

Character Formation as a Foundation for Effective Leadership: An Examination of Integrity, Virtue, and Ethical Leadership

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Abstract

Leadership effectiveness is frequently evaluated through the outcomes such as productivity, influence, innovation, and organizational performance. Yet sustainable effectiveness depends on a deeper foundation: the character of the person who exercises leadership. This paper examines character formation as a foundation for effective leadership, with particular attention to integrity, virtue and ethical leadership. Drawing from virtue ethics, social learning theory, and contemporary leadership scholarship, the paper argues that leadership should be understood not merely as a set of skills or behaviours but also as a moral practice rooted in who the leader is becoming or has become. Character formation involves the cultivation of stable dispositions that enable leaders to recognize what is right, value it, and act consistently, even under pressure. Integrity provides coherence between values, words, decisions and actions; virtues such as courage, justice, prudence, temperance, compassion, humility, and honesty provide the moral resources needed for responsible leadership; and ethical leadership translates these qualities into observable conduct, fair decision-making, role modelling, communication and systems that support ethical behaviour. The paper further examines how character develops through family and community influences, organizational culture, mentoring, reflective practice and repeated moral action. It concludes that organizations seeking effective and trustworthy leadership should treat character formation as a continuing developmental responsibility rather than as an optional personal attribute. Ethical codes and leadership competencies are important, but they are most effective when reinforced by leaders whose character consistently aligns their conduct with legitimate moral standards and the common good.

Keywords: Character formation, leadership, integrity, Virtue, ethical leadership

Introduction

Leadership is one of the most consequential forms of human influence. Leaders allocate resources, establish priorities, interpret events, reward and punish behaviour, shape organizational culture and influence how other people understand what is acceptable and desirable. For this reason, the question of whether a leader is effective cannot be separated completely from the question of what kind of person the leader is. A leader may possess technical competence, charisma, strategic intelligence, and communication skills while still producing destructive outcomes when those abilities are directed by selfishness, dishonesty, injustice or an absence of self-control. Conversely, leaders who possess strong character can use authority in ways that strengthen trust, responsibility, cooperation and long-term institutional health. The need for competent and effective leaders of character in leadership positions has become necessary considering the revolutionary changes and

the character crisis in most organizations today. So that they can respond to the changing and challenging issues and situations associated with organizational leadership appropriately. The emphasis on character is especially important because leadership decisions frequently occur under conditions of uncertainty, pressure, competing interests and incomplete rules. And codes of conduct cannot anticipate every morally significant situation. Leaders therefore need internalized Principles and dispositions that guide judgement when explicit instructions are insufficient. Character supplies this internal orientation. It helps a leader remain truthful when deception would be convenient, fair when favouritism would be profitable, Courageous when silence would be safer, and humble when status makes self-importance attractive.

This paper examines the proposition that character formation is a foundation for effective leadership. It focuses on three interconnected dimensions: Integrity, Virtue and ethical leadership. The central argument is that effective leadership is strengthened when character formation produces leaders whose moral commitments are stable enough to withstand pressure and whose values are translated into observable ethical practices. Character is not presented as a fixed personality trait acquired once and for all. Rather, it is understood as something developed through education, relationships, reflection, practice, accountability and repeated choices. This perspective has implications for leadership in every sphere of life and at every level of leadership.

Conceptualizing Leadership and Character Formation

Leadership has gained global recognition because of the vital role it plays in various organizations. Gaining understanding of leadership will help guide the taught of this paper.

According to Okunkola (2024), leadership involves influencing group members or people by guiding or motivating them to work together to accomplish the set objectives or goals of the body. Weems (1993), defines leadership as the development and articulation of a shared vision, motivation of those key people without whom that vision cannot become a reality and gaining the cooperation of most people involved. This definition is key because a leader cannot accomplish a goal all by him/herself. Adetunji (2010) decried that leadership at its best is never revealed by the front man who by his words and actions seems to say, "here I am, come follow me," rather than, "here we are in this group... what is it to be done?" Ishola (2024), also submitted that leadership is not an art of coercing people to perform a given task; it is rather a natural influence on both human and material resources to be properly harnessed towards achieving corporate goal. This implies that leadership involves influencing and developing organizational key players to cooperate towards achieving organizational goals.

Character can be understood as the relatively stable pattern of moral dispositions through which a person perceives, evaluates, chooses, and acts. It is therefore broader than reputation. Because reputation concerns how others perceive a person, whereas character concerns the qualities and commitments that shape conduct even when external observers are absent. Character is also broader than compliance. Compliance asks whether a person followed a rule; character asks what kind of person is disposed to act rightly and why.

