



The Relationship Between Leadership and Integrity: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis

Roni Ekha Putera^{*1}, Nika Saputra², Edi Hasymi¹, Aqil Teguh Fathani³, Tengku Rika Valentina¹, Nabilaa Binti Mohamed⁴, Tirza Haqia Purnama¹

¹Universitas Andalas, Padang 25175, Indonesia

²STIA Adabiah, Padang 25171, Indonesia.

³Universitas Pembangunan Nasional Veteran Jakarta, Jakarta 12450, Indonesia

⁴UCYP University, Main Campus, Tanjung Lumpur, 26060 Kuantan, Pahang, Malaysia

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CORRESPONDENCE

Name: Roni Ekha Putera

E-mail: roniekhaputera@soc.unand.ac.id

A B S T R A C T

This study reviews how integrity is conceptualized and evidenced in leadership research and clarifies what is known about its outcomes and mechanisms. Guided by PRISMA 2020, we searched Scopus for English, peer-reviewed journal articles (2011–2022). After duplicate removal, screening, and eligibility checks, 67 articles were appraised with an adapted quality checklist and synthesized via descriptive mapping and thematic analysis. The literature clusters into twelve streams, dominated by leader behavioral integrity and ethical leadership. Across sectors, integrity is most consistently associated with follower trust, work engagement, and performance, often through transparent communication and psychological safety. Yet conceptual ambiguity remains because integrity is alternately treated as word–deed alignment, virtue-based wholeness, and follower attributions. We propose an integrative framework linking these views to influence theories and identify gaps: limited longitudinal and multilevel evidence, weak cross-cultural measurement, and underdeveloped connections to governance and anti-corruption outcomes. Practical implications are offered for integrity-based leadership development and accountability systems. The review also highlights boundary conditions (sector and culture) and outlines a focused agenda for future meta-analytic and policy-relevant research.

INTRODUCTION

Integrity has re-emerged as a practical and scholarly priority because many contemporary leadership failures are increasingly interpreted as failures of character, accountability, and governance, not merely failures of strategy or competence. In both private and public organizations, integrity-related breakdowns (e.g., corruption, misuse of authority, ethical drift, and credibility loss) erode stakeholder confidence, weaken employee engagement, and undermine institutional legitimacy. In public administration in particular, integrity reforms often depend not only on formal control systems but also on ethical leadership capacity, especially in high-risk governance environments where discretion is high and enforcement is uneven (Jones, 2018; Saputra et al., 2026). This context creates an urgent need for clearer, evidence-based understanding of how integrity functions in leadership processes and how it shapes employee and organizational outcomes.

Despite this urgency, cumulative knowledge is constrained by definitional fragmentation. Integrity is frequently used as an umbrella term that alternately refers to virtue, wholeness, honesty, moral identity, and consistency, making empirical findings difficult to compare across studies and sectors (Palanski & Yammarino, 2007). Efforts to sharpen the construct have improved clarity but also reveal continuing ambiguity. For example, Bauman (2013) distinguishes substantive integrity (ethical commitments), formal integrity (role/rule adherence), and personal integrity (coherence of self/identity), yet many empirical studies operationalize only one facet and then generalize conclusions about “integrity” broadly.

Complementing this, research on perceived leader integrity shows that followers’ integrity judgments can be multidimensional and context sensitive, and may not reduce to a single indicator of word–deed alignment (Moorman, 2013). As a result, the literature contains parallel conversations, “leader integrity,” “behavioral integrity,” “ethical leadership,” “transparency,” and “trust”, that overlap conceptually but are often analyzed in isolation.

Several influential empirical studies illustrate both the strength of the evidence base and the need for synthesis. Leroy (2012) show that authentic leadership can shape perceptions of behavioral integrity, which then predicts commitment and work performance. Vogelgesang (2013) provide evidence that leader integrity operates partly through transparent communication, strengthening engagement and performance. Engelbrecht (2017) demonstrate that integrity and ethical leadership influence trust and work engagement, suggesting that integrity is frequently intertwined with ethics-oriented leader behaviors rather than treated as a distinct construct. Across these studies, trust repeatedly appears as a central explanatory mechanism that links integrity perceptions to downstream outcomes. However, because constructs and measures vary across streams, the field still lacks an integrated map of what is being measured, which theories are being used, what mechanisms are supported most consistently, and where boundary conditions (sector, culture, risk) shape the strength of effects.

