



Canvassing for Integrity and Moral Compass by Leaders Without being Intentional: The Illusion of Ethical Leadership in Nigeria

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Abstract: This study examined the phenomenon of canvassing for integrity and moral values by leaders without intentional ethical commitment, exploring how such practices create the illusion of ethical leadership in Nigeria and undermine public trust, accountability, and good governance. Leadership built on integrity and a sound moral compass remains fundamental to good governance, institutional development, and sustainable national progress. The paper adopts a conceptual approach by reviewing relevant literature on integrity, moral compass, ethical leadership, and leadership practices within the Nigerian context. It argues that although many leaders publicly advocate ethical values such as honesty, accountability, transparency, and fairness, these principles are often not reflected in their actions and decisions. This inconsistency has contributed to declining public trust, corruption, weak institutional accountability, favoritism, and poor governance. The study concluded that ethical leadership can only be effective when leaders intentionally model integrity through consistent behavior, transparent governance, and responsible decision-making. One of the recommendations made was that Nigerian leaders should institutionalize ethical standards, strengthen accountability mechanisms, promote value-based leadership training, and demonstrate integrity through deliberate actions capable of restoring public confidence and fostering sustainable national development.

Keywords: Integrity, Moral Compass, Leaders Ethical Leadership

1. Introduction

Leadership plays a pivotal role in shaping the ethical climate, governance quality, and developmental trajectory of every nation. In contemporary societies, particularly in developing countries such as Nigeria, citizens increasingly expect leaders to demonstrate integrity, honesty, transparency, accountability, and fairness in both public and private institutions. Ethical leadership extends beyond making public declarations about moral values; it requires leaders to intentionally align their actions with ethical principles and serve as role models whose conduct inspires trust and confidence among followers. Consequently, integrity and a strong moral compass have become indispensable qualities for effective leadership and sustainable governance. Cox et al. [1] described that integrity is the capacity to uphold professional and ethical standards consistently despite institutional or environmental pressures.

Despite the widespread advocacy for ethical leadership in Nigeria, there remains a significant gap between leaders' public pronouncements and their actual conduct. Many leaders frequently promote anti-corruption campaigns, accountability, transparency, and



good governance while simultaneously engaging in practices that contradict these values. Such inconsistencies have created what can be described as the illusion of ethical leadership, where ethical principles are communicated rhetorically but are inadequately demonstrated in practice [2]. This disconnect has contributed to declining public confidence, institutional weaknesses, corruption, favoritism, and ineffective governance across many sectors of the Nigerian society. Kalshoven et al. [3] explain that ethical leadership involves behaviors such as fairness, integrity, concern for people, ethical guidance, role clarification, and sustainability orientation

Against this background, this paper examines the concepts of integrity, moral compass, and ethical leadership while exploring the implications of canvassing for integrity without deliberate commitment by leaders. It further discusses how intentional ethical leadership can strengthen public trust, improve institutional performance, promote accountability, and provide a sustainable pathway toward national development in Nigeria.

2. Materials and Methods

Concept of Integrity

Integrity is the quality of being honest and having strong moral principles, consistently doing the right thing even when no one is watching. It is the alignment of your actions, words, and values, reflecting a refusal to compromise your ethics for convenience or personal gain. Fuerst [4] defined integrity as the alignment between an individual or organization's ethical commitments, institutional values, and actual behavior. Integrity fosters trust, credibility, and responsible decision-making inside businesses when deeds consistently align with stated moral beliefs.

Cox et al. [1] described that integrity is the capacity to uphold professional and ethical standards consistently despite institutional or environmental pressures. Integrity is a crucial component of effective professional activity since it entails upholding consistency between one's moral convictions, professional responsibilities, and actual behavior. It is a fundamental aspect of human development and plays a vital role in shaping one's identity and sense of self [5].

Magalhães [2] describes integrity as adherence to ethical norms, transparency, accountability, honesty, and responsibility in carrying out professional duties. Integrity and ethics go hand in hand because moral behavior boosts institutional legitimacy and public trust.

