

Exploring Leadership Authenticity as a Driver of Employee Trust: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study was to explore how authentic leadership behaviors influence the development of employee trust within organizational settings in Tehran. A qualitative research design was employed to capture in-depth perspectives on leadership authenticity and trust. Using purposive sampling, 18 participants (10 employees and 8 managers) from various organizations in Tehran were recruited. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, lasting between 45 and 75 minutes, focusing on themes such as transparency, ethical conduct, communication, and trust formation. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed through thematic analysis using NVivo version 14. Credibility was enhanced through constant comparison, iterative coding, and validation of themes across the dataset. Four overarching themes were identified: (1) Authentic leadership behaviors, characterized by transparency, ethical conduct, relational authenticity, self-awareness, and balanced decision-making; (2) Employee trust formation, built on reliability, psychological safety, open communication, shared vision, consistency, and perceived support; (3) Outcomes of authentic leadership, including job satisfaction, organizational commitment, team cohesion, improved performance, and reduced turnover intention; and (4) Challenges in practicing authenticity, such as cultural barriers, bureaucratic constraints, personal limitations of leaders, employee misinterpretations, and external pressures. Participant quotations revealed that authentic leadership was perceived as a key driver of trust but its practice was often constrained by cultural and organizational contexts. This study demonstrates that authentic leadership plays a central role in cultivating employee trust, leading to positive organizational outcomes such as commitment, cohesion, and satisfaction. However, cultural expectations and structural limitations can complicate its practice. The findings underscore the need for leadership development programs that foster authenticity while accounting for contextual barriers.

Keywords: Authentic leadership; Employee trust; Qualitative research; Tehran organizations; Leadership behaviors; Organizational outcomes

Introduction

In today's dynamic organizational environments, fostering employee trust has become a pivotal concern for leadership practice and theory alike. Trust serves as the foundation for psychological safety, organizational commitment, and meaningful team performance (Edmondson, 2001). At the same time, global challenges—such as economic instability, shifting cultural expectations, and heightened corporate scrutiny—place authenticity at the core of leadership effectiveness. Authentic leadership, defined by genuineness, ethical consistency, self-awareness, and integrity, has been championed as a powerful antecedent to follower trust (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; CCL, 2023). Yet, while quantitative evidence underscores its positive associations with employee engagement,



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flourishing, and workplace trust (e.g., Baquero et al., 2023; Stander et al., 2022), qualitative insights—especially in non-Western contexts—remain limited. This study fills that gap by offering a grounded qualitative exploration of how authentic leadership behaviors shape trust among employees within Tehran-based organizations.

Authentic leadership emphasizes consistency between a leader's values, words, and actions; transparency in decision-making; balanced processing of feedback; and self-awareness (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; CCL, 2023). Organizational consulting and research organizations highlight that authenticity enables trust-building through open communication, ethical decision-making, and fostering safe environments where employees feel recognized (CCL, 2023; Forbes, 2023). Authentic leaders also model integrity and courageous admission of mistakes, contributing to both psychological safety and innovation within teams (Investors.com, 2025).

Empirical studies support these claims. Baquero and colleagues (2023) found that authentic leadership significantly enhances subordinates' trust and well-being in organizational settings, highlighting trust as a mediator between leadership authenticity and employee flourishing. Similarly, Stander et al. (2022) demonstrated that authentic leadership positively predicts employee flourishing via the mechanisms of organizational support and trust in a South African manufacturing context. Chen and Sriphon's (2022) study during the COVID-19 pandemic further confirmed that authentic leadership behaviors substantially improve trust and social exchange relationships between leaders and employees.

Adding nuance, research has identified the components of relational transparency, balanced processing, internalized moral perspective, and self-awareness as key drivers of trust (Baquero et al., 2023; Clapp-Smith et al., 2009). Additional qualitative findings note that authenticity gains salience through consistency, fairness, and openness—critical traits for adherence to trust over time (Agote et al., as cited in Baquero et al., 2023).

