

Essences of Leadership Trust: Constraints and Opportunities for Regional Cooperation

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Abstract

Original Research Article

The trustworthiness of a leader has a significant influence on an organization's reputation, followers, suppliers, and stakeholders, though it is still under investigation in terms of its effect on building regional cooperation. This study aims to explore the criteria to confer a leader's trust, the antecedents of leaders' trust, the core perceived attributes to gain a leader's trust among regional peer leaders, and the perceived determinants to establish or uplift trustworthiness. To address the study's purposes, it adopted an exploratory qualitative study using focus group discussion and key informants' interviews from the perspectives of youth leaders. Theme based content analysis using inductive approach was carried out to categorize similar or different conceptions that further discussions made to align with the literature. The findings indicate that core criteria to confer a leader's trust include leadership competence, relationship building, and leadership environment (context). Leadership values, functions, and roles are key antecedents of leaders' trust. Essential attributes to gain a leader's trust among peers embrace of a philosophical attribute, leadership qualities, values, and attributes of benefits, and collaboration. Furthermore, in establishing or uplifting a leader's trust solely depends on a leader's behavior and functions. The results of the essences of leadership trust, which focus on constraints and opportunities for regional cooperation, are insightful for academicians and practitioners, as well as paving the way for future qualitative and quantitative research in the leadership science.

Keywords: Leadership, Confer a leader trust, Antecedents of leadership trust, Essential attributes of gaining trust, Key determinants to establish or uplift leader's trust.

INTRODUCTION

Many regional collaborations flourish, freeze, or fall off depending on the extent of the leaders' trustworthiness, anticipating the fruits of cooperative relationships such as mutual development, growth, and stability. Efforts to foster collaborative leadership-goodwill could be attributable to consensual principles and values, leadership competence, and a consistent mitigation strategy for situational turbulence. A growing awareness of regional countries' interdependence may facilitate resolving developmental gaps, establishing a common vision, and nurturing synergy to challenge globalization. Exemplary leadership involves building trust, inspiring, and instilling confidence in workers and followers (Rich et al., 2010; Uddin, 2013), which equally may necessitate reflecting those qualities among partnering leaders. In order to modify and change an organization's efficacy, the trust concept has become essential (Armstrong, 2010; Schaubroeck et al., 2011) to garner a collaborative environment. Many academics have studied the

relationship between trust and leadership, but there hasn't been much research on the benefits of trust in transformational leadership and leader-follower dynamics from the perspective of subordinates (Goldman, 2011; Hu et al., 2011). This study aims to broaden the prospects and challenges of the essential elements of leadership trust, depending on the research gaps outlined (Taris et al., 2021; Babu et al., 2023; Thornton, 2021); similarly, how can a leader establish and sustain a culture of trust (Rudolph et al., 2020). They have also explored how various misunderstandings that disrupt public perceptions impact leaders' trustworthiness (CIPD, 2014), the potential impact of unforeseen events and turbulent decisions contributing to a decline in leaders' trust (Segal et al., 1999), and the extent to which concurrent variabilities can erode leadership trust (Sergent & Stajkovic, 2020). These are some of the foundations for this study. As a result, the research agenda has focused on how leaders' trust influences their trustworthiness antecedents and core determinants.

Many scholars have emphasized the importance of trust in driving follower motivation, performance, and efficacy (Dirks, 2004). Leaders' actions elicit a reciprocal trust response from managers and followers (Colquitt et al., 2007) and foster a positive belief in collective survival and mutual support (Podsakoff et al., 2003), creating a win-win scenario for enhanced cooperation and increased productivity. Several incidents have witnessed a decline in the leaders' trust, resulting in devastating failures for energy and bank companies (CIPD, 2014), which could be a lesson to existing leaders. The pressure on declining leaders' trust necessitates pragmatic decisions

to repair trustworthiness, such as addressing the public's overriding perceptions and valuing leaders' trust. Ignoring these feelings and perceptions can be due to a lack of an affective or emotional psychological contract, which may have a devastating effect on future trusting relationships.

The established science of leadership confirms that an effective leader sets momentum until a team member is happy, enthusiastic, at peak efficiency, and productive both at team and organizational levels. Among the most important indicators of a leader's efficacy are business performance as well as staff motivation and happiness (Lewis, 2022); on top of this, creating healthy and productive relationships with peer leaders can provide an advantage for collaborative development. Uniformly, Frei and Morriss (2020) emphasized that trust is the foundation for sincere and successful leadership; Ciulla and Ciulla (2020) also expressed a distinct perspective on trust, highlighting that employees should trust their leaders, while leaders must also have the trust of their subordinates. Equally, or even more, such reciprocation of trust could have significance with partnering leaders. Leaders who have faith in their employees provide them with opportunities to empower and increase their autonomy. Similarly, Dedahanov et al. (2019) assert that leaders have trust in the abilities and capabilities of their team members to make decisions. It raises employee morale by giving them more authority and encouraging creativity and innovation. When managers trust their staff, employees take responsibility for their work, which boosts output and job satisfaction while demonstrating the efficacy of leadership. According to Thornton's (2021) research, trust is especially crucial in uncertain and crisis situations because it encourages employees to accept change and adjust procedures to meet changing circumstances. Employee happiness and organizational success are key indicators of effective leadership, but these factors only improve when employees have trust in their leaders, which is an essential ingredient for effective leadership. Whenever possible, building trust among peer leaders may give a sense of confidence and compatriotism, which help to navigate change effectively, communicate shared goals,

and set standards for collateral win-win situations. However, the question remains unanswered about the essence of leaders' trustworthiness among collaborating leaders, which this study intends to address.