This leaves a clear research gap: since 2011, leadership–integrity scholarship has expanded across sectors, leadership styles, and integrity-adjacent constructs, but it remains

dispersed and uneven in conceptual clarity, measurement practices, and causal inference. Few studies synthesize the post-2011 expansion to clarify (1) how integrity is conceptualized and operationalized across research streams, (2) what theoretical lenses dominate and where they fall short, and (3) which mechanisms and boundary conditions are most consistently supported by empirical evidence. Addressing this gap is theoretically important because integrative constructs such as integrity can easily become “conceptually overloaded,” and practically important because organizations increasingly seek integrity-based leadership development and governance interventions without clear evidence map of what works and why.

Accordingly, this article provides an up-to-date synthesis of leadership–integrity research published between 2011 and 2022 and advances the literature in three ways: first, by mapping the field into a coherent taxonomy of themes, contexts, and methods; second, by integrating competing conceptualizations of integrity through an explicit theoretical framework; and third, by identifying priority opportunities for future research and practice (e.g., multilevel integrity dynamics, cross-cultural measurement equivalence, and integrity links to governance and anti-corruption outcomes). To guide the analysis and discussion, the review adopts an integrative framework that connects three dominant ways integrity is treated in leadership scholarship, virtue-based integrity, behavioral integrity, and integrity as a follower attribution, while linking these conceptualizations to established influence mechanisms.

First, virtue-based integrity frames integrity as a character virtue expressed through coherent moral commitments and principled action. In this view, integrity is not reducible to honesty or consistency alone but reflects “wholeness” across values, motives, and conduct (Bauman, 2013; Palanski & Yammarino, 2007). Second, behavioral integrity emphasizes the perceived alignment between a leader’s words and deeds. This perspective is especially relevant for explaining why integrity predicts trust and engagement in everyday interactions: consistent follow-through signals reliability and reduces perceived risk for followers (Choi, 2020; Vogelgesang, 2013). Third, integrity as an attribution highlights that followers use observed conduct to make judgments about moral character, consistency, and fairness; such judgments can be multidimensional and sensitive to context and expectations (Moorman, 2013). These three views are complementary rather than mutually exclusive, but they imply different measurement choices and can activate different psychological processes.

To connect integrity to outcomes, the framework draws on complementary theories of social influence. Social learning perspectives on ethical leadership emphasize modeling and reinforcement: leaders’ visible conduct shapes what followers perceive as acceptable, thereby affecting ethical voice, compliance, and discretionary behaviors (Brown et al., 2005). Social exchange perspectives explain why integrity-based treatment is reciprocated through commitment and performance: when leaders are perceived as trustworthy and fair, employees return the relationship with greater engagement, cooperation, and citizenship behaviors (Engelbrecht, 2017; Saputra et al., 2026). Finally, uncertainty-management accounts explain why integrity attributions become especially salient under ambiguity or risk: integrity serves as a heuristic that helps followers decide whether to accept vulnerability to a leader’s

decisions (Moorman & Grover, 2009). In combination, these lenses suggest that integrity influences organizational outcomes primarily through trust-related processes (e.g., perceived reliability, psychological safety, transparent communication), and that effects may vary across contexts such as sector (public vs. private), culture, and value congruence (Jones, 2018; Vogelgesang, 2013).

Grounded in this framing, the review addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the dominant themes, contexts, and methodological approaches in leadership–integrity research published between 2011 and 2022?

RQ2: How is leader integrity conceptualized and operationalized (e.g., behavioral integrity, virtue-based integrity, integrity attributions), and which theories are most frequently used to explain it?

RQ3: What empirical relationships and mechanisms link leader integrity to follower and organizational outcomes (e.g., trust, engagement, performance), and what gaps define the future research agenda?

METHOD

Design and rationale. A systematic literature review was selected because evidence on leadership and integrity is dispersed across disciplines (management, public administration, psychology, education, and health) and varies substantially in conceptualization and method. A systematic approach enables transparent identification, selection, appraisal, and synthesis of studies, reducing selection bias compared with narrative reviews.