Nkwor & Adiele (2020) described character as the enduring distinguishing traits or attributes of an individual's ideals and conducts. It is fundamental in leadership such that organizational effectiveness, success, and growth depend on it. And the ancient Greek Philosophers including Plato and Aristotle had argued that character is something that is habituated, that it could be acquired through the consistent application of the virtues over the course of one's lifetime rather than mere teaching of its principles in the classroom, conferences or seminars (Arijoon, 2000). In other words, People become just by performing just actions, Courageous by practicing Courageous

responses, and temperate through repeated self-Control. Virtue is therefore neither simply knowledge nor an isolated act. It is a cultivated disposition that enables appropriate action across situations. Bhuyan (2007) emphasized that a Virtuous Person had Practical wisdom, which is the ability to know when and how best to apply moral perspectives. This is because moral action requires judgement about what is appropriate in particular circumstances. This is directly relevant to leadership because leaders rarely face choices in which one rule mechanically determines the correct action. They must interpret competing goods, anticipate consequences and decide how principles should be applied. Riggio et al (2010) examined virtue-based measurement of ethical leadership; illustrating an effort to move character from an appealing but vague concept toward something that can be examined systematically. Kilburg (2012), likewise argues that effective executive leadership combines behaviourally based competencies with virtuous dimensions of character. This is important because good character is the demonstration of qualities and virtues considered as good, virtuous, and of noble disposition (Adejuwon, 2024).

Character formation refers to the process through which moral dispositions are developed, strengthened, corrected and integrated into behaviour. And formation occurs through both intentional and unintentional influences. Through the teaching of family's norms about honesty and responsibility; schools reinforcing or weakening habits of fairness and respect; communities providing models of service and citizenship; workplace rewarding particular forms of conduct; and leaders themselves becoming examples for others. Character is also shaped by the choices individuals repeatedly make, as small decisions can become habits, and habits eventually becoming dispositions. Adejuwon (2024) also asserts that there are many factors that may inform character formation in persons before their attaining leadership positions. These are parental background, environmental factors, levels of exposure and education are a few of what influence character development. However, he stressed that good character can be learned and grown through cultivation of desired values and virtues which become habituated behaviours when practiced over a period of time. This is important to note because leadership training often concentrates on competencies that are easier to teach and assess. Such as strategic planning, communication, negotiation, project management and decision-making. These skills are valuable, but competence without character can amplify harm. For instance, a highly skilled leader who lacks integrity can manipulate people more effectively. A highly intelligent leader without humility may dismiss correct information, and a courageous leader without prudence may take reckless risks. Character formation therefore complements, rather than replaces leadership competence.

Integrity, Virtue and Ethical Leadership

Integrity is one of the most frequently cited qualities of effective leaders because leadership depends heavily on trust. Trust is difficult to sustain when followers repeatedly encounter contradictions between what leaders say and what they do. For instance, a leader who speaks about transparency while concealing relevant information, or who promotes fairness while rewarding personal loyalty, undermines the credibility of both the leader and the institution.

Palanski & Yammarino (2007) argue that integrity is best distinguished from closely related concepts such as honesty, authenticity, morality and consistency. Honesty concerns truthfulness; authenticity concerns acting in ways that reflect one's identity; morality concerns right and wrong; and consistency concerns stability across behaviour. Integrity incorporates these ideas but focuses particularly on the coherence of commitments and conduct. Therefore, a leader with integrity is not merely someone who occasionally tells the truth but someone whose pattern of action remains meaningfully aligned with professed values.

Nkwor & Adiele (2020) described integrity to leader's unwavering commitment to the right thing at the right time and place for the right reason(s). And Abraham (2013) argued that integrity is an "attribute which differentiates effective leaders from other people as integrity involves constant adherence to the truth by the leader regardless of whose interests are affected." Because "leaders of integrity are not scandalous and not easily roped into fraudulent dealings" (Adejuwon, 2024). In other words, leadership integrity is built through repeated actions honesty, transparency and accountability rather than dramatic declarations. Virtues refers to a stable disposition to act well. According to Cappell (1996), "Virtue is a disposition of character which instantiates or promotes responsiveness to one or more basic good." And Adejuwon (2024) described 'ethical virtue as disposition of characters which are needed by humankind to have flourishing life and relationship with others.' And identified virtues are wisdom, courage, temperance, justice, humility, compassion, honesty, empathy, responsibility and respect. And these virtues are interconnected. Hence, Virtue ethics is valuable for leadership because it shifts attention from isolated decisions towards the kind of person a leader is becoming, or towards an integrated moral identity. Ethical leadership is the practical expression of moral character in the exercise of leadership. Brown et al (2005) defined ethical leadership through the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct and the promotion of such conduct among followers through communication, reinforcement and decision-making. This definition is significant because it makes ethical leadership both personal and organizational. Leaders must behave ethically themselves, but they must also make ethics part of how leadership is practiced.