Significance of the Study

The study goes beyond previous research on leadership and trust in four ways. First, it responds to the call for a study to assess the causal antecedents of leadership trustworthiness suggested by Taris et al. (2021) and Babu et al. (2023). The aforementioned research angle addresses a theoretical gap regarding criteria to confer a leader's trust, a topic that has received little attention. Along with this, the study aims to identify core attributes to establishing (or deteriorating) trust in leadership among peers with the expectation of contributing their part in a leadership science. Second, the study incorporated the perspectives of youth leaders to investigate the crucial factors that enhance leaders' trust and promote regional cooperation, a research area often overlooked. Third, it adopted an exploratory qualitative study as the basis for future case studies, quantitative, or mixed- approach research on this theme. Finally, the study aims to contribute to the ambivalence in the theory of building leadership trust in the context of partnering leaders as well as provide a framework for establishing and uplifting a leader's trust. Thus, the main purpose of this study is to examine how a leader's trustworthiness impacts effectiveness on followers, subordinates, public perception, and among peer leaders. It specifically addresses the antecedents of leaders' trustworthiness, as well as how a regional leader gains or loses trust from her or his counterparts. As perceived by youth leaders, it also attempts to respond to the key determinants that establish or enhance leadership trust for building trusting relationships between followers, regional (peer) leaders, and the community at large.

Theoretical Framework Trustworthy Leadership

Without a trusting relationship between leaders, it is impossible to guarantee the maintenance of healthy regional collaboration. It is even more critical in situations of uncertainty, ambiguity, and dynamics that are both internal and external. Academics define trust and its constructs, prevailing in several ambivalences. For instance, trust is "a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behavior of another" (Rousseau et al., 1998:395). Whitener et al. (1998:516) also view trustworthy behavior as "volitional actions that build trust and impact the leader's relationship of trust." Thus, leaders' trustworthy behaviors are critical indicators of a leader's internal appeals and motives that reciprocate

with others (Ferrin et al., 2006). Interestingly, Whitener et al. (1998) outlined five core

behavioral diagnostics for trustworthy behavior: behavioral consistency (predictability and reliability), behavioral integrity (word-deed consistency, along with honesty, and moral character to fulfill promises), open communication (accurate information, explanations for decisions and openness), sharing and delegating control (build abilities of perceptions of trustworthiness), and demonstrating concern (show sensitivity and consideration of others and acts to protect their interests), which could be applicable in the context of leader to followers, suppliers, stakeholders, and peer leaders measuring trusting relationship influencing regional cooperation.

On the other hand, Colquitt et al. (2007) claim that trustworthiness is a very rational justification for believing someone. A sense of justice, or moral rectitude, offers a level of predictability that can assist people in adjusting to uncertainty. Therefore, people will regard a leader with integrity as trustworthy, which will foster trust in that person. Mayer et al. (1995) also provide a comprehensive account of the integrative model of trust processes, highlighting in particular the role of trustworthiness perceptions (measured with constructs of ability, integrity, and benevolence) as key conditions of trust in a leader. Recalling Yukl's definition of integrity as "honesty and consistency between a person's espoused values and behavior," Yukl (2013:331) suggests that this may have a significant role in promoting regional collaboration.

In order to foster employee engagement in their work, ethical leaders take their followers into consideration and, via open communication, clearly communicate the organization's aims and expectations to its subordinates (Brown and Trevino, 2006). Similarly, partner engagement, open communication, and overarching goals could play a role in building a trusting relationship. Notably, workers frequently seek information and comfort from corporate leaders during such moments of stress (Sanders et al., 2020), and such a situation could replicate among communities and peer leaders. Likewise, research has shown that confidence in leaders and the line manager's function are important determinants of worker outcomes (Lauring & Kubovcikova, 2022). According to Jordi (2010), senior leaders should help people develop while creating an environment that cultivates trust and human aspirations. Given the often-shaky relationship between employees and senior leaders, there is some disagreement over the effectiveness of trust in senior leadership in terms of workers' psychological outcomes (Dirks & Skarlicki, 2004; Fulmer & Ostroff, 2017). In this case, line managers' leadership in particular may function as a boundary condition, strengthening the impacts of trust in senior leaders on employee outcomes since they are

typically closer both physically and mentally (Gilbert et al., 2011; Kauppila et al., 2021). It is high time to scrutinize the alignment or misalignment of literature with the findings of this study on qualities of trustworthiness of leaders impacting collaboration.

