Credible Messenger Perspectives on the Skills and Traits that Support Effective Outreach and Case Management in Community Violence Intervention

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Practitioner Summary

This study examines how credible messengers engage individuals at high risk for gun violence and support long-term change. Drawing on interviews and focus groups, the analyses identified seven core skills and traits that shape effective practice: adaptability, communication, credibility, empathy/compassion, leadership/mentorship, openness/honesty, and patience. These skills are not used one at a time or as a checklist; they work together and show up through ongoing relationships built on trust and consistency. For instance, credibility alone is not sufficient; it gains power when paired with authenticity, compassion, and sustained presence. Credible messengers are not interchangeable frontline staff but informal leaders and mentors whose influence is grounded in community recognition. Their work challenges short-term, output-driven expectations by emphasizing patience, persistence, and engagement through setbacks and nonlinear progress. These findings underscore the need for hiring, training, and supervision practices that recognize and help build these skills and attributes.

Authors' Note

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Peter Twigg, M.S., is a Senior Research Associate at the Center for Health Justice & Bioethics, at Temple University's Lewis Katz School of Medicine. He provides research support on a variety of community violence intervention and related projects, working closely with research and practitioner partners on data collection, analysis, and implementation-focused studies.

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Abstract

Credible messengers—individuals with lived experience of violence either as perpetrators or victims—are central to many community-based violence intervention (CVI) programs. Although the use of credible messengers as case managers in CVI programs is expanding, research is limited on what contributes to their effectiveness. This study examines the skills and traits credible messengers utilize to engage participants and support behavior change. Interviews and focus groups with staff from a violence intervention program were conducted and transcripts were thematically analyzed using iterative deductive–inductive coding and a team-based pile sort. The analyses, later validated through member checking, resulted in the identification of seven core traits and skills, along with 14 subthemes that shape effective participant engagement. By illuminating the interpersonal foundations of credible messenger work, this study advances scholarship on the processes underlying critical components of CVI programming and offers insights into optimizing case management training and program implementation.

Key words: credible messengers, desistance, intervention, peer mentors, personality, qualitative analysis, social bonds, violence

Introduction

Gun violence was recently declared a public health crisis by the U.S. Surgeon General (U.S. Health and Human Services, 2024). With the growing crisis there also has been growing interest in prevention and intervention strategies that move beyond policing and emphasize community-based solutions. One increasingly adopted approach centers on "credible messengers"—individuals with lived experience of violence, either as a perpetrator or victim, who build trust and work to positively influence those at high risk of engaging in violence or being shot (Szkola & Blount-Hill, 2024). Also known as outreach workers or peer mentors, credible messengers draw on personal connections to shift behavior and mediate conflict, continuing a long tradition of peer-led interventions seen in models like Alcoholics Anonymous and the 1990s Los Angeles gang truces (Brierley et al., 2025; Buck, 2020). Unlike community health workers, their primary focus is not on health access or education, but on mentoring individuals involved in violence and reducing fatal and nonfatal shooting victimization through relationship-based engagement (Buck, 2020; Giffords Center for Violence Intervention, 2024).

The community-based programs that employ credible messengers have been commonly referred to as community violence intervention (CVI) programs, and many rely on credible messengers to serve as case managers. In this role, credible messengers build sustained, trust-based relationships with high-risk individuals, provide mentorship, and connect clients to essential services such as job training, education, or mental health support. They help clients navigate crises, develop risk-reduction plans, and move toward safer, more stable lives. Rather than delivering services directly, credible messengers often act as brokers, linking participants to external resources. They also are providing mentorship; some scholars and practitioners have referred to credible messenger-centered programs as "lived experience mentoring programs" (DuBois, 2024). Despite the rapid growth of these programs, there is still limited understanding of how credible messengers navigate their roles and the specific skills that make them effective at outreach and in their capacity as case managers (Bocanegra & Aguilar, 2024; Brierley et al. 2025). This study draws on focus groups and interviews with credible messengers employed as outreach workers or outreach worker supervisors across three CVI programs, exploring the personal traits and skills OWs use to influence clients and drive change. Understanding these aspects of CVI programming can help improve and support intervention programs and staff training and development.

Effective engagement and case management depend on both the inherent traits and developed skills of case managers (i.e., the credible messengers), which shape their ability to build trust, navigate complex systems, and meet client needs (Barrett, 1999; Frankel et al., 2019). Research across criminal justice interventions suggests that practitioner *quality* is a key determinant of program effectiveness (Ross & Fabiano, 1985; Taxman et al., 2004). In this study, *skills* refer to proficiencies developed through practice or training, while *traits* are enduring personality qualities. Skills are typically task-specific, measurable, and can be improved over time (e.g., communication skills). Moore (2009) emphasizes the importance of interplay between the two for fostering client-centered care and reaching positive outcomes (e.g., improved health, stability, and well-being).

Theoretical and Applied Backdrop

The current study is primarily framed using Shadd Maruna's research on crime desistance (see for example Maruna 2001, 2025), Beth Weaver's work on relational desistance (2013,

2015), and Andi Brierley's scholarship introducing the concept of desistance habitus. Maruna argues that desistance involves the construction of a credible narrative identity—one that explains past criminal behavior and supports a prosocial future. These redemption narratives are central not only to reintegration but also to the work of credible messengers, who reconstruct their identities as good people who made bad choices (Brierley et al., 2025; Lopez-Humphreys & Teater, 2019). Similarly, Giordano and colleagues (2002) stress that within the desistance process, individuals undergo a cognitive transformation—internal shifts that can be supported by positive relationships. But Maruna specifically emphasizes that desistance is socially embedded, shaped by supportive relationships that foster self-worth and connect individuals to prosocial opportunities. Further, Maruna emphasizes the need for interventions that build social ties and a sense of belonging. In this study, we apply this relational framing.

Weaver extends Maruna's work by highlighting how social relationships, networks, and reflexivity—an individual's capacity to reflect on their social position—are central to desistance. This perspective helps explain how credible messengers not only guide others but also continue on their own desistance journeys, often conceptualized as tertiary or relational desistance (McNeil, 2015; Weaver, 2013). Brierley and colleagues' (2025) recent review of peer mentorship in desistance-related interventions found these reciprocal relationships generate hope and self-esteem for both parties. This relational and narrative-based approach aligns closely with the strengths-based perspective in social work, which emphasizes empowerment and human potential rather than deficits. Credible messengers model resilience and growth, drawing on their own transformation stories as evidence of personal change and capacity (LeBel et al., 2015; Maruna, 2001).

Brierley and Best (2025) discuss similar relational mechanisms that undergird credible messenger practice. They put forth the concept of *desistance habitus* as an important new construct to capture how peer mentors with lived experience have critical cultural knowledge and understanding of street culture and carceral culture (built within their own life context). This knowledge and skill set gives them the unique capacity to obtain legitimacy and trust in their work moving others toward desistance. The term *habitus* draws from Bourdieu (1977); Brierley and Best describe it as the values and dispositions that become ingrained and shape behavior; these values and dispositions are formed through cultural experiences, evolve over time and evoke responses that are diverse. Essentially, Brierley and Best's epistemological position captures how peer workers employed in criminal and juvenile justice practice fields draw on their own knowledgebase; habitus becomes activated "when required to gain street capital, legitimacy, respect, and validation" (p.11) during interactions with individuals who have had similar experiences of persistent offending.