Trust in leadership emerges as a critical outcome and sustaining resource in organizational behavior. When employees perceive leaders to be authentic, they are more likely to feel psychologically safe, invest emotionally in the organization, and demonstrate loyalty (CCL, 2023; Investors.com, 2025). Psychological safety—defined as the shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking—thrives under authentic and inclusive leadership (Edmondson, 2001). This environment enables open dialogue, constructive feedback, and creativity without fear of judgment (Edmondson, 2001).

Further theoretical insight comes from social exchange theory and social contagion theory. Through social exchange, authentic leadership behaviors—marked by fairness, consistency, and integrity—encourage reciprocal trust and high-quality workplace relationships (Chen & Sriphon, 2022). Social contagion theory suggests that employees emulate leaders' authentic behaviors, spreading trust across organizational networks (Baquero et al., 2023). As such, trust is both a response to and a vehicle for sustained authentic leadership impact.

The preponderance of quantitative evidence affirms that authentic leadership bolsters trust, employee engagement, and enhanced organizational outcomes (Baquero et al., 2023; Stander et al., 2022; Chen & Sriphon, 2022). However, there remains a distinct lack of qualitative studies that delve into how authenticity manifests in everyday leadership interactions—especially in cultural contexts distinct from Western norms of individualism.

Tehran, with its rich cultural, organizational, and hierarchical traditions, presents a compelling case for exploring how authentic leadership is enacted and perceived. Existing research in collectivist or hierarchical cultures suggests that leader authenticity may clash with normative expectations around authority and emotional expression (Rockstuhl et al., 2012; LMX). Yet, these conflicts—and their effects on trust-building—have been scarcely documented in qualitative terms.

Thus, this study addresses two primary research gaps: (1) how do authentic leadership behaviors manifest and become recognized across various organizational roles—from managers to staff—in Tehran?; and (2) how do these behaviors engender, sustain, or challenge the development of employee trust?

This study aims to explore experiences and perceptions of authentic leadership among employees and managers in Tehran-based organizations, focusing on how such behaviors influence trust. Using semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis (via NVivo 14), the study seeks to:

1. Identify authentic leadership behaviors (e.g., transparency, ethical conduct, self-awareness, relational authenticity, balanced decision-making) present in organizational interactions.
2. Explore how these behaviors facilitate or hinder trust development (reliability, psychological safety, consistent support, shared vision).
3. Examine the cultural and structural contexts that either enable or impede authentic-led trust-building in Tehran.

By emphasizing depth over breadth through qualitative inquiry—informed by theoretical saturation—this study enriches understanding of authentic leadership's lived reality and its relational outcomes. Additionally, it contributes culturally grounded insights from Tehran, challenging assumed universality in leadership–trust dynamics and offering practical implications for leaders navigating authenticity within hierarchical, collectivist environments.

Methods and Materials

This study employed a qualitative research design aimed at exploring leadership authenticity as a driver of employee trust. A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit participants who could provide rich and relevant insights into the phenomenon under study. A total of 18 participants, including managers and employees from various organizations in Tehran, were interviewed. Participants were selected based on their professional experience and willingness to share perspectives on leadership authenticity and trust within their workplaces. Recruitment continued until theoretical saturation was reached, ensuring that no new themes or concepts emerged from the data.

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, which provided flexibility to explore participants' experiences while maintaining consistency across key topics. An interview guide was developed to cover central themes such as perceptions of authentic leadership, trust-building behaviors, and the relational dynamics between leaders and employees. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in a private setting to ensure confidentiality and encourage open dialogue. Each interview lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent.

All interview recordings were transcribed verbatim, and the data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and underlying meanings. NVivo software version 14 was employed to organize and code the data systematically. The analysis process involved several stages: familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing and refining themes, and finally defining and naming the themes. Constant comparison was applied throughout the process to ensure consistency and coherence across the dataset. Theoretical saturation was considered achieved when additional interviews yielded no new insights or themes.