Building Leadership Trust

It is eminent that there are disagreement among academics over the conceptual framework fostering trust in leadership. There are many who contend that, for instance, building trust requires equitable opportunity and distribution (Hasel, 2013), a collaborative work environment is subject to policies that encourage technology and education, and the cultivation of strong follower-leader relationships (Ford et al., 2017). A recent paper also states that the key to developing leadership trust is the leader's capacity to increase effectiveness (Anheier & Knudsen, 2023). These analyses show that in order to gain trust, a leader must implement a variety of measures, including increasing productivity, modernizing human and technological capability, ensuring that policies protect the benefits of followers, and taking a win-win approach to perceptions of kindness and honesty. Along similar lines, Osborne and Hammoud (2017) highlighted a number of tactics for fostering trust, including a culture of continuous improvement, training, and empowerment. Hynes (2012) also goes on to offer some strategies for developing a culture of acknowledgment, skill development, concern for followers, and increased participation in order to foster leadership trust. With this alignment, Vandenberg (2014) demonstrated how enhancing engagement can contribute to a trustworthy connection, enabling followers to perform to the best of their abilities once they feel that a leader is there to help them. However, it appears that most academics concur that trust is a skill and a prerequisite for a successful leader. Similarly, heightened influencing strategies, intellectual stimulation, inspiring motivation, and individual consideration are critical elements of good leadership that are necessary to develop trust (Maduka et al., 2018). The ongoing discussion infers that there is no comprehensive framework for establishing leadership trust. Using meta-analytical approach, the study is expected to integrate findings and literature to determine antecedents of trust, perspectives to build trust, and ingredients of trustworthy leadership.

Leaders' Trust and Regional Cooperation

In emphasizing the significance of trust in leadership, Hassan and Ahmed (2011) argue that trust is essential to successful companies, particularly when intricate tasks and interdependence call for

close collaboration and effective information exchange methods. It is evident from research notes that trust is a key

constituent of successful working relationships between leaders and followers (Schwepker & Good, 2010; Tuan, 2012; Van den et al., 2009), and correspondingly, leaders are expected to build intimacy with counterparts. Although it is believed that trust paves the road for cooperation, dealing with differences in opinions, and information sharing to build the collaborative stamina of leaders, observations demonstrate that leaders gave undue attention to their role in cohesiveness.

Yukl's (2013:18) characterization of leadership is "a process whereby intentional influence is exerted over other people to guide, structure, and facilitate activities and relationships in a group or organization." Along the way, several constructs were utilized on key dimensions of leadership trust (Fleishman, 1951; Halpin and Winner, 1952; Fleishman et al., 1955). Among these, Halpin and Winner (1952) come up with four dimensions in descending significance: consideration, initiating structure, production emphasis, and sensitivity. Subsequently, in the Ohio State leadership studies, Fleishman (1969) developed a reliable two-dimension measuring instrument: considerateness (C) and structure (IS). The considerate (C) is a measure that reflects a leader's trust and feelings of respect, which includes creating a conducive work environment consisting of good rapport and two-way communication. A scale with a low C score indicates the leader's impersonal relationships with colleagues, members, and associated leaders. The structure (IS) refers to the extent to which a leader defines roles, expectations, and defines individuals and groups towards the end goal. A high score on IS indicates a leader's ability to direct members through planning, scheduling, feedback, and being open to creative approaches and procedures. A low IS score reflects a leader's inactivity in giving directives and his or her lack of definitiveness toward end-goals; a leader's rating of high IS and low C can be a source of member stress, high turnover, and grievance (Fleishman, 1969). Moreover, the construct does not correlate with a leader's aptitude, personality, or intelligence scores. It instead indicates interaction characteristics within or outside an organization, such as harmony, intimacy, and stratification. The scale pattern showing low levels of both C and IS reflect undesirable situations that may be unrecognized by the leader or even viewed as unfunctional. Studies confirm that a leader's evaluation of a high or above average C and IS is an optimal role (Fleishman, 1969).

The Global Executive Leadership Inventory (GELI) is a reliable tool for understanding the successes and challenges of global leaders (Kets de Vries et al., 2004). GELI's twelve behavioral dimensions include: visioning, empowering, energizing, designing and aligning, rewarding and feedback, teambuilding, outside orientation, global mindset, tenacity, life balance,

resilience to stress, and emotional intelligence. In relation to the study's objectives, the GELI dimensions seem applicable in the sense that they include outside orientation, global mindset, and resilience, which seem critical for regional cooperation.