Social learning theory helps explain why leaders have such influence. Social learning theory states that people learn new behaviours, values and attitudes by observing others. Bandura (1977) argues that people learn through observing models, interpreting consequences and developing expectations about behaviour. Leaders occupy highly visible positions, so their conduct provides information about what the organization truly values. For instance, if a leader claims that honesty matters but rewards employees who manipulate reports, follower learn that performance is more important than truth. If a leader consistently acknowledges mistakes and rewards responsible disclosure, followers learn that accountability is legitimate. Ethical leadership therefore involves role modeling. And leaders communicate ethics through what they pay attention to, what they reward, what they tolerate and what they punish. Brown et al (2005) found that ethical leadership was associated with trust, fairness and favourable employee outcomes. Brown & Trevino (2006) also emphasized the distinction between ethical leadership and other necessarily being ethical. Ethical leadership requires explicit concern for moral standards and the welfare of affected stakeholders. Den Hartog (2015) notes that ethical leadership research examines both leader characteristics and behaviours, as well as followers' perceptions and organizational context. This means that intentions alone are insufficient. A leader may sincerely believe that he or she is ethical, yet followers may experience favourism, disrespect, opacity or unfairness. Ethical leadership therefore requires self-awareness and feedback.

Ethical leadership also involves the management of ethical behaviour, where leaders are expected to establish clear expectations, provide channels for raising concerns, apply standards consistently and respond appropriately to misconduct. This is where character formation connects with institutional design, because character makes ethical behaviour credible, while systems make it sustainable.

Trevino et al (2000) also described ethical leadership in terms of the moral person and the moral manager. Stressing that the moral person demonstrates traits such as honesty, integrity and concern for others. While the moral manager actively communicates ethical expectations and uses

organizational mechanisms to support them. Both dimensions matter because a leader who is personally honest but never addresses unethical behaviour in the organization may be a good person without being an effective ethical leader. Conversely, a leader who creates extensive compliance systems while privately violating ethical standards undermines those systems through hypocrisy. This implies that an individual cannot be moral and dislodge him or herself from his or her leadership responsibility, the effect of being moral should be evident in the discharge of leadership.

Character as a Formation of Leadership Effectiveness.

In leadership, the role of character is central. If leaders repeatedly conceal minor errors, they may become more comfortable with larger forms of deception. But if they repeatedly acknowledge mistakes, seek advice and give credit to others, those behaviours can become part of their leadership identity which will help them do well in their leadership responsibilities.

Leadership effectiveness is often measured by whether leaders achieved desired outcomes. However, outcomes alone do not provide a sufficient definition of effectiveness, because a leader may achieve short-term targets through coercion, fear, deception, exploitation or manipulation. Such results can be impressive on paper while damaging to trust and institutional capacity. Effective leadership should therefore include both performance and quality of the means by which performance is achieved.

Bass & Steidmeir (1999) made a similar distinction in their analysis of authentic transformational leadership. They argued that genuinely transformational leadership required moral foundations and distinguished authentic transformation from pseudo-transformational leadership, in which influence is used primarily for self-interest. The distinction demonstrates why leadership effectiveness cannot be reduced to influence. Influence is morally neutral and can be used to serve followers and the common good or to advance a leader's personal interests. Adejuwon (2024) argued that leadership must be characterized by the practice of honesty, loyalty, commitment, justice, humility and discipline. That these virtues when exemplified would enable the leader to be intolerant of indiscipline and violations of moral standards. And the personal virtues of selfless services or sacrifice, self-control and discipline will guide into relating with everyone with respect, humility and love, which will enable the leader to see and treat others with the respect they deserve. This is an indication that character as a formation of leadership effectiveness is very key. And character contributes to effectiveness through several mechanisms.

First, it creates consistency. Followers are more likely to trust leaders when leaders' words and actions correspond. Second, character supports sound judgement because virtue such as prudence, justice and humility help leaders interpret complex situations. Third, character encourages responsible use of power. Fourth, character creates a credible basis for ethical expectations within teams and organizations. Finally, strong character can support resilience when leaders face pressure, temptation, criticism or failure. Therefore, it should be established that leadership skills are necessary but can become unreliable when character is weak and character alone does not guarantee success because virtuous leaders can still make mistakes. However, character provides a stable orientation for learning from mistakes, accepting accountability and using authority responsibly.