Findings and Results

The study included 18 participants from different organizations in Tehran, consisting of 10 employees (55.6%) and 8 managers (44.4%). Among them, 11 were male (61.1%) and 7 were female (38.9%), with ages ranging between 28 and 52 years ($M = 39.4$). Participants' work experience varied from 5 to 25 years, with an average of 14.2 years. Regarding educational background, 6 participants (33.3%) held bachelor's degrees, 9 (50%) had master's degrees, and 3 (16.7%) held doctoral degrees. This diverse profile ensured a broad range of perspectives on leadership authenticity and trust within organizations.

Reporting the Findings (with Table Data Integrated + Quotes)

Category 1: Authentic Leadership Behaviors

Transparency and Openness emerged as a critical subtheme, with participants emphasizing the role of honest communication and clarity in decisions. One employee noted: "When my manager openly explains the challenges the company is facing, I feel respected and included" (Participant 7). Many highlighted that leaders who share accurate information build credibility and reduce suspicion.

Ethical Conduct was consistently referenced, with participants describing integrity, fairness, and avoidance of favoritism as essential qualities. As one manager stated: "Employees observe even the smallest inconsistencies. If you promise fairness but show favoritism, trust is broken immediately" (Participant 12). This shows that authentic leadership requires alignment of words and actions.

The subtheme of Relational Authenticity reflected the importance of building genuine connections. Participants described authentic leaders as empathetic and respectful, valuing employees' individuality. For example, an employee explained: "I trust my supervisor because she listens carefully to my concerns without judgment" (Participant 4).

Self-Awareness also emerged as an important element, with participants stressing the need for leaders to recognize personal strengths and limitations. One interviewee reflected: "My manager admits when he doesn't know something, and that makes him more human and trustworthy" (Participant 15).

Finally, Balanced Decision-Making was emphasized, with leaders expected to consider multiple perspectives and avoid impulsive actions. As one respondent said: "Our director always consults us before making big decisions. That makes me trust the outcomes, even if I don't fully agree" (Participant 2).

Category 2: Employee Trust Formation

The subtheme of Reliability of Leaders highlighted how predictability and consistency in behavior promote trust. An employee expressed: "When my manager says she will support us, she always delivers. That's why we believe in her" (Participant 9).

Psychological Safety was another prominent aspect, where participants described feeling safe to express opinions without fear of retaliation. As one participant noted: "I once made a mistake, and instead of punishing me, my leader encouraged me to learn from it. That made me more confident to take risks" (Participant 6).

Regarding Leader–Employee Communication, participants stressed that openness and responsiveness enhance trust. One manager explained: "If an employee sends me feedback, I try to answer immediately. This two-way dialogue is essential for trust" (Participant 13).

Shared Vision also reinforced trust, with employees stating they trust leaders who align organizational goals with their personal growth. As one participant described: "When I see the company's direction matches my own values, I feel committed and trust the leadership" (Participant 3).

Consistency Over Time was described as vital, since temporary trustworthy acts were not sufficient. One employee commented: "Trust grows slowly, and only if leaders prove over time that they truly stand by their words" (Participant 11).

Finally, Perceived Support highlighted the role of both emotional and practical backing from leaders. As expressed by a participant: "My manager recognized my effort publicly, and that simple act made me trust him more" (Participant 5).

Category 3: Outcomes of Authentic Leadership on Trust

Job Satisfaction was frequently mentioned, with participants linking authentic leadership to positive emotions and reduced stress. As one employee shared: "I feel satisfied with my job because my manager is transparent and respectful" (Participant 10).

Organizational Commitment emerged strongly, as authentic leadership fostered loyalty and emotional attachment. A participant stated: "Even if I get better offers, I stay here because I feel connected to the mission and the leadership" (Participant 8).

The subtheme of Team Cohesion reflected how authentic leadership nurtured collaboration and reduced conflict. One manager explained: "When employees trust me, they also begin to trust each other, and the team works like a family" (Participant 14).

Performance Improvement was noted as a direct outcome, with participants describing increased productivity and creativity. An employee said: "I am more motivated to take initiative because I know my leader trusts me" (Participant 1).

