingenuity and strength (Matt. 10:7; 28:18-20; Acts 1:8).

Developing capacity

"Credible leaders are not afraid to liberate the leader in everyone."⁷⁶ Others experience liberation to personally grow and correspondingly contribute significantly to the aims and aspirations of the organization when they are intentionally well informed, encouraged to take risks, and nourished in a climate where they can learn from their mistakes. Jesus exercised this discipline in several ways.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 53.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 54.

Jesus spent much time traveling with and teaching His disciples. It appears as though these didactic sessions were the result of both intentional design, as well as on-the-spot occurrences (e.g., Matt. 5:1; Mark 11:20-24). During the instructional interaction, Jesus would sometimes be very careful to offer extensive *explanation* as to the meanings of His words and works (Matt. 13:34-51). Often either preceding or following a time of verbal discourse, the Master would then give visual substantiation to His message through a powerful *demonstration* of His glory (Luke 8:1).

Continual development of His followers meant not only explanation and demonstration but also progressive *delegation* (Mark 6:7-13). Effective training had to include hands-on, practical involvement of the disciples in that they were eventually launching into their own fruitful efforts of Kingdom expansion. Times of *evaluation* were also a regular part of Jesus' training process as the leaders who had been temporarily released to go and practice were now recalled to debrief and offer feedback (Mark 6:30). Lest the load become overbearing, Jesus also knew the need to follow times of intense ministry with seasons of *relaxation* wherein fellowship and restoration would be enjoyed (Mark 6:31). The activities of explanation, demonstration, delegation, evaluation, and relaxation all played an important role in developing the capacity of the disciples and enhancing the credibility of Jesus.

Serving a purpose

True leaders are not self-serving but others-serving demonstrating their true commitments by visible actions.⁷⁷ At times, this involves tremendous courage and may involve the willingness to put one's own career or safety on the line for the sake of maintaining principles and modeling commitment. Jesus exemplified this discipline wonderfully in His commitment to modeling and ultimately dying for the cause to which He had recruited others.

All four Gospel accounts are replete with modeling activities of Jesus relative to His love for God and people and the actions that accompanied this. His life was a living testimony to the first message He preached in His hometown of Nazareth (Luke 4:16-21). Later when called to give account to the angry religious leaders for their healing activities around the Temple, His followers simply answered, "We cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard!" (Acts 4:20). Though many years had passed since he had been an eyewitness to the physical presence of Christ, the Elder John was still simply testifying to what he "had seen and heard" (1 John. 1:1-4). The example modeled by Jesus was truly transformational in the lives of the apostles, and reflection upon it gave them the fortitude to stay faithful in difficult circumstances.

The purpose for which Jesus stood eventually resulted in His death. All Gospel accounts again bear witness to this martyred savior's courage as well as to His resurrection power. While several of the Twelve were actual eyewitnesses of the crucifixion of Jesus, they all (excluding Judas) were also eventual proclaimers of the resurrected Christ as they went forth declaring the message of a living Lord (Acts 1:22; 2:22-23). Paul the Apostle also became a powerful proponent of the crucified but

⁷⁷ Kouzes and Posner, *Credibility*.

resurrected Christ and encouraged all believers to be encouraged by and emulate the attitudes that allowed these purposeful events to transpire (Phil 2:1-13).

The willingness and courage exercised by Christ in actively pursuing and completing the salvation of others will forever serve to allow Him to maintain credibility and inspire confidence in every generation of followers.

Sustaining hope

The final of the six credibility-enhancing disciplines described by Kouzes and Posner⁷⁸ and modeled by Jesus is sustaining hope. Three main attributes are necessary in this discipline. Leaders must maintain a positive attitude in times of trouble and transition; they must make themselves available particularly in seasons of challenge and difficulty, and they must be compassionate and empowering in their associating with workers experiencing struggles of various kinds.⁷⁹

Jesus assured His disciples in all three of these areas even in the final hours preceding His death. The concluding instructions from the earthly Jesus, given in John 14-17 to His closest followers, find their backdrop amidst the foreboding uncertainties and darkness of impending difficulties. As Jesus explained to them issues concerning His departure, His words were those of faith and encouragement not doubt and despair (14:1-6; 16:33). The attitudes of love and joy permeated His instructions (15:9-13). He also prayed for them (John 17) and promised His continual presence with them, but in a changing and even more intimate fashion (14:16-24; 15:1-5).