Furthermore, Kolstoe and Pugh [6] explain that integrity is a social virtue characterized by commitment to moral principles, intellectual honesty, transparency, and accountability. Maintaining integrity means being accountable to the larger community while upholding professional standards, justice, and the truth.

Concept of Moral Compass

Moral compass refers to the internal system of ethical values, beliefs, principles, and standards that guides an individual's judgments, decisions, and behavior in distinguishing between right and wrong. A moral compass influences how individuals respond to ethical dilemmas, exercise professional responsibilities, and interact with others in ways that promote honesty, fairness, justice, and accountability. Garcia-Febo [7] notes that a moral compass enables librarians to uphold intellectual freedom, professional ethics, equitable access to information, confidentiality, and social responsibility. To preserve public trust and deliver unbiased information services, librarians must exercise ethical judgment.

According to De Cremer [8], a moral compass is the internal ethical mechanism that enables leaders and professionals to align their actions with principles of honesty, fairness, responsibility, and justice. Organizational trust, moral leadership, and responsible governance are all strengthened by a strong moral compass.

Kaptein [9] defines a moral compass as the internal ethical orientation that enables



individuals to distinguish ethical from unethical behavior while promoting integrity, accountability, transparency, and responsible professional conduct. Organizations perform more effectively when employees consistently rely on a strong moral compass in their daily activities.

Concept of Ethical Leadership

Ethical leadership is a leadership approach that emphasizes moral values, integrity, fairness, accountability, and responsible decision-making in the management of people and organizations. Ethical leaders demonstrate appropriate conduct through their personal actions and interpersonal relationships while promoting ethical behavior among followers through effective communication, reinforcement, and decision-making [10]. They serve as role models by consistently aligning their actions with ethical principles, thereby fostering trust, transparency, and organizational commitment.

According to Northouse [11], ethical leadership is the process of influencing others through behaviors that are consistent with ethical standards, including honesty, justice, respect, service, and community building. Ethical leaders prioritize the interests of employees, customers, stakeholders, and society rather than pursuing personal gains. They establish ethical standards, enforce organizational values, and create an environment where ethical conduct is expected and rewarded.

Yukl and Gardner [12] describe ethical leadership as leadership that is grounded in moral responsibility and the consistent application of ethical principles in organizational decision-making. Ethical leaders demonstrate fairness in allocating resources, transparency in communication, and accountability for their actions. By doing so, they inspire confidence among employees and encourage ethical behavior throughout the organization.

Similarly, Kalshoven et al. [3] explain that ethical leadership involves behaviors such as fairness, integrity, concern for people, ethical guidance, role clarification, and sustainability orientation. Ethical leaders encourage employees to voice concerns, make ethical decisions, and resolve conflicts through fairness and respect. Such behaviors contribute to higher employee satisfaction, organizational trust, and improved performance.

Ethical leadership is therefore regarded as an essential component of effective organizational governance because it strengthens trust, improves employee morale, enhances organizational reputation, and contributes to sustainable organizational performance. Leaders who consistently uphold ethical values create a positive organizational culture where employees feel respected, motivated, and committed to achieving organizational goals while maintaining high ethical standards.

3. Results

The need for Canvassing for integrity and Moral Compass by Leaders without being Intentional

Building Public Trust and Confidence: Building public trust and confidence in leadership and governance is one of the main goals of encouraging leaders to have integrity and a moral compass. Leaders with integrity are able to make decisions with honesty, accountability, transparency, and fairness. Citizens' trust in government institutions and organizations grows when they believe that leaders constantly operate in the public interest. Additionally, ethical leadership strengthens democratic governance and institutional legitimacy by reducing corruption, misuse of office, and favoritism. As noted by Enwereuzor et al. [13], followers are more likely to trust leaders whose behaviors align with their moral ideals, perceived leader integrity has a substantial impact on the ethical atmosphere of a company. Similarly, by encouraging honesty, justice, and responsible government, moral political leadership has been shown to rebuild public trust.