As discussed in the introduction, we also recognize that the engagement and mentoring work of credible messengers has long roots in community-led traditions that predate today's CVI efforts. Practitioners often trace the term's lineage to incarcerated organizers in the 1970s, frequently invoking Eddie Ellis of New York's Black Panther Party, who reframed lived experience of harm and punishment as a basis for moral authority and community accountability (Brotherton, 2025). Early street peace efforts and peer movements (e.g., gang truces) similarly positioned "experience-near" guides as uniquely capable of brokering trust, interpreting local codes, and modeling change. Scholars and practitioners caution, however, that mentoring/engagement practices, and generally, credible messenger practices as a whole, are not monolithic or abstract; they are historically situated in neighborhoods shaped by racialized

inequality, policing, economic markets and local cultures (Brotherton, 2025; Goddard & Myers, 2017). Desistance research echoes that scholars must be sensitive of context in that what credible messengers can accomplish depends on place, opportunity structures, and the meaning people make of their pasts (Maruna, 2025; Österman, 2021; see also Weaver on reflexivity). Furthermore, Brotherton (2025) stresses that we must integrate a range of theories that undergird praxis of the street outreach worker, drawing heavily from the organized knowledge developed by those who have been incarcerated and have lived experiences around violence.

Today in urban communities, city-based outreach workers are not only building on this history but are bringing more awareness to their work given the search for effective violence reduction strategies and programs that reach those at highest risk for being perpetrators or victims of urban community violence (Brotherton, 2025). From the 2000s forward, cities began institutionalizing lived experience practices in rehabilitation into formal CVI infrastructures—street outreach, case management, and intensive mentoring—while experimenting with different practice models and strategies. "Transformative mentoring" work emphasizes mentors' deliberate engagement with their own histories to support mentees' agency and identity shifts (Austria & Peterson, 2017). Program lineages diverge (e.g., Cure Violence Global–style outreach and case management, Roca's inclusion of a strong emotional & behavioral regulation component, and Advance Peace's (Richmond, California; Corburn & Boggan, 2025) fellowship model), yet all rely on credible messengers to translate systems, mediate conflict, and build pro-social ties and turn them into social capital. Hospital-based violence intervention program ("HVIPs") also may use credible messengers and sometimes the role is called "violence intervention specialists" (Wical et al., 2020). Studies of mentor selection and role socialization underscore that who is recruited and how they are trained matter, but effects likely vary with local conditions and implementation capacity (Austria & Peterson, 2017). The current study builds on this history by focusing specifically on the interpersonal traits and applied skills credible messengers report drawing upon to initiate and sustain engagement. We also build on recent results from two studies. One study, by the current authors, interviewed both credible messengers and clients of credible messengers and found that credible messenger relationships generate a collective sense of belonging and shared purpose in that program participants come to see themselves as part of a prosocial community ("new family") that helps sustain their motivation to change (Simonsson et al., 2025). The other study—by Szkola and Blount-Hill (2024)—sought to define the terms *credible* and *credible messenger,* and to do so, interviewed 22 credible messenger staff in a range of roles. The authors found that credibility was not reducible to one or two attributes, but is conferred through shared racial identity, local rapport, authenticity, and caring.

Situated adjacent to this line of inquiry, and guided by a relational framework and ongoing gaps in the literature on engagement and case management in CVI, the present study adopts a broader focus on the multidimensional nature of credible messenger work. Our core research questions are: Which personal traits and practice skills distinguish effective credible messengers? And how do credible messengers deploy those traits and skills to influence change, especially among the hardest-to-reach young people? Client engagement and case management are foundational elements that subsequent training and supervision. We hope the findings from this paper will have implications for how organizations recruit, train, and support credible messengers, and for how CVI models institutionalize engagement as a central component of effective intervention.

Methods

Participants

This study draws from interviews and focus groups conducted in 2023 and early 2024 with all credible messenger staff from three CVI teams who are part of one umbrella Cure Violence program in a large city in the mid-Atlantic, USA. This sample represents all staff in the large program; these staff are employed in one of three roles: outreach worker, outreach worker supervisor or program manager. None of the credible messengers are employed in the role of violence interrupter (VI), as that role does not exist in this program, but all staff have been trained in conflict mediation (and conflict mediation is a core part of the outreach worker role).

The Cure Violence model originated in Chicago in 2000 under the name Chicago CeaseFire. The model treats violence as a disease and aims to interrupt transmission, change behaviors of those most at risk, and shift social norms that perpetuate violence (Butts et al., 2015). A total of 25 Cure Violence credible messengers participated in the current study (we use "OW" and "credible messenger" interchangeably throughout this paper): 16 through three focus groups and nine through one-on-one interviews. The overwhelming majority of participants were male—there were only three female OW staff at the time of this study and they were part of the focus groups. All participants had been employed in the role of an OW at least in some point of their career and currently carry or previously carried a caseload of roughly 15 clients. At the time of the study, four participants were in supervisory or manager positions. Focus groups were organized by program setting—street (n = 4), hospital (n = 5), and school (n = 7)—to explore contextual differences in outreach work. While each setting shares the Cure Violence goal of reducing violence among high-risk individuals, daily tasks differ. Street teams canvas recent shooting locations and support clients with court, job interviews, and community presence. Hospital teams engage victims and families at bedside to offer support and interrupt retaliatory violence. School-based workers provide daily mentoring, group activities, and in-the-moment conflict mediation for student clients. All credible messengers receive the same initial training from Cure Violence Global, with additional on-the-job mentoring specific to each setting. The initial week-long Cure Violence Global-led training is very specific to the Cure Violence model, with an emphasis on strategies for engagement, conflict mediation and caseload management. There are no training modules that go deep into styles and methods for case management. Some of the training segments briefly discuss active listening and motivational interviewing, but not in a formal way. Very little is known about the impact of these trainings or other training models.

Focus groups followed a semi-structured guide (see online-only supplemental material) but encouraged informal conversation to make participants comfortable and allow them to emphasize what they found most important. The facilitator had prior familiarity with the program which supported open dialogue. Participants also completed a brief demographic survey that included an open-ended prompt about the traits and skills they use in their work. The nine one-on-one interviews, conducted by the academic program supervisor using a broader protocol (also available in the online-only supplemental information), explored credible messengers' motivations, strategies, and life histories. Despite some variation in question focus, both data sources yielded rich accounts of how credible messengers engage and support individuals.

Study participants ranged in age from 27 to 58 (average age = 44), and most were raised in the communities where they now work. Ten of the 16 focus group participants (62.5%) had prior incarceration histories, and all but one had children. Tenure with Cure Violence varied

widely, from early involvement starting in 2012 to more recent hires, with many reporting prior experience in violence intervention. The average reported age at the start of study participants' own desistance journeys was 25.7, with a range between 16 to 37 years of age.