The quest for regional cooperation isn't as easy as people would think; it is likely to be dependent on the extent of a leader's free will. Many successful leaders who build extensive goodwill follow a philosophy, such as K. Nkrumah's principle, "seek ye first the political freedom, and every other thing will be added unto you" (Nkrumah, 1957:164). However, observations indicate that leaders' excessive dependency critically influencing the countries freewill to establish and develop regional cooperation. Olu-Adeyemi and Ayodele (2007) expressed that the search for increased integration in Africa has been a persistent challenge with minimal success. Following the independence of some African states, several integrative processes emerged, demonstrating the crucial role of integration in propelling the continent's growth (Aworawo, 2015). Unfortunately, many African nations encountered a plethora of problems soon after attaining independence, such as military takeovers, civil wars, secessionist movements, conflicts over natural resources, environmental issues, corruption, and a near total dependence on foreign aid for almost all aspects of their lives (Okorie et al., 2023). Such challenges and pressures can be a reason to cripple the states' cherished goal of collaborative engagement.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

The study uses an exploratory qualitative approach using both key informants (KII) and focus group interviews to examine the essence of leadership, focusing on constraints and opportunities for building regional cooperation. Using the Delphi technique, the researcher engaged with key informants (KII) to refine and examine the specific research idea, adhering to Robson's (2002) recommendations. The technique assisted in identifying the core purposes of the interviews, allowing for a broad understanding of the essences of leadership and trust for regional collaboration. The interviews enabled participants to make spontaneous reflections about their

perceptions and observations of leaders. The probing and exchange of ideas critically generate insights on criteria to confer a leader's trust, the antecedents for the leader's trust, the perceived attributes to gain trustworthiness, and core perceptions on determinants to establish (uplift) leaders' trust among peer regional leaders.

Sampling

Participants in the study were recruited from the

National Union of Eritrean Youth and Students (the youth-empowering organization) engaged in youth leadership positions. Seven high-level youth leaders were eligible for interviews, out of which six voluntarily joined the study. Two focus group discussions consisting of thirteen and eleven participants were carried out, from head quarter and region. Appendix 1 presents the composition and indicative demographic information of KII and FDGs.

Ethical Consideration

The study took into account the following ethical considerations: the moderator first explained the study's purpose to the participants, requested their consent before the interviews, and assigned each participant a code number for anonymity. All participants in KIIs or FDGs were on a voluntary basis and were informed to leave anytime during the interview session if they wished to discontinue the deliberation.

Data Collection

The KII and focus group interviews were carried out at the NUEYS centers between February and April 2024. The principal investigator was a moderator, guiding interviews, and probing when needed. The discussion was designed to enhance the level of participants' engagement, with a focus on exploring the essences of leader trust in promoting and constraining regional cooperation. A sample of questions: 'Based on your perception, please describe how a leader would be conferred or ignored trust. How can a regional leader gain or lose trust from his or her counterparts? What could be the key determinants to establish or uplift perceptions of leadership trust? For in-depth understanding and clarification, follow-up probe techniques were applied. Following Walker's (2012) suggestions, careful observation was made for data saturation when redundancy or repetition occurred. Other research assistants were responsible for documenting gestures, key

points, and the dynamics of data collection. The interviews were relaxing, open, and cordial exchanges of perceptions and observations. The KII were audio-recorded for 40 to 60 minutes, and the FDGs ranged from 90 to 120 minutes.

Data Analysis

The interview records were translated from Tigreña to English, transcribed verbatim, checked for accuracy against audio records, and supplemented with field notes, reflections, and group interactions. Content analysis using an inductive approach was carried out following methodologists' recommendations (Graneheim and Lundman, 2004; Thomas, 2006). Data with similar or different contents was marked differently to create

categories and sub-categories of responses. Following the procedures for analysis, a contrast was made with the literature to develop frameworks and conceptualizations for leadership trustworthiness.

FINDINGS

Synopsis

Over the past few years, a lack of trust among leaders has caused unprecedented damage to regional cooperation, according to the perceptions of youth leaders. It raised several critical questions about the role of trust in building leadership goodwill, core determinants for establishing trustworthiness, and constructs for measuring trust in leadership. Moreover, it examined some of the doubtful incidents or sources of uncertainty that contribute to eroding leaders' trust.

Despite the public's escalating expectations for a high level of collaboration and mutual development based on effective leaders' trust, there was an unprecedented curtailment of this desire. People have observed a number of challenges in leadership, including the instability of principles, the tendency to focus on short-term tactics rather than long-term strategies, the lack of commitment to set objectives, the fear of external pressure, and the difficulty in understanding arguments, reasoning, and decision-making regarding issues encountered. These are spinning negative images of a leader's trust and fallacies about a leader's influence on visioning. The underlying leadership functions, which aim to inspire and positively contribute to a desired level of collaboration, have faced a steep decline that could require significant effort to revive. In light of the core antecedents of a leader's trust, the study participants identified critical opportunities as a strategy for leadership qualities. The responses have encompassed three

attributes, namely, leaders' personal characters, leadership roles, and leadership strategies. The key personal characteristics needed to build trusting relationships include the leader's self-reliance, endurance, persona of principle, honesty, wisdom, and extent of commitment towards the common goal. The public perceives core leadership roles as the basis for establishing trusting relationships: to instill vision, to set a broader perspective, to embody exemplariness, to stand for unity instead of groupings, and to place emphasis on communal interest instead of self-glorifying schemes. A trustworthy leader adopts leadership strategies such as openness, openness for learning, proven integrity, passion for goals, participatory approaches for the common good, creativity, and boldness in overcoming challenges, rather than succumbing to prevailing situations. As a result, the study participants note that a leader's compelling vision, predictability, consistency, and principle-guided leader behavior are key elements in cultivating trustworthiness that become an

incubator for result-driven long-term relationships.

