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Actions to Build Leader Credibility – Here’s a Checklist!

Leader credibility is talked about a lot. A google search for phrases such as “leader has credibility”, “build credibility as a leader”, or “leader has lost credibility” produces thousands of results. Consider discussions of political leaders’ credibility (Trump, Cuomo, and Angela Merkel during Covid) or business leaders’ credibility (Warren Buffet and Volkswagen’s leaders during the diesel scandal). Leader credibility is discussed or explored in at least 33 fields of study, including transportation engineering, trial advocacy, performance improvement, policing, information technology, foreign affairs, business strategy, children and youth services, and behavioral science. Research indicates high leader credibility produces multiple positive outcomes, including high-quality relationships between leaders and followers, creativity and innovation, employee motivation, leader believability, reduced employee burnout, and others. The positive outcomes associated with leader credibility are relevant to printing companies today.

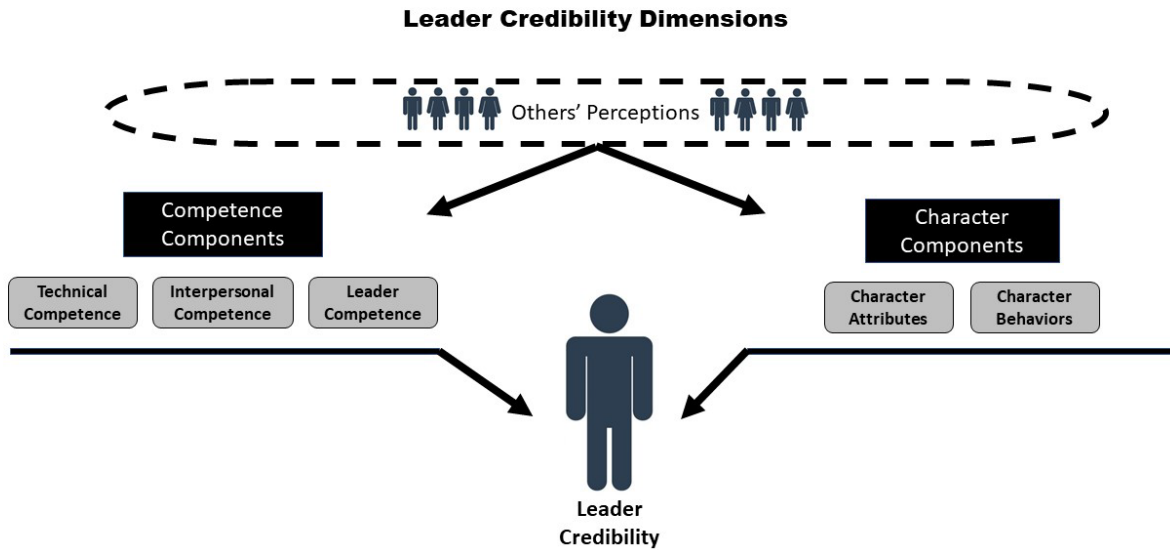
To gain a footing on the leader credibility concept, we conducted an extensive review of leader credibility research, which included 153 academic articles. Given the widespread

discussion of leader credibility, it surprised us that a consistent definition of leader credibility does not exist. From our work, we define leader credibility as follows:

Leader credibility is others' perception of competence (such as technical competence, interpersonal relationship competence, and leadership competence) and character (such as integrity and related behaviors).

The three critical elements in our definition are *perception, competence, and character*.

Credibility is the product of what others see in a leader and how they interpret what they see – perception. Others determine a leader's credibility by perceptions of competence and character. Suppose individuals perceive a leader as lacking either competence or character. In that case, people will view the leader as lacking credibility – in other words, not as a credible leader. From our broad review of research, we discerned that competence includes three components: technical competence, interpersonal competence, and leadership competence. Likewise, we determined that character consists of two components: character attributes, and character behaviors. See the illustration below.



Below we provide examples of actions a leader can take to build leader credibility aligned with our competence and character components. Leaders might view these items as a *checklist* – periodically pull it out of a drawer and assess where you stand on each, seeking areas for improvement.

Building Leader Credibility Through Competence

Technical Competence

- Continue to build a foundation of relevant education and experience – bring applicable knowledge to the table as an expert (but not faking it).
- Deliver tangible results, performance outcomes, and achievements – this is especially relevant for a new leader.
- Get the right things done!

Interpersonal Competence

- Nurture and build relationships by working with others in a cooperative spirit.
- Avoid dysfunctional conflict – but address it when it appears (conflict can be very functional).
- Place concern for others over self – help others, develop others, and enhance others' self-esteem.

- Have a willingness to forgive and be humble.
- Respond to criticism with an open mindset – see negative feedback as constructive.
- Effectively communicate – answer questions with clarity, provide solid examples, be composed, deliver bad news well, and *listen* to followers with respect.

Leadership Competence

- Develop an organizational mission/vision that builds value and effectively communicate that picture.
- Ask relevant questions, seek ideas from others, and develop solid plans.
- Provide honest and relevant feedback to subordinates.
- Focus on the right issues – do not divert down paths fraught with unimportant matters or minutiae.
- Have the courage to delegate – enable others to act, exhibit trust in others, and view delegation as an opportunity to grow and develop others.

Building Leader Credibility Through Character

Character Attributes

- Display personal commitment and resilience. Do not let fear and doubt paralyze.
- Be honest, trustworthy, and show integrity – lead from a strong ethical foundation and solid moral principles.

Character Behaviors

- Be accountable, especially in dealing with your mistakes.
- Do not lie, stretch the truth, or fail to tell the whole story for selfish reasons.
- Match actions with words – “*walk the talk.*”
- Follow the same guidelines, priorities, and values you present – “*practice what you preach.*”

We share a bunch of potential ways a leader can build credibility. However, we emphasize the word "*potential.*" As every leader and every leadership environment differs, there is no single "one best way" to build leader credibility. At times, followers may put more importance on competence than character or character over than competence. We encourage leaders to review this list periodically and seek paths for improvement, again like a checklist. A bold leader may openly seek others' feedback related to these behaviors. We have much more

leader credibility research to do. In the meantime, we hope this list helps you in your personal leadership development, which is an ongoing process.