All credible messengers employed by the agency participated voluntarily, following an invitation from their supervisor. The study was approved by the Temple University Institutional Review Board. Written consent was obtained in advance, with verbal consent reconfirmed at the time of interviews and focus groups, including consent for audio recording. At the start of each focus group, participants responded to a prompt asking them to list three traits or skills they use to engage clients. (We use the term "client" instead of "participant" to indicate a Cure Violence program participant to distinguish research participants within the study from program participants.) Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim by trained staff and reviewed for accuracy. Focus groups took place at the agency's office; interviews were held at locations chosen by participants.

Analysis

We employed a multi-step coding process, combining deductive and inductive approaches to organize and interpret the data (Saldaña, 2014). Because the data collected were part of a larger project to examine a full range of program intervention processes across all components of the Cure Violence strategy, the initial codebook was larger than needed to explore the current study's research questions. This large codebook, with many codes derived from Maruna's and Weaver's desistance frameworks, included codes for program components and processes such as staff backgrounds and history with the program, client recruitment, case management, and conflict mediation as well as the movement into crime desistance and desistance maintenance for the outreach workers. We also included codes that matched the structured prompts of the focus group guide (e.g., "recruitment skills") to ensure that our analysis remained consistent with the study's aims while allowing for the emergent themes.

We read and re-read transcripts to develop additional codes and definitions. The initial codebook and all transcripts then were uploaded into Atlas.ti (v9.1.3). The researcher who conducted the focus groups performed the initial round of coding, while a second researcher co-coded portions of the transcripts to validate the codes and ensure interpretive convergence (Saldaña, 2016). The full research team (four members) collaboratively refined the codebook during team meetings. Coding was then completed by two researchers to identify broad themes. Coding disagreements were resolved through discussion, refining definitions, and ensuring alignment with research questions. The team also examined how subjectivities might influence interpretation of themes and iteratively revised code definitions and inclusion/exclusion criteria.

We compared emergent themes with the written responses from the written prompt on important skills and traits and also asked for feedback from participants on initial themes. We looked for alignment between written responses and the deeper, nuanced insights revealed during the focus group discussions and interviews. When themes emerged in the qualitative data but were absent in the written responses, we considered this to reflect additional dimensions of participants' experiences or implicit understandings not captured through the quantitative prompt.

The research team also discussed overlap across themes and determined that careful delineation of subthemes would facilitate clearer operationalization of skills and traits. To support this, we used the pile sort method (Weller & Romney, 1988) to finalize subthemes and assess overlap. Excerpts containing larger sections of text coded as "personality traits" and

"recruitment skills" were re-generated. Three team members independently identified subthemes and sorted them into piles aligned with the six main themes, then discussed convergence, divergence, and overlap. All subtheme placements had agreement from at least two of the three members; disagreements were resolved through discussion. Interestingly, the pile sort process led to a strong recommendation to add a new main skill/trait, resulting in a proposed seventh theme. To ensure the findings accurately reflected participants' perspectives, we reconvened six credible messengers from the original focus groups and interviews to review the core themes. All six participants supported including the seventh theme.

Results

As mentioned above, seven main themes related to skills and/or traits were identified from the analyses and verification process as shown and defined in Table 1 (and presented in alphabetical order): (1) adaptability (2) communication, (3) credibility, (4) empathy/compassion, (5) leadership/mentorship, (6) openness/honesty, and (7) patience. Figure 1 diagrams the main themes and corresponding 14 subthemes. The figure is provided to help illustrate the overlapping nature of the subthemes. Below, we define the main themes and, where space permits, provide illustrative quotes. Due to journal space limitations, we do not fully elaborate on the areas of overlap across themes and subthemes.

Adaptability

The OWs often discussed the importance of being adaptable in how they work with individuals ("adaptability")—they adjust their approach, communication style, and problem-solving strategies to fit the individual and situation at hand. OWs described how they recognize that every client and potential client is different and has their own reasons for being involved in the street. Moreover, they stressed the importance of observing and listening both to what is (and is not) said when first approaching an individual or potential conflict. The subthemes relevant here are *knowing the language and culture*, *understanding the situational context* and *listening intently*. One OW indicated that *not* knowing how to adapt to different people and situations could cost you your life:

> *It's not hard for me to sit there and know who it is that I'm talking to. Because I'm already trying to read people. I'm trying to read your aura's. I'm trying to do all this. And you better do that if you're out in the streets. Why? Because you can walk up on somebody and they can sit there. Hey, hey, hey. What's up man? Yo, you got a light? (..) Oh no, no. You got to do a stop. You beg the wrong answer and that could be your life.*

Another OW stated: *"It's an individual case… because everybody's problem and issue is not the same."* Other OWs discussed how they reveal different things about themselves depending on the person they are trying to engage: "*..we got different resources and stuff. Different ways we communicate. We could tell them when I was homeless, …or when I was having a child…so we have different ways of giving them different options and different resources*."

Effective Communication

The most often-discussed skill described by OWs was effective communication. OWs describe themselves as skilled orators who can provide a mix of motivational speaking (i.e., speaking in a way to enhance a client's intrinsic motivation), personal narrative, while also recognizing the need to sit back and just listen at times. Effective communication can be

understood by seven interconnected subthemes that enable meaningful engagement with high-risk clients. *Consistent communication* is essential, as it fosters trust through reliability and clear, ongoing interaction. *Knowing the language and culture,* particularly the slang, trends, and cultural references relevant to clients, helps establish rapport and credibility, ensuring that outreach workers are seen as insiders who understand their world. *Listening intently* is another critical element, demonstrating genuine care and attentiveness to clients' needs and experiences. Coupled with this is the ability to *not judge and be respectful to others*, and *being sincere and sticking to one's word*, which creates a safe and open environment where clients feel valued and understood and can begin to trust the OWs. In addition, *using soft language* (i.e., employing words or phrases that minimize the impact or harshness of a statement or situation) was identified as a related subtheme under effective communication, as soft language helps outreach workers de-escalate tensions, convey understanding and respect, and approach clients in a non-confrontational manner. Last, *sharing life experiences* is also a large part of effective communication; it provides a means to be seen not only as credible, but empathetic and caring.

The processes underlying these subthemes help create personal connection. OWs noted that many clients lack meaningful connections, which can leave them feeling isolated amid violence, poverty, trauma, or addiction. OWs emphasized the importance of using culturally appropriate language—not just slang, but a way of speaking that signals insider status, builds trust, and ensures safety. As one outreach worker put it, "*Everywhere you go, you got to know the language. You go into the court system, you got to know the court system language.*"

Sentiments about effective communication were shared across the street, school and hospital teams. Participants from the school-based team greatly stressed the importance of communication adding that they reported they played an outsized role by having more sway over students than teachers and administrators. One OW on the school team explained how teachers and administrators will often bring them in during tense moments with students, explaining that school staff struggle to reach the kids when they are upset or shut down and the school will call in the outreach workers to help resolve student conflicts. The OW went on to say:

> *...so we're going in and the kids are shut down, a lot of them deal with trauma and things like that and when they shut down you got to talk to them hey, it's me. They'll come around, sometimes I'll take them out of the room and converse with them but it's definitely something that you definitely have to live by, live around or at least experience…*

This OW concluded by acknowledging how difficult some of these skills may be to teach an outsider. They ruminated that it may take a year or longer of on-the-job training and shadowing for someone to start to pick up some of the skills they have been taught by their life experiences.

