Followers Say They Want Leaders with Integrity, But Do They?

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Followers consistently indicate they desire to follow leaders who have demonstrated the characteristics of integrity, honesty, trustworthiness, and credibility (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1991; Kouzes & Posner, 2003; Simons, 2002). There may be inconsistencies in the expressed desire of followers, since they may be willing to follow leaders knowing the leaders lack these characteristics or have compromised these personal characteristics in their behavior and actions. It has been argued that individuals who are prone to following untrustworthy leaders tend to be compelled by psychological needs and fears that have been delineated as a need for reassuring authority figures; a need for security and certainty; a need to feel chosen or special; a need for human community; a fear of ostracism, isolation, and social death; and a fear of personal powerlessness to challenge a bad leader (Lipman-Blumen, 2005). This has been exemplified in business, religious, and governmental organizations with catastrophic consequences. If followers are aware of these propensities, better assessments of leaders and improved responses to leaders lacking integrity could result.

In the leadership and management literature, there is a propensity toward presenting leadership development in a hopeful, good, and constructive framework, which is inarguably the desired form of leadership; however, from a realistic viewpoint, negative or bad leadership may exist in organizations (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Kellerman, 2004; Kouzes & Posner, 2003; Lipman-Blumen, 2005). When leaders lack integrity, it can lay a foundation for bad leadership practices. Followers consistently claim

they desire to follow leaders with integrity whose actions and behaviors exhibit trustworthiness, honesty, credibility, and conviction (Kouzes & Posner, 2003). Even though this is what followers claim they desire, at times they willingly follow leaders who lack integrity, and there are multiple reasons for this inconsistency in followers.

There is a divergence in the concept and meaning of integrity, and clarity is needed to fully understand the term as it will be used. The origin of the word *integrity* is from the Latin term *integer* that means whole, complete, intact ("Integer," n.d.). Integrity is defined as the "adherence to moral and ethical principles; soundness of moral character; honesty; the state of being whole, entire, or undiminished; and a sound, unimpaired, or perfect condition" ("Integrity," n.d.). Even scholars differ on the definition of integrity as applied in management and leadership literature, with some having an objective perspective while others have a normative perspective (Bauman, 2013; Becker, 1998; Monga, 2016; Moorman & Grover, 2009; Palanski & Yammarino, 2007). The objective perspective gravitates toward defining integrity as wholeness, in that a person is complete and is consistent in their values, behavior, and thoughts while being morally neutral. In contrast, the normative perspective encapsulates the moral and ethical implications of a person's behavior and character (Jensen, 2009; Moorman & Grover, 2009; Palanski & Yammarino, 2007).

In various studies on leadership qualities and traits, respondents have coalesced terms associated with integrity such as honesty, trustworthiness, credibility, and conviction (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1991; Kouzes & Posner, 2003; Simons, 2002). Covey (2006) expands this to include congruency and intent. The concept of congruency relates to the wholeness and consistency of a person in living out her values and beliefs in her actions and behaviors coupled with the intent of the individual. The congruency of wholeness and consistency was well captured by Mahatma Gandhi when he said, "My life is an indivisible whole, and all my activities run into one another . . . My life is my message" (as cited by Covey, 2006, p. 63). Followers understand the message of the leader by what they see and experience.

Followers have indicated the qualities of honesty, trustworthiness, credibility, and conviction are the qualities that embody a leader worth following. This paper aligns with the normative concept of integrity that is

recognized in leaders by followers. Followers persist in expressing their desire for leaders of integrity; however, when leaders fail to embrace integrity, followers may continue to follow the leader. When people are unaware of a leader's lack of integrity, their followership is understandable. However, people consciously following an untrustworthy leader is perplexing, but this occurs in all types of organizations: business, religious, and governmental.

One of the best-known examples of leaders lacking integrity is the Enron Corporation scandal. Kenneth Lay and Jeffrey Skilling were the top leaders in the organization, who deceptively led the company, but there were people within the company and associated with the company, who had some knowledge of the questionable practices. However, they continued to follow the leaders. When the organization's practices became public knowledge, it resulted in bankruptcy, and many followers suffered financial ruin (Thomas, 2002).

Religious organizations are not immune to being led by people who lack integrity. Jim Jones began a religious organization that ultimately became known as the *Peoples Temple* with the intent of building a utopian community, and his charismatic appeal attracted thousands of devoted followers. Jones' initial appeal to the disenfranchised became self-serving greed and power. Some of the followers began to sense an inconsistency in Jones' character and leadership but continued following him out of commitment, fear, and intimidation. In 1978, Jones led over 900 of his followers to commit suicide by drinking cyanide-laced Kool-Aid (Gritz, 2011).