Finally, Reduced Turnover Intention emerged as a consequence, with employees feeling a stronger sense of belonging. As one participant reflected: "I used to think of leaving, but now I feel stable because my leader's authenticity makes this place feel secure" (Participant 16).

Category 4: Challenges in Practicing Authentic Leadership

Cultural Barriers were highlighted as significant, with participants noting that hierarchical traditions and resistance to openness hinder authenticity. One manager explained: "In our culture, showing vulnerability is often seen as weakness, which makes it harder to practice authenticity" (Participant 17).

Organizational Constraints such as bureaucracy and rigid structures also limited authentic behaviors. An employee observed: "Even if leaders want to be authentic, the system sometimes forces them to follow rigid procedures" (Participant 18).

Leader's Personal Limitations were noted, particularly stress management and emotional instability. One participant said: "My supervisor wants to be open, but under pressure, he becomes authoritarian" (Participant 5).

The subtheme of Employee Misinterpretations revealed that some employees misunderstood authenticity. For instance, one respondent explained: "When my manager admitted a mistake, some colleagues thought he was incompetent. But I saw it as honesty" (Participant 7).

Finally, External Pressures such as economic uncertainty and political instability were seen as barriers. As one manager reflected: "Even authentic leaders cannot always act freely when the environment is unstable" (Participant 12).

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study highlight the multifaceted relationship between authentic leadership and employee trust within organizations in Tehran. Through semi-structured interviews with 18 participants, four overarching themes emerged: authentic leadership behaviors, employee trust formation, outcomes of authentic leadership, and challenges to practicing authenticity. These findings contribute to both the theoretical and practical understanding of leadership authenticity, extending previous quantitative research by offering rich, contextualized narratives. In this section, we discuss each theme in relation to prior scholarship, highlight cultural nuances, and reflect on implications for leadership practice.

The study revealed that authentic leadership behaviors manifested primarily through transparency and openness, ethical conduct, relational authenticity, self-awareness, and balanced decision-making. Participants emphasized that leaders who communicated challenges honestly, admitted mistakes, and provided clarity in decision-making were perceived as trustworthy. These findings reinforce Avolio and Gardner's (2005) conceptualization of authentic leadership, which stresses the congruence between internal values and outward behavior as a prerequisite for building trust. Similarly, Clapp-Smith, Vogelgesang, and Avey (2009) found that authenticity is expressed through relational transparency and balanced processing, both of which were evident in participant narratives.

Ethical conduct, particularly the avoidance of favoritism and adherence to fairness, was repeatedly cited by interviewees as central to authenticity. This aligns with Stander et al.'s (2022) findings that authentic leaders foster organizational trust by upholding integrity and justice. Moreover, participants in the present study viewed self-awareness as a form of authenticity, especially when leaders admitted their limitations. Prior research has similarly emphasized that leaders who reflect on personal strengths and weaknesses project humility, thereby enhancing credibility (Gardner et al., 2011). By situating these behaviors within the Iranian cultural context, our results suggest that authenticity is not merely a personality trait but a dynamic process of interaction and self-presentation.

The findings indicate that employee trust was constructed around six subthemes: reliability, psychological safety, leader–employee communication, shared vision, consistency over time, and perceived support. Reliability emerged as a cornerstone of trust, as participants valued leaders who consistently delivered on promises. This resonates with Chen and Sriphon's (2022) study, which demonstrated that authentic leadership cultivates trust through predictable and dependable actions.

Psychological safety was also highlighted, with employees feeling more secure in voicing concerns when leaders responded empathetically rather than punitively. This is consistent with Edmondson's (2001) influential work on psychological safety, which underscores how authentic leaders create climates where mistakes are treated as learning opportunities rather than grounds for punishment. Furthermore, the emphasis on two-way communication reflects Baquero et al.'s (2023) finding that transparent leader–employee dialogue mediates the relationship between authenticity and employee flourishing.