Promoting Ethical Decision-Making: Encouraging moral decision-making in both public and commercial entities is another crucial requirement. Before putting policies or programs



into action, leaders with a strong moral compass carefully consider the ethical ramifications of their choices. By doing this, unethical behaviors including bribery, fraud, discrimination, and conflicts of interest are reduced. Additionally, ethical decision-making guarantees that organizational goals are met without sacrificing moral principles or the well-being of society. According to recent research, leaders who continuously uphold moral principles foster favorable workplace cultures where workers are motivated to make morally sound judgments [14]

Strengthening Accountability and Good Governance: Integrity canvassing is essential because it fosters good governance and increases accountability. Leaders with a strong moral compass are willing to take accountability for their actions, use public resources wisely, and stay answerable to stakeholders. Such leadership improves service performance, lowers corruption, and increases financial management transparency. Strengthening leaders' integrity is widely acknowledged as a successful tactic for thwarting corruption and advancing sustainable national development in developing nations like Nigeria. Accountability, honesty, transparency, and selfless service are key attributes that enhance governance outcomes, according to studies on integrity leadership [15].

Inspiring Positive Organizational Culture and Employee Commitment: Leaders act as role models, influencing followers' views and behavior. Integrity canvassing contributes to the development of corporate cultures that are marked by professionalism, justice, honesty, and respect for one another. Because they trust their leaders, workers under moral leaders are typically more driven, devoted, productive, and inclined to follow company rules. Along with enhancing teamwork and employee engagement, ethical leadership also lessens conflicts and unethical behavior at work. Research has repeatedly demonstrated that by fostering a supportive ethical environment, ethical leadership has a favorable impact on employee commitment and organizational success [16].

Achieving Sustainable National Development: Integrity-driven leadership is essential for achieving sustainable national development. Leaders with a strong moral compass make decisions that prioritize long-term societal welfare rather than short-term personal or political gains. They encourage responsible resource management, equitable distribution of public resources, respect for the rule of law, and inclusive development. Such leadership promotes economic growth, social justice, peace, and institutional stability. Recent literature on integrity leadership in Nigeria concludes that integrity serves as a foundation for sustainable management practices and national transformation because it promotes transparency, responsibility, and ethical stewardship of national resources [17].

The Illusion of Ethical Leadership in Nigeria

Ethical leadership is generally understood as leadership that demonstrates integrity, honesty, fairness, accountability, transparency, and concern for the welfare of followers. However, in Nigeria, there is often a noticeable gap between the ethical values publicly proclaimed by leaders and their actual conduct in public office. This disparity has given rise to what scholars describe as the illusion of ethical leadership, where leaders present themselves as ethical while their actions are characterized by corruption, favoritism, abuse of power, and weak accountability

Egbiki et al. [18] argue that transparent decision-making, accountability, integrity, and effective corporate governance should reflect ethical leadership. The analysis of Public Interest Entities (PIEs) in Nigeria showed that while many leaders openly uphold moral standards, organizational procedures frequently fall short of doing so. When moral principles are upheld in theory but disregarded while implementing policies and making organizational decisions, ethical leadership becomes superficial.

According to Inegbedion et al. [19], unethical favoritism, organizational injustice, and preferential treatment continue to undermine ethical leadership in many Nigerian organizations. Favoritism undermines workers' trust in management, promotes unethical



behavior, and fosters an environment where moral values are implemented inconsistently. These behaviors reinforce the notion that immoral behavior prevails in organizational reality, with moral leadership confined to official policies.

Furthermore, Adaiwo [20] asserts that transparent and ethical leadership significantly improves employee performance, organizational commitment, and institutional effectiveness. Transparency, accountability, and integrity are essential characteristics of effective leadership. However, where leaders fail to practice these principles consistently, organizations experience declining employee morale, poor service delivery, and loss of public confidence, reinforcing the illusion of ethical leadership.