Data sources and search strategy. The primary database was Scopus because it indexes a broad range of peer-reviewed journals and provides consistent metadata for screening. The search targeted titles, abstracts, and keywords using combinations of leadership- and integrity-related terms (e.g., “leadership” AND “integrity”, “leader integrity”, “behavioral integrity”, “ethical leadership”). The search was limited to journal articles published in English between 2011 and 2022 to capture the contemporary growth of this research stream.

Eligibility criteria and study selection. Studies were included if they (a) examined leadership integrity or integrity-relevant leadership constructs (e.g., ethical leadership linked explicitly to integrity), (b) reported empirical findings or developed a conceptual/theoretical argument relevant to leadership and integrity, and (c) were published in peer-reviewed journals. Studies were excluded if they were conference papers, dissertations, book chapters, or did not address leadership as a core construct. Screening followed PRISMA 2020 (Page et al., 2021): duplicates were removed, titles/abstracts were screened, and full texts were assessed for eligibility. Of 1,128 records identified, 1,043 remained after duplicate removal; 80 full texts were assessed; 67 articles were included.

Quality appraisal. Included studies were appraised using an adapted checklist based on the Newcastle–Ottawa Scale principles for nonrandomized studies (Gómez-Leal et al., 2022), with criteria covering sampling clarity, construct measurement, analytic transparency, and coherence between data and conclusions. The appraisal informed interpretation (e.g., weighting stronger designs more heavily) rather than excluding studies solely on quality grounds.

Data extraction and synthesis. For each study, we extracted publication year, sector and setting, integrity construct(s) and measurement, theoretical lens, design and method, and main findings. Synthesis proceeded in two steps: (1) descriptive mapping of trends and study characteristics; and (2) thematic synthesis, where integrity-related findings were coded and grouped into recurring research streams, then interpreted using the theoretical framework described above.

Table 1. Search strategy and eligibility criteria

Component	Specification
Database	Scopus (peer-reviewed journal coverage and standardized metadata)
Timespan	2011–2022
Language & document type	English; journal articles
Core keywords	leadership; leader integrity; behavioral integrity; ethical leadership; integrity
Inclusion criteria	Leadership is a central construct; integrity is measured or theorized explicitly; empirical or conceptual contribution
Exclusion criteria	Non-journal items (e.g., conference papers, theses); studies where integrity is unrelated to leadership; purely technical/legal compliance without leadership focus
Screening (PRISMA)	Duplicate removal → title/abstract screening → full-text eligibility checks; included studies n=67
Quality appraisal	Adapted checklist guided by Newcastle–Ottawa Scale principles
Synthesis	Descriptive mapping + thematic synthesis informed by the theoretical framework

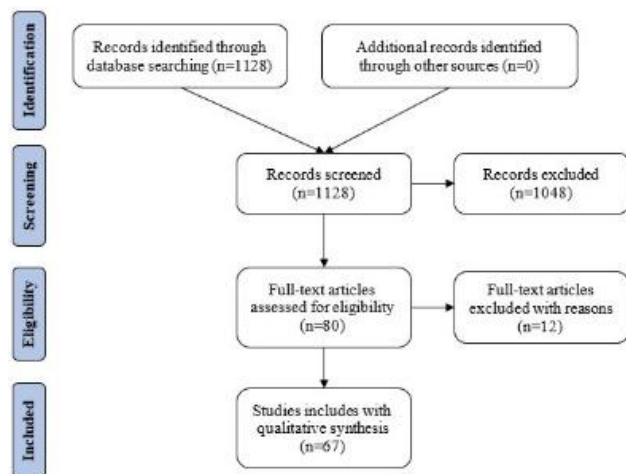


Figure 1. PRISMA 2022 flow diagram
Source: Page et al., (2021)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Across the 67 included articles, the field shows a clear shift from normative discussions of integrity toward measurable integrity perceptions and their consequences for employee attitudes and organizational performance. The descriptive mapping indicates steady publication activity across the 2011–2022 period, with a concentration of studies in applied settings where integrity failures carry high costs, such as public administration (Jones I van, 2018), education, health and safety, and financial services (Ahmad, 2021; Halbesleben, 2013; Javed, 2021; Kang, 2017). Methodologically, most studies rely on survey designs and structural models to test integrity–outcome paths,

while fewer studies use qualitative designs, multi-source data, or longitudinal approaches. This pattern matters because the strongest theoretical claim in integrity research, integrity builds trust through repeated alignment of words and actions, implies a temporal process that cross-sectional designs can only approximate.