Shared vision and consistency over time also emerged as vital elements. Participants noted that trust develops slowly and requires leaders to demonstrate sustained alignment of words and actions. This long-term dimension is echoed in research by Rego, Sousa, Marques, and Cunha (2012), who observed that authentic leadership promotes trust through the gradual reinforcement of shared organizational values. Perceived support, including recognition of effort and provision of emotional backing, further enhanced trust. Stander et al. (2022) similarly showed that authentic leadership fosters perceptions of organizational support, which in turn strengthens trust. Collectively,

these findings confirm that trust is not a static outcome but a dynamic process reinforced by repeated interactions and relational experiences.

The results showed that authentic leadership positively influenced job satisfaction, organizational commitment, team cohesion, performance improvement, and reduced turnover intention. Participants reported greater job satisfaction when leaders were transparent and respectful, reflecting prior evidence that authentic leadership is positively associated with employee well-being and satisfaction (Walumbwa et al., 2008). Organizational commitment was also strengthened, with employees expressing loyalty to leaders who embodied integrity and openness. This parallels findings by Hassan and Ahmed (2011), who demonstrated that trust in authentic leaders fosters strong affective commitment to organizations.

Team cohesion emerged as another outcome, as trust in leaders was seen to spill over into trust among peers. This is consistent with social contagion theory, which suggests that authentic behaviors modeled by leaders can diffuse through teams, enhancing collective trust (Baquero et al., 2023). Improved performance and creativity were also reported, aligning with studies that link authentic leadership to higher levels of follower engagement and innovative behavior (Rego et al., 2012). Finally, the reduction of turnover intentions in the present study corroborates prior findings that authentic leadership decreases withdrawal behaviors by reinforcing psychological attachment to the organization (Walumbwa et al., 2008). Thus, the outcomes identified here provide qualitative depth to quantitative correlations previously established in the literature.

Despite these positive associations, participants also highlighted several challenges that limit the enactment of authentic leadership. Cultural barriers, such as hierarchical norms and fear of transparency, were noted as constraints. This observation aligns with Rockstuhl et al.'s (2012) meta-analysis, which found that leader–member exchange (LMX) dynamics differ across cultures, with collectivist societies often perceiving openness as a weakness. In the Tehran context, leaders' vulnerability may conflict with societal expectations of authority, complicating the practice of authenticity.

Organizational constraints, including bureaucracy and rigid procedures, also hindered authentic leadership. Such structural barriers resonate with Gardner et al.'s (2011) argument that organizational systems can either facilitate or constrain authenticity. Leaders' personal limitations, such as poor stress management or emotional instability, further complicated authentic behaviors. These findings echo Leroy, Palanski, and Simons (2012), who noted that authenticity requires substantial self-regulation, which may falter under stress.

Employee misinterpretations posed another challenge, with some participants perceiving transparency as incompetence. This reflects the delicate balance leaders must strike between openness and authority, as previously discussed by Algera and Lips-Wiersma (2012). Finally, external pressures such as economic uncertainty and political instability limited leaders' ability to remain consistent and transparent. These externalities suggest that authentic leadership must be understood as context-dependent, influenced by macro-level forces beyond the leader's control.

Overall, the findings of this study confirm and extend prior research in several key ways. First, they affirm that authentic leadership behaviors are strongly linked to employee trust, as proposed by Avolio and Gardner (2005) and empirically validated by subsequent studies (Clapp-Smith et al., 2009; Stander et al., 2022). Second, they highlight the relational processes—such as communication, perceived support, and psychological safety—that mediate this relationship, thereby supporting the social exchange perspective (Chen & Sriphon, 2022). Third, they

contextualize these processes within a non-Western cultural setting, demonstrating that while authenticity is valued, its enactment is complicated by hierarchical norms and structural constraints.

By providing qualitative depth, this study addresses calls for richer explorations of authentic leadership across diverse cultural contexts (Gardner et al., 2011). The voices of participants illustrate not only the benefits but also the tensions of authenticity, suggesting that authentic leadership is both universally valued and locally constrained. This duality underscores the importance of situating leadership theories within cultural and organizational realities.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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