Despite repeated pledges to ethical governance, recurrent corruption, political favoritism, nepotism, selective enforcement of the law, insufficient institutional accountability, and low transparency are examples of the illusion of ethical leadership in Nigeria's public sector. As noted by Okoye [21], the existence of ethical codes, anti-corruption agencies, and public sector reforms has not translated into the expected level of ethical behaviour because implementation remains inconsistent and enforcement mechanisms are weak. Consequently, many citizens perceive ethical leadership as a political slogan rather than a practical reality. To combat the illusion of ethical leadership, institutional transparency can be reinforced through AI-driven big data frameworks that automate legal processes, detect fraud, and track human rights compliance [22]

4. Discussion

Canvassing for Integrity and Moral Compass by Leaders without being Intentional as a Function of Ethical Leadership in Nigeria.

Ethical leadership is primarily concerned with encouraging honesty, justice, accountability, openness, and responsible decision-making within businesses and society. Many Nigerian leaders publicly encourage their followers to act morally, ethically, and with integrity. However, ethical leadership necessitates more than just promoting moral behavior in speeches or public statements; it also calls for the purposeful and intentional display of these ideals through consistent choices and acts. As noted by Enwereuzor et al. [13], instead of relying solely on vocal lobbying, leaders have a greater impact on an organization's ethical climate through their integrity, credibility, and consistent behavior. The effectiveness of such campaigns is greatly diminished when leaders only promote integrity without purposefully modeling ethical behavior because followers are more likely to emulate seen behaviors than declared principles.

In Nigeria, leadership language and organizational behavior frequently diverge when integrity is advocated for without deliberate commitment. Leaders may advocate for anti-corruption initiatives, accountability, discipline, and openness, but they may not exhibit these values in organizational management, public administration, or political leadership. Such discrepancies erode institutional ethics and public trust. By guaranteeing justice in appointments, openness in financial management, responsibility in decision-making, and respect for the law, leaders must intentionally match their personal behavior with corporate ideals. When ethical messages lack intentionality, they become symbolic rather than transformative, which leads to widespread cynicism among citizens and employees. According to recent research on Nigerian public institutions, ethical leadership only improves organizational commitment and trust when moral values are regularly upheld rather than only promoted [21].

Furthermore, passive leadership cannot foster the development of integrity and a strong moral compass. Through explicit policies, open processes, frequent ethical training, efficient oversight, and suitable penalties for wrongdoing, ethical leaders consciously set up systems that support moral behavior. Despite frequent appeals for integrity, unethical practices including favoritism, corruption, abuse of authority, and conflict of interest may



persist in the absence of intentional institutional initiatives. Ugoani [16] contends that selflessness, honesty, consistency, and a dedication to acting morally even when doing so comes at a personal sacrifice are characteristics of integrity leadership. Therefore, intentional character development, institutional accountability, and ethical governance that instills trust in followers should take precedence over moral argumentation in Nigerian ethical leadership. To move past rhetorical canvassing for integrity, Nigerian public institutions should adopt transparent, AI-aided big data analytics to monitor public resource allocation, automate judicial dockets, and limit opportunities for executive corruption [23].

1. Conclusion

In conclusion, the effectiveness of ethical leadership depends not merely on advocating integrity but on the deliberate and consistent demonstration of ethical values through actions, decisions, and institutional practices. The paper has shown that integrity, accountability, honesty, transparency, and a strong moral compass are essential ingredients for responsible leadership and sustainable governance. However, when leaders merely canvass for these values without intentionally practicing them, ethical leadership becomes superficial and fails to inspire public confidence or organizational commitment. This illusion of ethical leadership has contributed to persistent corruption, favoritism, poor governance, and declining trust in Nigerian institutions.

Recommendations

1. Nigerian leaders should intentionally demonstrate integrity, honesty, accountability, and transparency through their daily decisions and leadership practices rather than merely advocating these values publicly.
2. Government institutions and organizations should strengthen accountability and enforcement mechanisms by ensuring that ethical violations attract appropriate sanctions regardless of status or political affiliation.
3. Leadership development programmes at all levels should incorporate continuous ethics and integrity training to cultivate leaders with strong moral values, responsible decision-making skills, and a commitment to sustainable national development.

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