The subtheme *listening intently* is highlighted here in how listening creates connection with a potential client:

> *And you're trying to find that thin line, that line of motivation for them, whether it be a kid or something they might really want out of life that they lost sight of. You know what I mean? That's that. That's that listening. That's why I like to let them talk. I like to let them talk more than tell them what they should and shouldn't or how they should go about and why. I like to let them rant and let it off. So when I hear those key words or key ideas or sayings or dreams, that's when I apply the pressure from that.*

This exchange is also important because it shows that OWs recognize they need to be adaptable and patient (another main theme described below) and identify an internal motivation unique to the individual to move clients toward desistance from violence. This type of patience in listening becomes part of effective communication.

Credibility

The results from the analyses described herein lead us to define *credibility* as the ability of outreach workers to establish trust and authenticity with high-risk clients and other community members by demonstrating a deep understanding of their lived experiences, cultural context, and challenges. The theme includes ten subthemes: (a) *commanding and showing respect; (b) consistently communicating (or being a consistent presence); (c) demonstrating identity change; (d) demonstrating understanding; (e) knowing language and culture*; (f) *knowing clients' family members and supporting them*; (g) *sharing life experiences* (when appropriate); (h) *sticking to one's word*; (i) *supporting an anti-violence mission*; and (j) *understanding the situational context*.

Credibility involves both surface-level connections, such as speaking the same language, knowing trends, and understanding cultural norms, and deeper bonds rooted in shared life experience. While a criminal past isn't required, clients value messengers who look and talk like them and, most importantly, understand their hardest experiences. As OWs explained, "knowing the language and culture" is just the first step toward building true credibility:

> *You come in with the training and you get this person to the side and you think you can have a conversation, it's going to go over your head because you ain't even getting the lingo. You're going to say what that mean? They off you already.*

An OW emphasized that speaking the same language as clients is essential to being seen as credible. In a one-on-one interview, the OW expanded on this, noting that credibility allows them to offer something different: genuine commitment. They shared that many in the community see programs as money-driven, not mission-driven, which breeds distrust. Earning trust, they explained, requires showing you're truly there to help:

> *I kind of always talk to my clients in a way they can understand. I do a lot to make sure my dynamic on this team is the way it is for me. I keep up on the latest trends. I keep up on the latest rap music. I'm always on social media just figuring it out. What the language is with these children. What it is that they're hip to. So I can come out here and I won't look nothing different. But my mindset is different.*

This quote also helps illustrate the close overlap between the main skills/traits of credibility and effective communication.

Many OWs discussed how credibility is demonstrated through discussing personal shared experiences. A core tenet of the Cure Violence model is recruiting OWs from the communities they serve, and who have many shared experiences with those they are working with. Nearly all of the OWs came from "the street life" themselves. Though their experiences may vary slightly, most of them have experienced or perpetrated violence, been the victims of violence, sold and/or used substances, belonged to groups organized around drugs or violence, lost family and friends to guns, suffered deep levels of poverty, experienced incarceration and many other incredibly difficult experiences. It is these personal histories and overcoming them, that connect them to their communities and clients much more deeply. During our focus group with the hospital team,

one of the OWs explained how their past engaged in street life helps them work with their clients and even helped change the lives of many in their social circle. He said:

> *That's the big part of my message because they knew where I came from. And everybody that I deal with, they knew me, they knew my background. And they're looking at me like, if he can do it, I can do it. And I talk to people all the time about like changing and stuff like that. Young guys too. So, I mean, my message definitely get across. So, they see me, see where I came from, see what I used to do, and it actually make it easier for them.*

As this OW states, his experiences and where he came from is a critical part to connecting with people, earning their trust as "credible," and helping them to make a change. Another OW told us:

> *When they start talking like that, I take my mask off. Take my hat off. I show them my tattoos. I be like, bro. The same stuff you doing now, I used to do it. I ain't no cop. I got felonies. I've been to jail. I do the stuff you do. I just be getting deep into it now…This ain't no game…I've been in the streets. I've been doing what you was doing. I'm on probation and all that…When I know they think I'm playing. I just break it down to them. Let them know what's going on with me. Who I am…The people who be guessing, that's when I really break it down. Show them all my tattoos. Tell them my life story.*

In this circumstance, a criminal history, previous incarceration, and even tattoos showing involvement in street life, become badges of authenticity that build credibility and trust; these things are symbols of an insider status few would be able to demonstrate without sharing these experiences.

Empathy and Compassion

Many of the OWs described empathy and compassion as central to their role in preventing violence and supporting individuals in crisis. These interrelated traits allow OWs to recognize, understand, and respond to the emotional states of others without judgment or condemnation. In the context of study participants, empathy and compassion are not abstract values—they are functional tools used to build rapport, sustain engagement, and de-escalate potentially volatile situations. Our analysis identified seven subthemes that reflect how empathy and compassion are enacted by OWs: *(1) creating connection, (2) demonstrating understanding, (3) listening intently, (4) not judging and showing respect, (5) supporting the anti-violence mission, (6) understanding context, and (7) using soft language.*

Empathy often began with connection. For many OWs, their compassion for others was rooted in shared life experiences—especially trauma, loss, and community violence. Several OWs reflected on how their past deepened their empathy and fueled their commitment to helping others:

> *Like to put it in a word—just compassion. Just make sure you have compassion for it. You don't look at none of the situations differently. You always want to go in with compassion for what they're going through or experiencing.*

Similarly, another OW spoke about his transformation over time:

> *Just understanding people going through things too. I'm not the only one. Just having*

that sense of understanding, I guess, and being able to empathize a little bit more with others. I guess that's the biggest change that I see I had…

This OW described growing up with instability, including parental incarceration and abandonment. These experiences shaped not only his compassion for others, but also his patience with the slow and often nonlinear process of change.

OWs demonstrated empathy by affirming that clients' experiences were valid and real. One school team member described how her role as both a mother and a community member allowed her to connect with young people and their parents as well:

Especially if you're a mother already and you grew up in a neighborhood where you seen kids getting shot. Locked up. Fighting... Now that I'm older and I basically when I talk to them and I try to aid them, I let them know that I understand where they come from.

Several OWs stressed that compassion begins with deep listening. Listening was described not only as an act of kindness but also as a diagnostic tool to guide what type of support was appropriate. Participants emphasized that empathy involves suspending judgment. Rather than reacting critically to behavior, OWs reported approaching individuals with respect and an open mind. This stance was seen as essential to gaining trust. As one OW put it: "You don't want to overstep your boundaries. And you don't want to kind of overextend yourself to the point where they're like, there's too much. You don't want to come on too strong." By treating people with dignity, OWs are able to build bridges rather than walls.