Theme synthesis reveals twelve research streams, but two dominate: (1) leader behavioral integrity and perceived leadership integrity, and (2) ethical leadership and ethics-oriented integrity. The first stream focuses on the leader as a target of integrity attributions, whether the leader keeps promises, applies rules consistently, and behaves predictably. Conceptually, this stream reflects the long-standing debate over whether integrity should be treated primarily as consistency or as a broader moral virtue. Palanski & Yammarino (2007) clarification is frequently cited because it positions word–deed consistency as an analytically usable core, while acknowledging that virtue-based integrity cannot be fully reduced to consistency. Bauman (2013) “three faces” account further indicates that integrity judgments may rest on (a) substantive ethical commitments, (b) adherence to formal roles and rules, and (c) a coherent self or identity. Studies that measure “perceived leader integrity” explicitly support this multidimensionality and show that different integrity facets can carry distinct predictive value for follower outcomes (Moorman, 2013).

The second dominant stream blends integrity with ethical leadership. In these studies, integrity is not only an individual attribute but also a leadership practice: leaders’ model normatively appropriate conduct, reinforce ethical standards, and create climates in which ethical voice is possible. Evidence in this stream consistently indicates that ethical leadership predicts integrity compliance and reduces integrity violations, especially when ethical climate is supportive (Hamoudah, 2021; Zheng, 2022). Theoretically, this pattern aligns with social learning accounts of ethical leadership, where leaders function as salient models of appropriate conduct and reinforce ethical standards, and with trickle-down evidence that ethical conduct can flow from higher to lower organizational levels (Brown et al., 2005; Mayer et al., 2009). At the same time, the stream exposes a conceptual risk: when integrity is operationalized as “ethical leadership,” the construct boundary becomes blurred, which can inflate relationships through common method variance or overlapping items. A practical implication is that future work should report and justify operational definitions and demonstrate discriminant validity when integrity and ethical leadership are modeled simultaneously.

Answering the question of “what integrity does” in organizations, the most consistent empirical pattern across streams is that leader integrity is associated with follower trust, work engagement, and performance-related behaviors. Trust appears as the central mechanism through which integrity influences downstream outcomes, consistent with meta-analytic evidence that leader word–deed alignment relates strongly to trust and employee attitudes (Simons et al., 2015). For example, Engelbrecht (2017) show that integrity and ethical leadership relate to trust and, in turn, to work engagement. Vogelgesang (2013) provide a more process-oriented explanation: when leaders communicate transparently, followers interpret this as integrity-consistent behavior, which increases engagement and performance. In occupational health and safety research, leader

behavioral integrity is also linked to employees' willingness to adhere to safety values, implying that integrity operates through credibility and perceived accountability (Halbesleben, 2013). Similar mechanisms appear in performance-oriented contexts: behavioral integrity supports in-role performance and reduces withdrawal intentions, particularly when job autonomy and coworker support are present (Choi et al., 2020; Kang, 2017).

The review also indicates that integrity is not a uniform "good" but a context-sensitive signal whose effects depend on risk, uncertainty, and value alignment. Studies on value breaches and value congruence show that employees' interpretations of integrity violations can vary: when values are shared, followers may discount certain breaches; when values differ, the same breach may trigger strong distrust and disengagement (Cha, 2020). Work on ethical "double whammy" effects suggests that ethical leaders may face stronger backlash when they violate norms because expectations are higher, which reinforces the idea that integrity is judged relative to role expectations and identity claims (Grover, 2018). In innovation and shared leadership contexts, integrity can also serve as a coordination resource: when leadership is distributed, integrity perceptions help align decisions and reduce relationship conflict that would otherwise suppress innovation (Chaman, 2022; Hoch, 2013).

