

Abstract

Purpose

This study aims to examine how follower trust violations influence authentic leadership and how leaders' spiritual orientations shape this relationship. While most trust research focuses on leaders as violators of followers' trust, this study shifts the analytical lens to explore how leaders' authenticity is affected when followers violate expectations.

Design/methodology/approach

Survey data were collected from 588 managers and employees in Kenya's tourism sector. Hierarchical regression analysis was used to estimate baseline relationships between trust violations, spirituality and authentic leadership. Polynomial regression was then used to examine potential nonlinear and interaction effects across four dimensions of trust violation and five dimensions of spirituality.

Findings

Integrity and dependability violations significantly undermined authentic leadership, whereas competence violations showed weaker effects and relational violations displayed no consistent linear pattern. Spiritual orientations generally reinforced authentic leadership, particularly purpose, transcendence and compassion. However, some dimensions – such as gratitude and inner peace – were associated with more ambivalent effects, occasionally coinciding with reduced openness. Polynomial analyses further revealed nonlinear dynamics, including accelerating declines in authenticity following repeated integrity violations and curvilinear patterns in relational violations.

Research limitations/implications

The cross-sectional design and reliance on self-reported measures limit causal inference. In addition, the sectoral and cultural context may constrain generalizability. Future research using longitudinal and multi-source designs could examine how authentic leadership evolves over time following trust disruptions.

Practical implications

Leadership development programs should prepare leaders to manage follower trust violations constructively. Spiritual orientations can support authenticity when grounded in purpose and compassion, but excessive emphasis on harmony or gratitude may discourage necessary confrontation and accountability.

Social implications

The findings highlight the importance of trust and spiritual meaning systems in leadership relationships, particularly in collectivist and high power-distance contexts where relational disruptions can have broader organizational and social consequences.

Originality/value

This study advances authentic leadership theory by examining how authenticity is recalibrated under conditions of follower trust violations. It also extends trust research by shifting attention from leader violations to follower violations and contributes to spirituality research by demonstrating that spiritual orientations can have both enabling and constraining effects on leadership authenticity.