Historically, one of the most notorious governmental leaders who lacked integrity, when defined with a moral bent, was Adolf Hitler. He had the alluring ability to captivate the minds and hearts of people to align with his vision for Germany, which ultimately led to the killing of millions of innocent people. Some followed him with absolute loyalty while others began to question his actions and goals, but those who objected were dealt with strongly resulting in many being executed.

In one study, researchers found that followers "want leaders who are honest, forward-looking, competent, and inspiring. What this adds up to . . . is personal credibility" (Kouzes & Posner, 2003, p. xiv). In most contexts, honesty is by far the most desired characteristic, and Kouzes and Posner

(2003) found that followers want leaders they can believe in and trust. In a Gallup study from 2005-2008 of followers' opinions about leadership, it was found that followers want and need trust, compassion, stability, and hope (Rath & Conchie, 2008). An interesting dichotomy is that people want to follow leaders who are trustworthy and noted for their integrity but are seemingly willing, to a degree, to follow leaders who are untrustworthy and lack integrity (Kellerman, 2004; Kouzes & Posner, 2003; Lipman-Blumen, 2005; Padilla, Hogan, & Kaiser, 2007). Ideally, followers desire integrity but practically will tolerate the lack of it also.

An example of compromised integrity with the person remaining in a leadership position involved Christine Lagarde, the Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund. When Ms. Lagarde was the Finance Minister of France, she chose not to appeal a large arbitration award to Bernard Tapie, a French businessman who had close relations with the French president, Nicolas Sarkozy. Some of her advisers encouraged her to appeal the exorbitant arbitration decision, but she declined. In December 2016, she was found guilty of criminal charges associated with the misuse of public funds by a person in a public authority position. In spite of her conviction, the directors of the International Monetary Fund expressed confidence in her ability to lead the organization (Thomas, Alderman, & Breeden, 2016).

The 2016 United States presidential campaign presented an interesting scenario regarding integrity in leaders. It had been well documented that both Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump had a history of breaches in their integrity (Fournier, 2016; Remnick, 2016). Seemingly, the two presidential candidates had struggled more with integrity than the candidates who opposed them in their respective primary election campaigns. Even though members of both the Democratic and Republican parties knew this before they voted in the primary elections, they still preferred candidates who were untrustworthy with large numbers of the party members enthusiastically supporting them as their candidates. David Brooks of the *New York Times* (2016) stated, "I'm beginning to think this whole sordid campaign is being blown along by an acrid gust of distrust" (para. 1). If this is an accurate assessment, it furthers the quandary of trying to comprehend why people follow leaders they know lack integrity and they do not trust.

Barbara Kellerman (2004) of Harvard's Kennedy School of Government posits that there are seven types of bad leadership with four of these types (callous, corrupt, insular, evil) relating to the leader being unethical, which is problematic for a leader. Leaders, who lack integrity, fail to differentiate between what is right and what is wrong, which breeds distrust from followers. Some followers, who do not trust their leader, still follow the leader to satisfy their basic human needs of safety, simplicity, and certainty (Kellerman, 2004). As Maslow (1943) explained in his hierarchy of needs, the need for safety is sought in order to provide a sense of security from the uncertainties, known and unknown, that life presents to individuals. He stated, "His safety needs often find specific expression in a search for a protector, or a stronger person on whom he may depend, or perhaps, a Fuehrer" (p. 379). Some would perceive a leader as a person to satisfy that need for safety. People desire simplicity and seek it in ordering their lives and seeking solutions, even in resolving complex problems (Chater, 1999). Ambiguity can be perceived as a threat, and people crave certainty that, when met, provides the sensation of reward (Rock, 2009). When these three needs of safety, simplicity, and certainty are fulfilled by a leader, followers may be willing to compromise their desire for integrity. Padilla, Hogan, and Kaiser (2007) classify these types of susceptible followers as conformers. In a collective sense Kellerman (2004) pointed out that a bad leader can be beneficial in affording order, cohesion, and identity to an organization. Capturing the essence of this, "Leaders enable groups and organizations to distinguish themselves one from the other. And leaders at the top symbolize the whole" (Kellerman, p. 24).

It has been postulated that individuals who are prone to following untrustworthy leaders tend to be compelled by psychological needs and fears that have been delineated as a need for reassuring authority figures; a need for security and certainty; a need to feel chosen or special; a need for human community; a fear of ostracism, isolation, and social death; and a fear of personal powerlessness to challenge a bad leader (Lipman-Blumen, 2005). The unhealthy meeting of these psychological needs in childhood may condition individuals to be more accepting of and susceptible to following leaders who lack integrity and trustworthiness. Lipman-Blumen (2005) expounded on "how these psychological needs and fears drive us into the arms of leaders, some good, some bad (p. 30)."

Individuals may quench the psychological need for a parental figure by seeking an authority figure or external authority in a leader. The need for security, and to be considered personally significant to others, may be paramount for some individuals. An essential human need is to be accepted by others in the community considered vital to the individual, and the fear of ostracism by that community can be devastating (Lipman-Blumen, 2005; Maslow, 1943). When these psychological needs are met to some extent, it can lead to an individual becoming vulnerable to a leader lacking integrity (Lipman-Blumen, 2005).