OWs expressed that their empathy reinforced their alignment with the broader goals of the Cure Violence model. Understanding clients' pain and motivations made them more committed to helping prevent further harm. For many, compassion was not passive—it was mission-driven and deeply purposeful, and OWs described how clients saw OW involvement in Cure Violence as an expression of compassion for those who have historically lacked access to opportunities for stability and personal development.

OWs repeatedly described the importance of reading situational context before engaging with potential or new clients. This required being attuned to emotional cues, prior trauma, and the environment. One OW explained that every situation required a different approach grounded in compassion: "*Because you don't know what somebody's going through... You have to be able to provide them with that emotional support... That's the main thing you have to enter into these types of situations with compassion*." This situational sensitivity allowed OWs to pace their conversations, and interactions overall with clients, and determine how best to support someone without overwhelming them.

The language OWs used when interacting with individuals was often described as a reflection of their empathy. Rather than confronting or being argumentative, OWs emphasized the use of gentle, affirming words. One worker illustrated this with an analogy:

It's like you using vinegar…You pushing them off, then using honey and attracting them… It's definitely easier to pull a person in with some gentle words than harsh words. And to you, it might not be harsh, but to them, you hit a button… And when you hit that button, you turn them off.

This strategic use of soft language underscores how empathy shapes communication in ways that foster engagement, rather than defensiveness.

Mentorship and Leadership

The fifth main skill/trait identified is mentorship and leadership. Seven subthemes helped defined this combined aspect of their work. *Commanding and showing respect* establishes the authority and guidance OWs provide. *Demonstrating identity change (via acts of service),* such as helping clients or community members in meaningful ways, showcases leadership by example—by *consistently communicating* and *not judging* or being critical of individuals who are not on a prosocial path. Additionally, *knowing participants' [clients'] family members and supporting them*, like helping with practical needs and continuing to *create many deep connections* with community members who are often family members of the clients, illustrates mentorship's holistic approach. We learned through the focus groups and interviews that most OWs, with their extensive community ties, had trusting relationships with family members of clients that predated their work with Cure Violence. Through their work as professionals in Cure Violence, OWs continue to nurture their ties with family members. OWs also emphasize that being a leader was showing how one *supports an anti-violence mission*, guiding clients, family members, and community members toward a shared vision of change.

Given these subthemes, we combined leadership and mentorship into one main theme to capture how OWs spoke of this characteristic. We also verified this combination when we presented the initial findings to the OWs. We recognize, however, that being a leader does not necessitate that one is also a mentor, and vice versa. But many of the OWs engaged in mentorship (providing guidance, support and advice) through embodying the change they encourage in their clients. In this regard, it was difficult to separate being a mentor for clients and community members, from being a leader in their communities. This sentiment was stated perfectly during one of our interviews where the OW said: *"…because at the end of the day I live in this ghetto, that they call it,…I'm gonna live here, I'm gonna be around these individuals, so you know I'm part of them, I am them, so I'm gonna help as much as I could."* Many of the OWs echoed this sentiment—and although not all used the terms "mentor" or "leader" directly, they spoke of actions which embodied the principles and actions of leadership and mentorship. The following quote is an example where the OW used the phrase "lead by example" and the passage also shows how leadership overlaps with their mentorship. They stated:

> *The block that my business on, I sweep the whole block. Myself. Come out there in the morning. The thug. The gangster. The drug dealer. He ain't sweeping. He's throwing the trash. I'm a sweep. When you throw this trash while I'm sweeping. Guess what I'm a do? Pick it up and put it in a can. I just try to lead by example. Instead of always saying, do this, do that, do this. Let me show you. I get my hands dirty. I always use my past experience. If you know me from my neighborhood, you really say 'oh wow.' That's all they used to say about [outreach worker's nickname]. He knocked my dad out. He knocked this person out. He knocked my uncle out. He knocked Mr. Charlie out. They was out there fighting. Look at [outreach worker's nickname] right now. So respectful. So honest.*

In his words, it is evident that he believes being a leader is showing people what change can look like up close and personal. He explains how he used to be engaged in violence so regularly that people in the community often know them as the person who "knocked out"

someone they knew. However, now they clean the whole block and are known as "so respectful" and "so honest." This exchange also presents itself as a reverse of the "code of the streets" mentality (Anderson, 2000), where a typical code of streets mentality usually necessitates retaliation to disrespect, they now meet disrespect with even greater levels of respect and grace. During this conversation, while not present in the above quote, this OW also explains how he brings current and potential clients to work at their business, allowing the clients to see the OW running a successful business, earning legal income, and being a leader in the community not just as an employee of the program, but through other acts like sweeping the whole block.

OWs explained that being a leader/mentor meant to embody one's personal message of change, and by doing so, one can garner a positive reputation. Having earned a positive reputation in the community provides OWs with another layer of insider status that in turns aides the propagation of their message. By embodying the anti-violence message, other people will tune in. One OW on the hospital team explained how being a leader in the community facilitates the grass roots propagation of their message:

> *They say your biggest introduction to people is your character. Because your character speaks even when your mouth is not. So, we're deemed as credible messengers in the street. So, sometimes the people, they may be walking across the street but yet they see us. And they know what it is that we're doing. They know what we stand for…And then when they hear our motto or what it is that we're sharing with them, breast to breast. Then it's a whole different understanding like, oh, wow. Yeah, I'm on that kind of time. Y'all hiring or y'all doing this? How can I be a part? Easy. You can be a part even if you're not working for who we're working for. You can still be a part. You just got to be your message.*

Another example of this came from an OW on the school team:

> *And it's so much easier for me and [OW Name]. Because the kids don't just see us as Cure Violence or see us as a cop or a teacher. They really see us as mentors. Because when they come in there, we know their grandparents, we know their mothers, their fathers, their aunts, their uncles. Between the two of us, I'm going to say 80% of the kids, we know somebody in their family. So it makes it much easier for them to trust us and us to build the bond.*

Like the OW on the hospital team, this OW explained how knowing family members of their mentees allowed them to become like family.