Interwoven throughout these chapters of “farewell” are also numerous references to the compassionate empowerment that was to come to His followers to sustain, sanctify, and strengthen them for the days and the tasks ahead (14:15-17; 25-27; 15:26-27; 16:7-15; 22-28). When fulfilled, this empowerment was perceived by the apostles as yet another evidence of the concern and credibility of Christ and His trustworthiness as the quintessential leader, worthy of complete allegiance (Acts 2:32-36).

VII. CONCLUSION

This paper has explored some issues relative to the importance and improvement of leader credibility. An observation of the life of Jesus as recorded in the biblical gospel accounts has granted a brief overview illustrating definite similarities between His leadership activities and the six disciplines of credibility enhancement discussed in the leadership credibility theory of Kouzes and Posner.⁸⁰ It is quite illuminating to see the very powerful correlation of well-researched and documented leadership studies and the record of Holy Scripture. It is additionally very encouraging to comprehend the relevance of the ancient biblical record of the Jesus’ leadership to critical present-day leadership dilemmas.

The recognition of a widening credibility gap in many organizations should serve as both an alarm and a rallying cry to the Christ-centered leader desiring to influence the ever-shifting, turmoil-ridden, up-and-coming millennial-lead organizational

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

communities. A quote from the popular press offers some concluding and sobering thoughts in this regard from Kouzes and Posner:

Organizational life is full of struggles and tensions. These tensions can stretch people to their limits, and not all will be quite sure if they are up to it...today's turmoil and global challenges probably will continue indefinitely...Organizations are likely to seem more like organized anarchies than like the bureaucracies that typified the public and private sectors in preceding decades. Leaders feel these tensions acutely because of their responsibilities to set the example and inspire others to work collaboratively toward a shared vision of the future. The leaders who are the most in touch with their constituents—and therefore likely to be the most credible—will experience the pain most intensely.⁸¹

The multi-faceted secret to effectiveness in this 21st century scenario involves posturing through insightful anticipation,⁸² flexibility in “permanent white-water” conditions,⁸³ and genuine collaboration as teams.⁸⁴ Success in these essential efforts begins with and requires on-going, credible leaders with a focused, steady hand on the helm.

Because ingredients of credibility and disciplines for credibility enhancement are defined and teachable, it behooves those responsible for contexts of leadership development to take seriously the inclusion of these elements in structuring for next-generation leadership training and effectiveness. What emphases and opportunities might best serve that purpose? Should screening efforts focus more intently on insuring trainees are associating with those willing to first model and then teach credibility elements? Could additional opportunities to observe desired behaviors in real-life, hands-on contexts be in order? Since the six credibility disciplines operated effectively in the leadership of Jesus, might an examination and implementation of His leadership development strategies be beneficial in producing credible leaders? These and other related questions important considerations for universities, colleges, churches, and other training centers committed to providing society with others-centered, God-glorifying leaders. The present “leadership vacuum” is primed with opportunities for honest, visionary, inspiring, and competent to fill!

About the Author

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⁸¹ James Kouzes and Barry Posner, “Seeking the Elusive Credibility Factor,” *USA Today Magazine* 141:2806 (July 2012): 58.

⁸² William Eason, *Leadership on the Other Side* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000).

⁸³ Peter B. Vaill, *Learning as a Way of Being: Strategies for Survival in a World of Permanent White Water* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996).

⁸⁴ Ryan Hartwig and Warren Bird, *Teams that Thrive: Five Discipline of Collaborative Church Leadership* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015).

three decades of church ministry experience, serving churches in Florida and Illinois as lead pastor, traveling for several years as an itinerant teacher and evangelist, and serving as interim pastor for several congregations. He has also ministered as conference speaker and guest lecturer in various venues both nationally and abroad. Additionally, Hemby has spent extensive time leading tours to Israel, including church groups as well as multiple five-week, study-abroad sessions with university students. He holds educational credentials from North Carolina State University (A.A.), Lee University (B.S.), Trinity Evangelical Divinity School (M.A.), and Regent University (Ph.D. in Organizational Leadership). Hemby and his wife Rita have been married since 1973 and have two sons and two grandchildren.

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