Several applied sub-streams extend the integrity discussion beyond classic attitudes and performance. First, employee voice is a growing topic: leader integrity can reduce perceived risk and increase employee voice, but the effect is conditional on leader consultation and the follower's risk calculus (Duan, 2020; Javed, 2021). Second, sustainability-oriented leadership research highlights integrity as a foundation for credible corporate social responsibility and green advocacy; integrity strengthens the legitimacy of environmental claims and increases employee willingness to engage in pro-environmental behaviors (Crucke, 2022; Verissimo, 2015). Third, public-sector and governance-oriented studies show that integrity is directly tied to implementation capacity and anti-corruption outcomes: ethical leadership can function as a practical lever for strengthening integrity systems in contexts where formal controls alone are insufficient (Erakovich, 2016; Jones, 2018).

From a methods and measurement standpoint, the field remains constrained by three recurring issues. First, many studies rely on single-source, self-report measures, which can overestimate relationships between integrity, trust, and engagement. Second, integrity measures vary substantially, from brief behavioral integrity scales to multidimensional perceived leader integrity instruments, yet only a subset of studies report measurement robustness (e.g., factor structure, discriminant validity) (Moorman, 2013). Third, cross-cultural comparisons are common in aspiration but rare in design; studies in transitional economies suggest integrity matters for firm performance and legitimacy, but measurement equivalence is not always established, limiting the strength of cross-context conclusions (Wei, 2020).

Taken together, the evidence supports an integrative interpretation: leader integrity is best treated as a family of constructs that share a core signal of reliability and moral accountability. When leaders align words and deeds, communicate transparently, and reinforce ethical norms, followers are more willing to trust, to invest effort (engagement), and to reciprocate through performance and citizenship behaviors (Engelbrecht, 2017; Leroy, 2012;

Vogelgesang, 2013). However, the same evidence also shows why conceptual clarity is not merely semantic: different integrity meanings predict different outcomes and activate different mechanisms. Building on Palanski and Yammarino (2007) conceptual clarification and Bauman's multi-face model (Bauman, 2013), this review advances a framework that links (a) integrity conceptualization (virtue, behavioral alignment, attribution), (b) influence mechanisms (trust, psychological safety, transparency), and (c) context conditions (sector, culture, value congruence). This framework explains why integrity is repeatedly associated with positive organizational outcomes while also highlighting where the literature remains underdeveloped: longitudinal tests of integrity as a dynamic process, multilevel models capturing trickle-down integrity effects, and stronger integration between leadership integrity research and governance/anti-corruption scholarship.

In summary, the integrated results demonstrate that integrity is a consequential leadership signal with consistent associations to trust and engagement, but the field will advance most if future studies explicitly distinguish integrity's meanings, strengthen causal inference through longitudinal or experimental designs, and test boundary conditions across cultures and sectors.

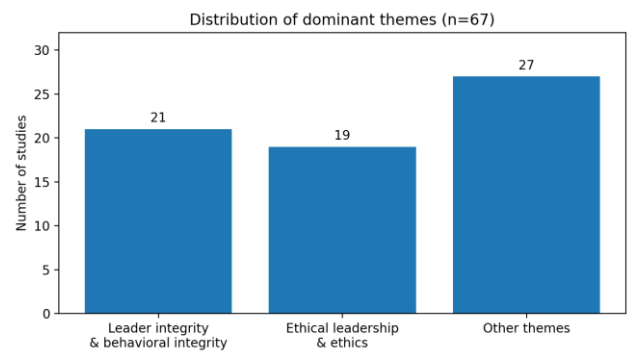


Figure 2. Distribution of dominant themes in the included studies

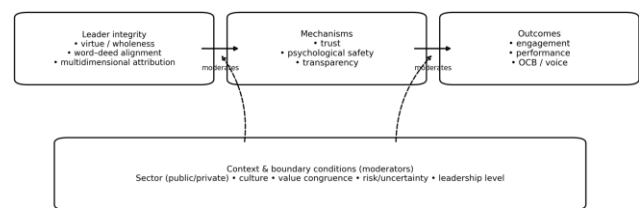


Figure 3. Integrative framework linking leader integrity to outcomes

Table 2. Thematic synthesis of leadership–integrity research (2011–2022)