Openness and Honesty

Openness and honesty can be thought of as traits related to a person's integrity and their transparency. This theme is reflected in four subthemes. *Creating connection* and *demonstrating understanding* foster transparency in relationships. *Willingness to share one's story* and *sticking to one's word* are also critical, as these characteristics convey authenticity and build deeper connections with clients. OWs feel it is disingenuous to hide or lie about their pasts when interacting with clients. For them, honesty and transparency are crucial to *being* credible, rather than simply being perceived that way by clients. We see this distinction as referring to credible messengers' commitment to truthfulness and self-consistency in their interactions, whereas being *perceived as credible* refers only to how clients interpret or evaluate those interactions. The outreach workers emphasized that credibility is not achieved through impression management or

strategic performance, but through alignment between who they are, what they say, and what they do over time—and being honest with clients is key here, as well as being direct about what they can and cannot offer people. During our conversation with the hospital team, one OW summarized this sentiment directly. When asked what it meant to be a credible messenger, one OW said:

> *It means that somebody who's truthful in they word, action and deed. Somebody who understands honor, loyalty and respect. Somebody who is not going to be disrespectful to an individual. Or somebody who is not going to sit there and back bite…We trying to uplift people. We trying to make people part of our message.*

While not always framed as direct truth-telling, OWs described honesty as something deeper—being fully oneself and showing clients that it's possible to have made mistakes and still pursue a prosocial path. For them, honesty often meant being authentic through sharing painful or unflattering parts of their past. OWs felt it was necessary—and even wrong not to—when it helps clients connect and see that change is possible. As one school team OW put it:

> *And I'm going to say one of the most important things to reaching these kids, being honest. Like he been through a lot. So when he can reach out and tell stories about losing a child or going through this or going through that, you watch the way they listen to him, how they pay attention…I tell them about me at my worst, I sit there in a group and tell them about things I did when I was at my lowest and I think by sharing that and giving them us butt naked like the butt naked truth it gives them. You become their uncle. Yeah. Basically it gives them that. They know we not but we're everybody's uncle. We're everybody's uncle.*

The OWs in this discussion expressed that by sharing painful stories about "losing a child" or stories from their lowest moments, they became like family to the students. This radical level of honesty shows clients they are not alone in their difficult and painful experiences. Later during this same exchange, an OW said *"All they want is the truth. We've been lying for years. They want the truth and they want somebody they feel like they can confide in."*

Patience

Patience emerged as a defining trait of effective (OWs). Rather than viewing patience as a passive or background characteristic, OWs described it as an active and deliberate stance—essential for building trust, navigating setbacks, and fostering long-term change. In contrast to justice system approaches that often demand immediate behavioral shifts and impose punitive consequences for noncompliance, OWs framed change as a slow, nonlinear process. Our analysis identified three subthemes through which patience was expressed in practice: (1) consistently communicating, (2) listening intently, and (3) not judging.

A core expression of patience involved being a steady presence in clients' lives—reaching out, checking in, and remaining available, even when clients were not immediately receptive. Several OWs reflected on their own difficult journeys toward personal change and how those experiences shaped their expectations for others. One OW shared:

> *Like, I've been there before, so I know everything that you're going through… Change won't happen overnight. It can take months, even can take years. So, as long as I keep looking out for them, reaching out to them and everything, eventually it'll change.*

This quote captures a common sentiment voiced that transformation is possible, but it takes time, repeated effort, and ongoing communication. Patience, in this context, meant continuing to show up and reach out—without demanding immediate results. OWs contrasted their approach with that of other professionals. One school-based OW described the challenges of working in educational environments where time and resources are limited: *"…I think the key trait is patience. That's a big thing, definitely patience—a lot of the teachers and social workers in the school, patience, that's ran out."* Here, patience is understood as a resource that others may lack. OWs emphasized that their external position—unburdened by institutional constraints—allowed them to remain consistently engaged, even with the most difficult cases.

OWs frequently described patient listening as a foundational skill. They noted that real engagement often starts with simply giving someone the time and space to be heard. In volatile situations, especially, listening served as a de-escalation tool and helped OWs assess when and how to intervene. One street OW illustrated this point during a discussion of conflict mediation:

> *You can't just go over there. If he hot right now, you can't go over there because you know he ain't trying to hear shit… So let me go talk to this person. Maybe I can remove him from this and give him time to calm down outside of his presence.*

Rather than reacting impulsively or forcing a conversation, the OW exercises patience by listening first, assessing emotional readiness, and adapting their strategy. Listening is thus not just an act of empathy; it is a tactical, patient choice that helps prevent escalation. Active or "deep" listening is frequently cited in the social work literature as a behavioral marker of patience (Egan, 2014; Hepworth et al., 2022).

Finally, OWs emphasized that patience also involved suspending judgment, especially when clients made choices that could be seen as setbacks. They understood that imposing expectations or reacting critically erodes trust. One OW put it simply: *"You don't want to overstep your boundaries. And you don't want to kind of overextend yourself to the point where they're like, there's too much. You don't want to come on too strong."*

Discussion and Conclusion

This study explores how credible messengers perform outreach to high-risk individuals and work to engage them in programming to move them away from involvement in gun violence. Through interviews and focus groups, we identified seven core traits and skill sets—adaptability, communication, credibility, empathy/compassion, leadership/mentorship, openness/honesty and patience—each with its own subthemes and behavioral expressions. These dimensions are not discrete. Findings from our analyses indicate that capable outreach, engagement and support are grounded in a confluence of factors, especially the interplay between *who* the credible messenger is and *how* they operate. As such, their work is deeply relational and skills based in that OWs support clients by far more than just service provision, but more as mentors, role models, and desistance companions. Importantly, the "who" reflects the unique nature of credible messenger lived experience, which varies across credible messengers and includes prior justice system involvement, exposure to violence, adversity, and trauma, and shared social positioning with clients. These experiences confer contextual knowledge and relational credibility that cannot be fully replicated through training.

Although the label "credible messenger" conveys the importance of credibility, our findings indicate that other core skills and traits work beside and help buoy credibility. For

example, credibility gains power when put into action with care and empathy and a willingness to show one's authentic self to clients. Credibility is also reflected by being patient and consistent in the support and mentorship offered. OWs know when to speak, when to listen, and when to step back. Essentially, OWs use their personal narratives to build trust, but only when it serves the client's needs. This demonstrates reflexivity and discretion. OWs described the ability to tailor their style to each client's readiness, using strategies grounded in lived experience but shaped by intentional practice, similar to the activation of the *desistance habitus* as Brierley and Best (2025) describe. In fact, four of highlighted main themes discussed in our results—adaptability, communication, credibility, and openness/honesty—overlap with Brierley and Best's description of how trust is developed through embodied experience of the desistance process. Brierley and Best describe how Brierley navigated the cultural street and carceral game and developed skills, competencies and knowledge that are then applied differentially (across clients) as a criminal justice practitioner (dependent on the client's specific history and needs).

This adaptability also underscores the importance of individualized engagement and distinguishes outreach work from more rigid institutional approaches. As one OW noted, criminal justice programs often adopt a one-size-fits-all approach, while outreach work within Cure Violence allows staff to tailor their engagement to each person's circumstances and readiness. Through consistent communication and emotional investment that is personalized, OWs create what many described as a surrogate family, offering not just services but belonging. These findings are similar to some of the core themes derived from an earlier study by the authors that examined how Cure Violence clients perceive the support they are receiving from OWs (Simonsson et al., 2025). Cure Violence helps individuals develop a community of care rooted in mutual recognition and where clients know they do not have to be perfect and will not be punished or ostracized from the program if they make mistakes.