Criteria to Confer a Leader's Trust

The participants were requested to identify the perceived criteria to confer a leader's trust. Participants eloquently listed a set of virtues, including a leader's competence, wisdom, foresightedness, a person of deeds, not words, exemplariness, a persona of principle, pragmatics, and building experience, on the basis of critical learning behavior. The study participants unanimously agreed that leadership reputation is a key criterion for trusting leaders. One respondent viewed this from the perspective of a leader-follower relationship that was believed to contribute to a leader's trust:

"I think followers expect a leader to take part in their happy and sorrowful moments, become a patron and advocate for them, and demonstrate confidentiality, exemplariness, and competence." I appreciate a leader soliciting feedback from a concerned body in a constructive way; it is also a value-adding element to confer trust."

Another participant perceived trust-bestowing leadership criteria as:

"I want to see a high level of endurance and tolerance among leaders. Stick to what you stand for: resistance to pressures, commitment to agreed goals, and overall honesty in the real sense. Furthermore, developing a leader's trust depends on the leader's values, such as discipline (ethical principles), humility, openness, leading by example, respect, and fairness."

On the other side, the respondents were asked to comment on some of the criteria to ignore or erode leadership trust. One participant noted that the roles and functions of leaders are under continuous scrutiny; thus, a single move is likely to cause irreversible destruction, and the public can possibly ignore leadership trust. Another respondent suggests that a leader under constant perceived pressure is likely to lose autonomy and be subjected to various dictations that wear away their own trust. "Any attempts by a leader to move away from legality and conventions have the detrimental effect of eroding trusting relationships," one participant noted.

Antecedents of Leader's Trustworthiness

The assessment of the antecedents of a leader's trustworthiness encompasses three main categories: the leader's values, leadership roles, and functions. Many agreed that a leader's set of values contributes to establishing trustworthiness; these are honesty, exemplariness, credibility, humility, commitment, openness, and being open to learning. The second category suggested leadership roles playing as critical antecedents to a leader's trust, including integrity, wisdom, pragmatics,

a persona of principle, and judiciousness. Respondents also noted leadership functions such as capacity for foresight, developing feasible scenarios and their implications for their own situations, setting a bigger picture and instilling it in followers and the public, and continuous assessment, follow-up, and adjustments to meet prevailing situations as core antecedents of leadership trustworthiness.

Importantly, the antecedents of a leader's trust are closely linked with the innate values of a leader. One respondent emphasized that:

"I can't see a leader's trustworthiness separate from his or her values. A leader demonstrates behavior and performance associated with predetermined values, contributing to a leader's trustworthiness. A virtue of a set of values such as openness, credibility, and honesty that are experienced in the real world determines to what extent a leader's trustworthiness."

Core Attributes to Gain Leaders' Trust among Peers

Respondents emphasized that peer leader trust depends on the coherence of philosophy, ideology, and principles on which the world is or should be viewed. One research participant noted that "without developing consensus on how to deal with the globalized world philosophically, gaining

trusting relationships becomes difficult to achieve, if not impossible." The second dominant finding appeared to be the level of a leader's courage, determination, and decisiveness to work in harmony as critical attributes of developing trust among peer leaders. The third component of the findings focuses on the benefits of relationships; for example, a respondent stated:

"Gaining a peer leader's trust hinges on addressing mutual interests to the fullest and having the intelligence to avoid or combat situations that conflict with those interests."

The other responses center on a set of values that a participant proposes in response to the question of what qualities peer leaders need to build trust:

"There is an old saying, 'trust is won, not given'; partnering leaders should ground their relationships on values associated with respect, honesty, cooperation, responsibility, and accountability that they actually practice on the ground."

Respondents noted the extent of caution needed to build trusting relationships among counterparts. One participant

in the FGD made the following observation:

“A leader’s open- and closed-door communications can adversely affect trust among leaders; for instance, a slippery slope from joint consensual principles,” a respondent critically put it, “as an incident to lose leaders’ trust.”

Most research participants asserted that the effectiveness of regional leaders' coordination and relationship strength hinges on their actions on the ground, not just on their diplomatic rhetoric and unrealistic communication. The process of building trusting relationships among regional leaders demands commitment to the joint goals, regional coordination and complementarity, and the exchange of information in building mutual relations, the FGD participant underlined. “I see the leaders’ level of courage, visionariness, decisiveness, and clarity on how to deal with future courses,” a participant described. Another participant suggested that “it is equally important that the leaders’ capacity to resolve conflicts and challenges, independence, and fight against their own egos of self-glorification as opposed to the interests of long-range relationships”.