Theme	What the literature emphasizes	Illustrative evidence (examples)
Leader behavioral integrity	Word–deed alignment, promise keeping, reliability signals	Integrity → trust/engagement/performance (Leroy, 2012; Simons et al., 2015; Vogelgesang, 2013)
Perceived leader integrity	Multidimensional integrity attributions (consistency +	Scale development and validation (Moorman, 2013)

Ethical leadership	morality) Role modeling, reinforcement, ethical climate, integrity compliance	Ethical leadership reduces violations; enables ethical voice (Brown et al., 2005; Hamoudah, 2021; Mayer et al., 2009; Zheng, 2022)
Trust & psychological safety	Trust as a mechanism; reduced perceived risk; safety for voice	Integrity and ethics predict trust; trust predicts engagement (Engelbrecht, 2017; Simons et al., 2015; Vogelgesang, 2013)
Engagement & well-being	Work engagement, dedication, well-being outcomes	Integrity relates to engagement directly and indirectly (Engelbrecht, 2017; Vogelgesang, 2013)
Performance & citizenship	In-role performance, OCB, reduced deviance/withdrawal	Integrity supports performance and lowers negative behaviors (Choi, 2020; Kang, 2017; Mayer et al., 2009)
Voice & speaking up	Employee voice depends on perceived leader risk and consultation	Integrity supports voice when consultation is high (Duan, 2020; Javed, 2021)
Sustainability & CSR	Integrity strengthens legitimacy of CSR/green leadership claims	Integrity linked to pro-environmental behaviors (Crucke, 2022; Verissimo, 2015)
Public sector governance	Integrity systems and anti-corruption capacity require ethical leadership	Ethical leadership supports public sector governance (Erakovich, 2016; Jones I van, 2018)
Value congruence	Interpretation of value breaches depends on value fit	Value congruence shapes breach reactions (Cha, 2020; Grover, 2018)
Measurement & assessment	Integrity measurement, selection, and assessment challenges	Integrity testing and assessment frameworks (Dartey-Baah, 2017; Paliszkievicz, 2019)
Education & teaching	Leadership integrity and teaching effectiveness outcomes	Integrity linked to teaching leadership and effectiveness (Ahmad, 2021)

Source. Researcher 2025

CONCLUSION

The review shows that leadership–integrity scholarship between 2011 and 2022 converges on a consistent substantive message: integrity is a consequential leadership signal that shapes employee trust and, through trust-related processes, affects engagement and performance. The evidence also indicates that integrity is not a single construct; it is enacted and interpreted through multiple lenses, virtue-based integrity, behavioral word–deed alignment, and integrity attributions, <https://doi.org/10.58835/jspi.v6i1.571>

each carrying different implications for measurement and intervention. Practically, the findings imply that integrity-based leadership development should emphasize visible follow-through on commitments, transparent communication, ethical reinforcement, and accountability systems that reduce the gap between formal values and daily decisions. Conceptually, the field will progress by separating overlapping constructs (integrity vs. ethical leadership), clarifying causal mechanisms (especially trust and psychological safety), and integrating integrity research with sector-specific governance challenges.

Limitations. This review used Scopus as the primary database and restricted inclusion to English-language journal articles from 2011–2022; relevant work indexed elsewhere or published in other languages may have been missed. In addition, the included studies are heterogeneous in construct definitions and measures, and many rely on cross-sectional, single-source survey designs; therefore, causal claims should be interpreted cautiously. Finally, although the title uses the term “meta-analysis,” the available reporting across studies does not consistently provide comparable effect sizes; the synthesis is therefore best read as a systematic review with descriptive mapping and thematic integration.

Future research. Priority directions include (1) meta-analytic estimation of integrity effects using standardized effect sizes and publication-bias checks; (2) longitudinal, experimental, and multi-source designs that can test integrity as a dynamic process rather than a static perception; (3) multilevel models that examine trickle-down integrity across hierarchical levels and teams; (4) cross-cultural measurement invariance testing to strengthen comparisons across institutional settings; and (5) stronger integration with public-sector integrity and anti-corruption scholarship, including outcomes such as policy compliance, whistleblowing protection, and integrity-system effectiveness.

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