Our thematic findings related to consistency, patience and mentorship also embody McNeill and colleagues' (2003; 2005) and Weaver's (2015) emphasis on stable and supportive relationships as key to successful desistance. This emphasis further aligns with Farrall and colleagues' (2014) argument that criminal justice intervention programming should create a desistance infrastructure that does not create frustration but instead works consistently and flexibly—buoying hope (and limiting frustration). Motivation to refrain from crime is not a constant; it varies across time and individuals. OWs meet clients where they are in the desistance process. Rather than expecting individuals to change behavior under the threat of punishment, OWs expect and accept that progress may be slow, nonlinear, and filled with setbacks. Traits such as patience and empathy are not soft skills but essential tools that create space for trust and personal growth. Patience was found to be a key skill and trait, but also a feature of leadership and mentorship, through which authority is exercised not through control or sanction, but through sustained presence—enabling clients to feel heard, respected, and ultimately supported.

As Maruna and LeBel (2003) write, "the desistance paradigm holds that the search for 'what works' should not begin with existing expert models of crime reduction but rather should begin with an understanding of the organic or normative processes that seem to impact offending patterns over the life course" (p. 72). Österman (2021) also stresses a similar message on desistance infrastructure in her comparative work with women who have been involved in offending and highlights how the quality and stability of interpersonal ties can shape the trajectories and resilience of those striving to stay on a desisting path. Buck (2020) also has stressed that peer mentors (i.e., credible messengers) can provide authentic engagement that

resists the transactional and outcome-driven logic of conventional criminal justice services. Similar to our findings on patience, empathy and consistency, Buck's work emphasizes the importance of value-based practices (e.g., caring, listening, incremental change). However, she also cautions that practitioners must take care that these values and practices are not subordinated to "deliverables" or "what works" in an increasingly marketized criminal justice system.

We are cautiously optimistic that these values will not be crowded out in the CVI context we examined, as our findings suggest credible messengers enter this work not only as practitioners, but as recognized leaders and mentors within their communities. Leadership/ mentorship does not appear to simply be a product of a professional leadership role or formal training but relationally conferred through their lived identities as community members who have transformed and now give back. Much of the credibility in credible messenger work stems from community affirmation—family, peers, and neighbors who recognize their authenticity and transformation. This social validation extends their influence beyond formal institutions, enabling them to lead and mentor in spaces where traditional systems often lack credibility. This multi-dimensional nature of "credibility" dovetails closely and helps extend the work of Szkola and Blount-Hill's (2024) effort to operationalize credibility among credible messengers. It is important to note that many of the themes and subthemes we identify both *under* and *aside* credibility (see Figure 1) directly parallel the bases of credibility described in their findings. The two studies converge substantively in identifying the core elements through which credibility emerges and operates. For instance, our subthemes of shared lived experience and sincerity and authenticity were similar to their themes. At the same time, several dimensions that they situated within or *under* credibility emerged in our analyses as distinct skills or traits, a difference likely attributable to our broader research questions and analytic focus. Future research could adopt a robust measurement lens to further examine credibility and its related attributes and perhaps differentiate credibility as a relational attribution from the skills and traits through which it is enacted. Additional studies could assess how the relative importance of these attributes varies across contexts, roles, and components of CVI programming.

While our findings offer important insights into the relational dynamics and strengths-based practices that define credible messenger work in the site studied, they must be interpreted in light of several methodological and contextual limitations. This study is limited to focus group and interview data from one program in one large east coast city, and in a program where almost all OW staff were men (versus women). In addition, the data were collected during a spike in gun violence. Other limitations include the possibility of credible messenger responses being subject to social desirability bias, or other forms of subjective reporting that could affect validity. Furthermore, the study does not directly measure the impact of their work on client outcomes or community violence reduction or examine other critical factors that may influence success of a Cure Violence or CVI model, such as organizational support or resource availability.

Despite these limitations, this study contributes to the social work, public health, and criminal justice literatures by providing a structured account of the skills and traits credible messengers use to foster crime desistance. As Maruna (2001) emphasizes, lasting change occurs when individuals find personal meaning and purpose in transformation, and credible messengers are uniquely positioned to help others locate that meaning. Looking ahead, an important next step for the CVI field is to replicate this study across different cities, organizational contexts, and CVI models. Studies could also extend the research questions to more explicitly examine how these relational skills and traits operate within successful case management—retaining clients

long-term and moving them to desistance. Such work would strengthen confidence in the generalizability of these findings and support the development of clearer, evidence-informed theories of change that specify the interpersonal processes through which credible messengers facilitate crime desistance and reductions in community violence. This clarity is especially important given growing calls to position CVI as a core component of civilian public safety infrastructure (Buggs et al., 2022).

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Table 1. Main Themes Embodying Skills and Traits of Credible Messengers, Cure Violence Model		
Theme	**Definition**	**Exemplar Quote**
Adaptability	Ability to adjust approach, communication style, and problem-solving strategies based on the evolving needs of participants/clients and the unique challenges they face/	"We got different resources and stuff. Different ways we communicate. We could tell them when I was homeless, …or when I was having a child…so we have different ways of giving them different options and different resources. I might not know you personally, but I can make a phone call to somebody that I know that's respected in the neighborhood. And there's some things that I gotta stand down on. I gotta be realistic. I'm not a superhero. I don't have a badge. I don't want a badge. You know what I'm saying? But it's just saying that like some things I can't intervene with at the time. I'm willing to know why because I'm trying to make it home at the end of the night too… So some things I gotta just take my time. Maybe I can't get to the person I need to get to today. You know what I'm gonna do? I'm gonna try again tomorrow."
Communication	Ability to both convey information efficiently & listen intently. Skilled orators who can provide a mix of motivational speaking, personal narrative, and the ability to sit back and just listen.	"And you're trying to find that thin line, that line of motivation for them, whether it be a kid or something they might really want out of life that they lost sight of. You know what I mean? That's that. That's that listening. That's why I like to let them talk. I like to let them talk more than tell them what they should and shouldn't or how they should go about and why."
Credibility	Simultaneously conveying a sense of shared experience while presenting something entirely new (and prosocial).	"I kind of always talk to my clients in a way they can understand. I do a lot to make sure my dynamic on this team is the way it is for me. I keep up on the latest trends. I keep up on the latest rap music. I'm always on social media just figuring it out. What the language is with these children. What it is that they're hip to. So I can come out here and I won't look nothing different."
Empathy/ Compassion	Empathy and compassion are traits which gives OWs the ability to understand and share feelings with others, without judgement or condemnation.	"Like to put it in a word just compassion. Just make sure you have compassion for it. You don't look at none of the situations differently. You always want to go in with compassion for what they're going through or experiencing."
Patience	Recognizing change is slow. In practice, OWs did not expect participants/clients to change overnight or even over a few months.	… "change won't happen overnight. It can take months, even can take years. So, as long as I keep looking out for them, reaching out to them and everything, eventually it'll change."
Openness/Honesty	Traits related to a person's integrity and their transparency. OWs feel it is disingenuous to hide or lie about their pasts or present when interacting with participants/clients.	"It means that somebody who's truthful in they word, action and deed. Somebody who understands honor, loyalty and respect. Somebody who is not going to be disrespectful to an individual. Or somebody who is not going to sit there and back bite…We trying to uplift people. We trying to make people part of our message."
Leadership/ Mentorship	Providing guidance, support and advice through embodying the change they encourage. Being a mentor means being a leader in their communities.	"the kids don't just see us as Cure Violence or see us as a cop or a teacher. They really see us as mentors. Because when they come in there, we know their grandparents, we know their mothers, their fathers, their aunts, their uncles. Between the two of us, I'm going to say 80% of the kids, we know somebody in their family."