Key Determinants to Uplift (Establish) a Leader Trust

Key determinants to uplift or establish a leader's trust encompass both the leader's character and functional attributes of the leadership position, according to the findings. First, it covers the leader’s personal character and expected behaviors. It takes time to develop public perceptions of a leader's goodwill, with a focus on trust. Uplifting a leader's trust critically depends on a person of principle, deed, not words, exemplariness, legality, and fairness that exercise within frames of authentic leadership, as the majority of the respondents agreed. One of the FGD participants noted that “the public wants to see concrete results and implementable projects that go beyond the media campaign.” A respondent for KII viewed “clarity of vision, heightened view of the world, and consistency” as factors in obtaining a leader’s trust.

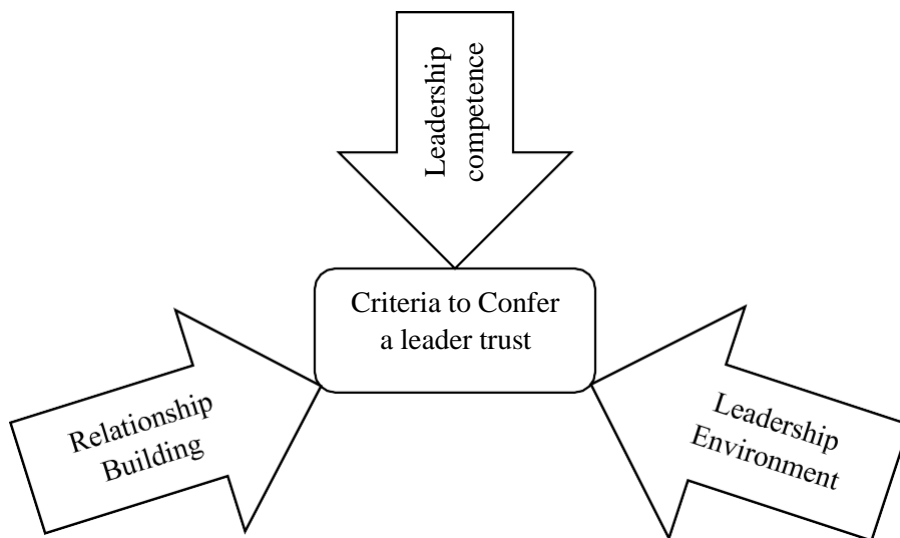
Secondly, the research results indicate leadership functions that contribute to building trust among the public. Establishing a leader’s trust depends on the leader's capacity to assume leadership positions. The study underlined the key determinants to establish leader trust, including developing a bigger picture, instilling a shared vision, communal interest, wide acumen, and a persistent move towards a vision. In response to key determinants of leadership trust, one participant noted that “I give weight to the leader’s wisdom, coining an inspiring vision, and heading followers towards it.”

DISCUSSION

Trust is an integral and critical element of leadership. Without a reciprocating trusting relationship between followers and leaders, it is unbearable for meaningful results. The research addresses the limitations associated with building and maintaining a culture of trust, which is a great challenge (Rudolph et al., 2020), various confusions in destabilizing public perceptions of the trustworthiness of leaders (CIPD, 2014), unanticipated developments that subjugate leaders to turbulent decisions attributable to a decline in trust (Segal et al., 1999), and several variabilities that contribute to losing leadership trust (Sergent & Stajkovic, 2020). Leadership is a complex of interwoven skills that include instilling and inspiring a vision statement, identifying overarching goals, creating a strategic alliance, utilizing principles of interdependence, emphasizing building strengths, capabilities, and abilities, setting a positive environment for result-driven operation, managing potential conflict, and mitigating negative impacts. However, these leadership skills are expected to have a significant impact once the leaders are perceived as trustworthy.

The study is an exploratory study to examine criteria to confer a leader’s trust, determine antecedents of a leader's trustworthiness, attributes to gain peer leader’s trust and its effect on regional collaboration, and key determinants to uplift or establish leader trust. First, it addressed the research question to identify the perceived criteria to confer a leader’s trust. The responses can be grouped by the leader’s competence, relationship, and context (environment) in which the leader operates. A leader’s competence includes foresight, integrity, pragmatics, learning behavior, a set of values, and exemplariness. Relationship building is a key criterion for establishing leadership trust. Without healthy relationships, a leader's function remains ineffective, and a lost bond between the leader and follower leads to untrusting relationships. In moments of happiness or sorrow, followers expect a leader to be part of the team (inside and outside), become a patron and advocate, and practice constructive communication, according to the findings. According to the literature, Whitener et al. (1998:516) define trustworthy behavior as "volitional actions that build trust and impact the leader's trust relationship." The leadership environment was found to be a criterion for gaining a leader's trust. The leadership environment encompasses a leader's autonomy, pressure and shocks, legal frameworks, and media usage. Therefore, the current study fills the void in the exploration of the leadership environment. Figure 1 represents the core criteria to confer a leader's trust:

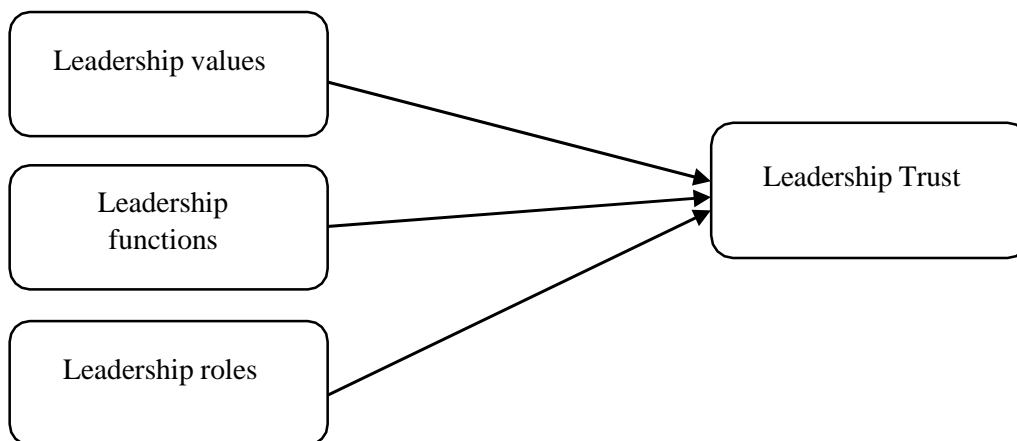
Figure 1: Core Criteria to Confer Trust



Second, the exploratory study focused on searching for antecedents of a leader's trust and pondering questions. What are the antecedents of a leader's trust? And what's the significance of establishing trust in leadership? The study's findings on identifying antecedents of a leader's trustworthiness fall into three main spectrums. These are the leader's values, roles, and functions. Leadership is under constant scrutiny as the virtues of values are exhibited, practiced, and assessed. In establishing a leader's trust, the following set of values are critical: honesty, exemplariness, credibility, humility, commitment, openness, and being open to learning. The core functions of leadership to measure trustworthiness include: capacity for foresight; developing feasible scenarios and their implications for own situations; setting a bigger picture and instilling it in followers and the public;

and continuous assessment, follow-up, and adjustments to meet prevailing situations as core antecedents of leadership trustworthiness. A leader's trust, integrity, wisdom, pragmatism, persona of principle, and judiciousness are amplified or preconditioned by their leadership roles. With this research outcome, the literature also suggests that enhancing engagement can contribute to a trustworthy connection, enabling followers to perform to the best of their abilities once they feel that a leader is there to help them (Vandenabeele, 2014). It builds on Mayer et al.'s (1995) integrative model of leadership ability, integrity, and benevolence that this study suggested comprehensively leadership values, functions, and roles. Thus, the study contributes to the leadership literature by identifying the core antecedents of a leader's trust, as depicted in Figure 2.