Kenneth Lay and Jeffrey Skilling of Enron were the reassuring authority figures to their employees through growing business challenges and declining stock prices creating a false feeling of security and certainty in the decisions they were making on behalf of the company. Some employees could sense and realize that the actions of their leaders were not actually in the best interest of the company but felt powerless to take action until a couple of the managers took the risk to be forthright and expose the deception (Ellwood, Kliot, Motamed, & Gibney, 2005; Thomas, 2002).

Jim Jones, the leader of the Peoples Temple, exploited all six of the human psychological needs and fears delineated by Lipman-Blumen (2005). Teri Buford O'Shea, a survivor of the Jonestown tragedy, recounted her experiences, noting that Jim Jones was a father figure to many of his followers and, seizing on that, he isolated them from their families and the outside world. Jones' followers felt privileged and were committed to being a part of this special utopian community. Through intimidation, blackmail, terror, and physical and emotional abuse, Jones created an environment where his followers felt powerless to challenge him (Gritz, 2011).

Adolf Hitler also exploited the psychological needs and fears of his followers to advance his vision for Germany. Hitler became the supreme authority in Germany and convinced the German people they were a superior race and a "chosen people," and that provided a means to protect and secure the German race (Fairweather, 1932). Since Hitler was the ultimate authority, his followers were powerless to oppose him or criticize his actions.

Some followed Hitler for seemingly practical reasons related to security, safety, simplicity, and certainty. Jessica Shattuck (2017) related that her grandmother, as a teenager, became a Nazi through an agricultural program that promoted the rebuilding of Germany in a time of severe unemployment. Her grandmother stated she did not know everything that was going on, and she did not listen to everything that was being said. She had been selective in what she heard and gravitated toward the appealing aspects. Shattuck profoundly observed, "My grandmother heard what she wanted from a leader who promised simple answers to complicated questions. She chose not to hear and see the monstrous sum those answers added up to. And she lived the rest of her life with the knowledge of her indefensible complicity" (para. 13).

When untrustworthy leaders face opposition, a common practice they use is to target those who do not follow them, who actively oppose them, or who can be seen as the problem. Many times the leader will give a name or classification to the dissenters, the opposition, or the problem to devalue or minimalize them. Adolf Hitler chose the Jews as the problem, and they became the unifying scapegoat for Hitler's movement. This was seen in the 2016 presidential campaign with Donald Trump demeaning illegal immigrants and those of the Islamic religion, while Hillary Clinton used the same tactic by demonizing those with differing philosophical beliefs as a "basket of deplorables." Lipman-Blumen (2005) explained this transformation of "huddling followers into superior beings" (p. 68) when she stated, "The heroic leader's promise to eradicate the polluting enemy relieves the group's insecurities and its projected guilt" (p. 67).

Followers may rationalize following untrustworthy leaders when the leader has painted a captivating vision; however, in the 2016 presidential campaign there was a wide disparity in the candidates presenting their vision or policy in their advertising campaigns. Approximately 60% of Hillary Clinton's campaign advertising focused on candidate characteristics while 25% focused on policy. In contrast, over 70% of Donald Trump's advertising focused on policy (Fowler, Ridout, & Franz, 2017). It cannot be concluded if this was the determining factor in the outcome of the election, but one of the candidates concentrated more on visionary glimpses of what could be rather than character assaults. The propensity for followership can be related to a captivating vision.

Another group of individuals who follow untrustworthy leaders are those followers who have a similar worldview, share similar values, and can fulfill ambitious desires. Padilla, Hogan, and Kaiser (2007) label this group of susceptible followers as colluders. These followers recognize that they may personally benefit from following a leader lacking integrity, since it may advance their personal views, is congruent with their value system, and furthers their career or personal ambitions. In the Enron Corporation, there were employees who acquiesced by virtue of their agreement with the worldview and values of Kenneth Lay and Jeffrey Skilling. Additionally, by following, they sought to advance their professional careers and potentially realize tremendous financial rewards.

Followers consistently state their desire for leaders with integrity, who exhibit trustworthiness, honesty, credibility, and conviction; however, their longing for certain personal and psychological needs may overrule that desire with their actions, contradicting their stated beliefs. Examples of followers conjoining with leaders lacking integrity are prevalent in business, religious, and governmental organizations, but there is a dearth of research in the occurrence of these events documenting the reasons for people following leaders lacking integrity. Further examination of these contradictory behaviors and actions has the potential of allowing followers to reflect on their needs in relation to the leaders they are following and any incongruences with the behaviors and actions of their leaders not consistent with their own personal values. Further awareness would better equip followers in responding to the leader's behaviors and actions and increase understanding of their personal motivations.

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