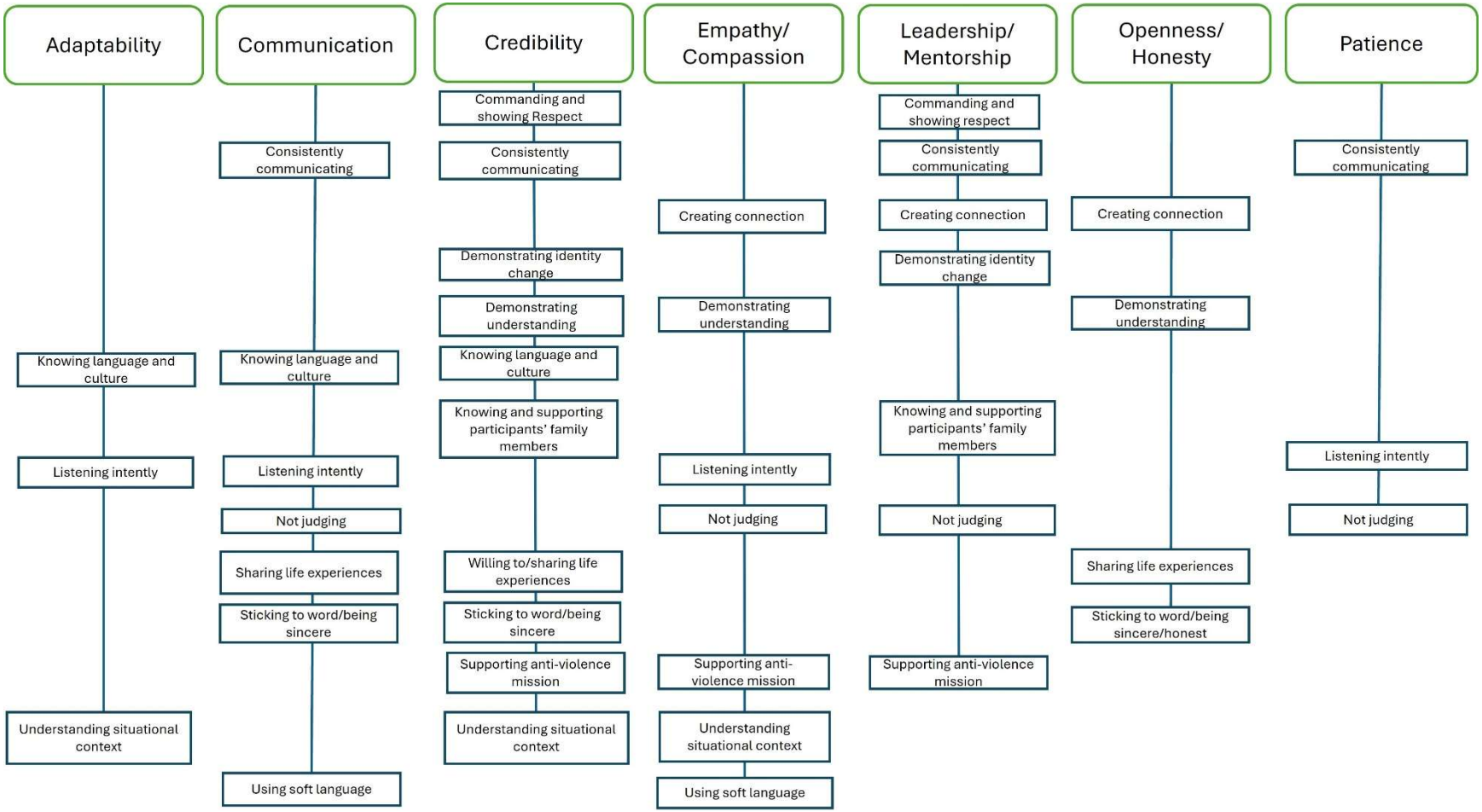


Figure 1. Credible Messenger Skills and Traits, Subtheme[a] Overlap

[a]Subthemes are aligned vertically in alphabetical order and placed in a specific position to show overlap across main themes

Supplemental Information [online only]
STUDY PROTOCOLS
Credible Messenger Focus Group Protocol

1. How did you get involved in doing Cure Violence work/first learn about it? What drove you to get involved? [PROBE]
2. When you think about the changes in your life –those that motivated you to move away from the streets and be part of giving back/become an outreach worker, can you talk about what motivated you to change? [PROBE]
    a. Were there specific turning points, moments or things that happened that you can pinpoint that motivated you to change? If so, what were they? [PROBE: Hassles with the police, having children, incarceration, etc.]
3. [FOR THOSE THAT MENTIONED MOTIVATIONS]: Was there was one specific thing or many things/factors coming together that influenced change?
4. When you look back on your past, do you feel as if you were a different person back then? In other words, do you view yourself as having a new personality in some way? Like having different personality characteristics or traits now than those you had before? Or perhaps you view yourself as the same person, just with different or new goals for life? [Examples of traits are things like empathy, agreeableness and conscientiousness].
    a. How were you different?
5. Some of you may have touched on this already: How does Cure Violence fit into the changes you have made in your life? Why is this particular type of work—giving back and working to create changes that reduce violence –meaningful to you?
6. Some people have said that going straight and leaving the street is like recovery from alcohol or drug use. Would you describe the process of leaving the street as that? If so, are there people you lean on when things are hard, and you might relapse?
    a. Is relapse common for people who are trying to leave the streets? What does that usually look like? What's helpful to prevent that? [PROBE: Peers? Family? Your work?]
7. Now I'd like to ask you to describe what you believe makes a successful outreach worker?
    a. Are there particular skills/personality characteristics/traits that you believe are very important to have in your work?
8. How do you use your skills and traits you have to make a difference in the lives of young people? Can you provide examples? [PROBE]
9. How do you encourage change among the most challenging to reach?

Relevant Questions from the Individual Credible Messenger Interview Protocol

Outreach Worker Functioning and Role

1. How did you get involved in CV?
    a. Did you have any hesitations to join?
    b. What initially excited you about doing community work?
2. How do you describe your role in CV? (prompt for mentor, father figure, friend, advisor, spiritual support, role model etc)
    a. Do you know who will be successful? How do you know?

    b. Do you stick with the one's who are hard? Rely on life-story with the ones who are hard, not so much with the ones who want to change?
    c. Who are the people that are difficult to reach?
3. Describe the street life. What is that mindset? How would you describe this to an alien from another planet?
4. How do you motivate people to change who live in violent neighborhoods? What techniques, skills and strategies do you use?
5. Do you use your past self in the mentoring process?
6. Do you draw on your past self to "hook" and engage people?