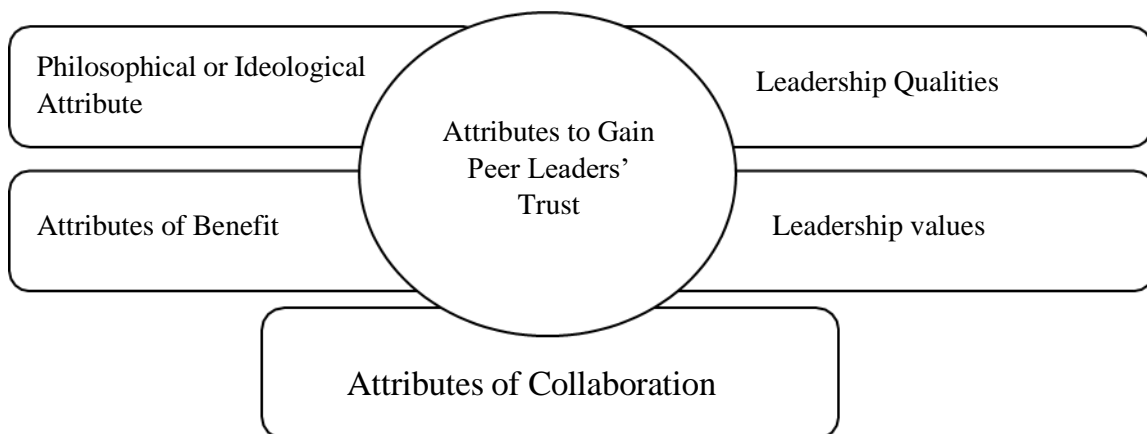
Figure 2: Antecedents of a Leader Trust



The third component of the study focused on examining what and how a leader gains peer leaders' trust, as well as its effect on regional collaboration. According to the exploratory study's findings, a combination of five attributes is critical to gaining leaders' trust among peer leaders. These are: philosophical or ideological attributes; attributes of leadership qualities; values; benefits; and determination for collaboration (interdependence). Peer leaders with a similar or coherent view of the world and a comparable ideological or philosophical outlook are likely to develop synergy and trust to meet globalized challenges. Without a common philosophical outlook, gaining a trusting relationship among peer leaders becomes difficult to realize, if not impossible. The leadership qualities that encourage harmonious relationships in gaining peer leaders' trust include visionariness, courage, deeds, not words, clarity on how to deal with future courses, determination, and decisiveness. The benefits of the relationship include the extent to which it addresses mutual

or common interests and the leaders' capacity to address counterfactual challenges. According to the old saying 'trust is won, not given', leaders' values such as respect, honesty, cooperation, responsibility, and accountability are open for inquiry, either to gain or lose peer trust. The final set of attributes needed to gain a leader's trust among peers is the level of regional leaders' commitment, determination, and readiness for collaboration. The achievement of results beyond diplomatic discourse determines the strength of regional leaders' cooperation. Setting realistic goals, interdependence rules, and complementarity principles such as respect, rule of law, conflict management, and others contribute to trusted relationships. The literature clearly supports the research findings, highlighting the crucial role of trust in successful working relationships between leaders and followers (Schwepker & Good, 2010; Tuan, 2012; Van den et al., 2009). Figure 3 represents the attributes needed to gain peer leaders' trust.

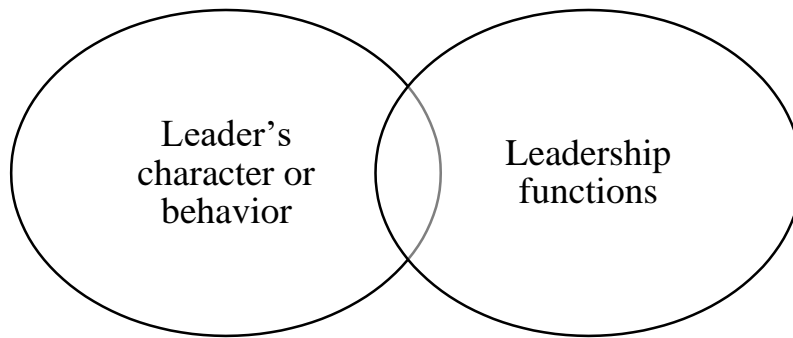
Figure 3: Attributes to Gain Peer Leaders' Trust



The fourth component considers assessing the key determinants to uplift or establish a leader's trust. The study's findings encompassed leaders' characteristics and leadership functions. The leader's character and behavior are open to the public. An authentic leader practices personas of principle, integrity, legality, fairness, and exemplariness in the real world to gain public goodwill. The next element includes determinants related to the leader's ability to assume leadership positions. Leadership determinants include developing a bigger picture, coining, instilling a shared vision, communal interest, wide acumen, a heightened view of the world, consistency, and a persistent move towards a vision. Literature informs us that exemplary leadership involves building trust,

generating inspiring energy for workers, and instilling confidence in followers (Rich et al., 2010; Uddin, 2013). To modify and change an organization's efficacy, the trust concept has become essential (Armstrong, 2010; Schaubroeck et al., 2011) to garner a collaborative environment. The study's evidence also supports Whitner et al.'s (1998) framework, behavior consistency and integrity as a leader's character (behavior), open communication, sharing and delegating control, and demonstrating concerns as leadership functions. Thus, a leader's behavior and character, as well as leadership functions, play critical determinants in upholding or establishing trust. Figure 4 summarizes the determinants to uplift or establish trust.

Figure 4: Determinants of Uplift or Establish a Leader Trust



LIMITATIONS

This study has limitations that pave the way for future research. First, the study uses qualitative data using key informants' interviews and focus group discussions to investigate the essence of

leadership, focusing on challenges and opportunities for regional cooperation. It also deals with research targets for the same cultural experience that may be interesting to read in a different cultural context. Therefore, it creates opportunities for future research to objectively evaluate the findings and explore them in diverse cultural contexts. Second, the research opted for KII and FDGs; however, future researchers can adopt case studies, empirical, longitudinal data, experimental, and simulation studies to widen our scope.

CONCLUSIONS

Effective trust-building is key to leadership, without which there is a minimal probability of success. The study underscored that the criteria for granting a leader's trust depend on the leader's competence, relationship building, and leadership environment. It investigated the core antecedents of leadership trust, including leadership function, roles, and values. In its quest for key attributes to gain leaders' trust among peers in regional cooperation, the study asserted that philosophical or ideological attributes, attributes of benefits, leadership qualities and values, and attitudes towards cooperation building. Finally, it examined paramount determinants to uplift or establish a leader's trust, including the leader's character and behavior as well as leadership functions.

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