Challenges to Character-Based Leadership

Character-Based leadership face diverse challenges. Ranging from self, others and organizational objectives. Adejunwon (2024) noted that leaders sometimes display tendencies of deviating from

the right track for which they were known from their emergence as leaders. There are situations whereby the leader started well by demonstrating commendable ethical standards but from which they ended up in a leadership mess entangled with various forms of vices and irregular behaviours. The purpose of this section is therefore to create in the consciousness of leaders to be aware of these possibilities of challenges that will test their leadership one way or the other and stay determined in the virtues of personal integrity and ethical standards, seeking for help where necessary and depending on God.

Character based leadership therefore faces the challenge of moral disagreement, where people and cultures may disagree about particular values, practices and priorities. Ethical leadership must therefore distinguish universal or widely defensible principles such as honesty, respect for persons, justice, responsibility and avoidance of unnecessary harm from culturally specific preferences. Leaders operating across cultures need also cultural intelligence and humility while still maintaining legitimate ethical boundaries.

The second challenge is moral hypocrisy. Sometimes, leaders may publicly promote ethical values while privately violating them. And because followers observe behaviour closely, hypocrisy can be damaging. The solution is not perfection because leaders inevitably make mistakes. But the key is distinction between error and deliberate concealment. And a leader who admits an error, accepts accountability and changes behaviour can strengthen credibility over time. But a leader who denies obvious misconduct may produce deeper distrust.

The third challenge is a pressure created by competing organizational objectives. Leaders may face demands to increase profit, reduce costs, satisfy political expectations, meet deadlines or outperform competitors. But ethical leadership requires leaders to recognize that not every organizational goal is legitimate simply because it is demanded. Prudence therefore involves identifying which goals should be pursued, not merely how to pursue them efficiently. The fourth challenge is the misuse of virtue language. It should be noted that calling a leader 'virtuous' does not automatically make the leader ethical. Therefore, character claims must be connected to evidence in conduct. Riggio et al (2010) work on character measurement demonstrate the importance of operationalizing leadership virtues rather than leaving them as vague ideals. The fifth challenge is that virtue can conflict. Loyalty can conflict with justice; compassion can conflict with accountability; transparency can conflict with confidentiality and courage can conflict with prudence. Ethical leadership therefore requires practical wisdom. The goal is not to maximize one's virtue in every situation but to exercise sound judgement about how legitimate values should be balanced.

Finally, character formation is difficult because human beings are susceptible to self-deception. Leaders may reinterpret their own motives in flattering ways. They attribute success to their competence and failure to external circumstances (Hannah & Avolio, 2010). Feedback, mentoring, accountability and reflective practices are therefore essential. Leaders need relationships in which people can tell them uncomfortable truths.

Conclusion/Recommendations

This paper provides a central proposition that character formation provides a foundation for effective leadership. Integrity gives leadership credibility by aligning words and actions.

Virtues provides the moral dispositions required for sound judgment and responsible use of power. Ethical leadership translates these qualities into observable behaviour and organizational practices. Hence, character formation should be treated as a central foundation of effective leadership rather than as ~as~ optional personal quality because leadership involves exercise of influence and power,

and those capacities can either strengthen or damage individuals and institutions. The difference is shaped substantially by the character of the person who leads and by the systems within which leadership occurs.

Effective leadership is both a competence and a moral practice. Competence without character can make harmful leadership more efficient, while character without competence may leave good intentions unable to address complex problems. The goal is integration, leaders who are capable and trustworthy, strategic and humane, courageous and prudent, confident and humble, results-oriented and morally responsible. Organizations that seek sustainable effectiveness should therefore recruit, develop, evaluate and promote leaders with character. They should build systems that reward integrity, protect ethical voice, enforce standards consistently and hold powerful people accountable. When character formation and institutional ethics reinforce one another, leadership can become a force not merely for achieving organizational goals but building trust, human dignity, responsible citizenship and the long-term common good.

Therefore, organizations should emphasize reflective practice, where leaders are required to maintain leadership journals in which they record difficult decisions, emotional reactions, stakeholders' interests, assumptions and lessons learned. Because reflection helps convert experience into learning. Mentoring and role modeling should be central as people learn character partly by observing credible leaders. Organizations should therefore select and reward mentors who demonstrate integrity rather than simply those with seniority or technical success. And promotion systems should consider character. Because if organizations promote people solely because they produce results, they may unintentionally elevate individuals who achieve performance through harmful methods. Ethical conduct should therefore be part of promotion and succession decisions. Organizations should create opportunities for ethical voice and protect the people where leaders should invite disagreement, especially when decisions involve significant risk of moral consequences. Because a culture in which everyone agrees with the leader may feel efficient but can be dangerously blind and harmful. Organizations should require leaders to practice accountability rituals. These can include post-decision reviews, conflict-of-interest declarations, stakeholder impact assessments and transparent explanations for major decisions. Such practices turn abstract values into routines.

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